

Beloit's Café Fromage works Wisconsin delicacy into delicious treats

Part coffee bar, restaurant, cheese shop and gourmet food store, Café Fromage is a place I wish was around the corner in Janesville—despite the danger to my hips.

By Joan Neeno, Special to The Gazette

BELOIT—Spend a summer Saturday in downtown Beloit and expect to feel envious.

The city has invested a lot in its downtown and riverfront. On a farmers market morning, it really shows. The streets are bustling. The storefronts are attractive. The downtown has good energy.

After you stop at Café Fromage, the real envy begins.

Part coffee bar, restaurant, cheese shop and gourmet food store, Café Fromage is a place I wish was around the corner in Janesville.

For several years, Darren Larsen has sold cheese at farmers markets in the area as The Cheese People of Beloit. Richard and I have been market customers on occasion, and his assortment has always been impressive. So it's no surprise that Café Fromage has a cheese counter. Heck, fromage means cheese in French, so they are clearly pulling no punches.

I expected a standard selection of breakfast and lunch items served with coffee. The menu was pretty much as expected. The quality was something else.

It was a hot summer morning, so I ordered a medium iced coffee (\$2.40) that was as refreshingly bold as it was cold. Café Fromage uses quality coffee and knows how to brew it. Its choice of Rishi teas was also impressive.

You order at the counter, and friendly staffers deliver your food to the table. It's a bright, airy space with simple furniture and lots of sunlight. The bakery case is like a siren song, filled with irresistible bars, cookies, scones and other dangers to your hips.

I ordered the breakfast sandwich (\$3.95) with bacon (additional \$1.50). You also can choose sausage or ham. The sandwich was massive, stuffed with eggs scrambled in a three-cheese blend and served in a brioche bun. The rich bread, creamy and cheesy eggs, all topped with crisp, salty bacon—I'm getting the vapors just writing about it.

Richard ordered the quiche and the strata of the day (\$4 each). I'm not a huge fan of quiche, but this was amazing. Café Fromage has a way with eggs. The chefs use fresh, local eggs, but they also know how to cook them to fluffy, moist perfection. The quiche was filled with cheese (of course), mushrooms and ham. Perfectly done.

The strata had spinach, cheese and a rather miserly portion of ham. That's a minor quibble in an otherwise delicious dish.

As Richard picked up our coffee, he saw a server dishing out cinnamon roll bread pudding (\$3.50). Our order got larger. The pudding was warm, gooey and oozing with cinnamon. I had a hard time focusing because my eyes kept rolling back in my head.

Café Fromage held such sway that Richard went down for a visit the next weekend. He brought home a Cuban sandwich (\$8.95), chicken salad on a croissant (\$7.95), two slices of banana cream pie (\$4) and a cinnamon roll (\$3.50) for Sunday breakfast.

The Cuban was the real deal: sliced pork, baked ham with Swiss cheese and mustard served on a French roll. Richard is a fan of Cuban sandwiches, and this was the first authentic one he has had in the area. And just for good measure, it was really good.

The chicken salad was made with big, moist chunks of chicken breast. The light, mayo-based dressing was mixed with shredded cheddar cheese and herbs. It hit all the right notes. The cheese incorporated right into the salad was a nice touch.

For dessert, the fresh banana flavor burst through the cream for a mild but delicious experience.

And that cinnamon roll. It was the size of a hubcab—OK, a slight exaggeration. It was dripping with sugar, cinnamon, butter and cream cheese frosting. Downright dreamy.

On the day we dined in, Larsen mentioned his monthly themed dinners that you can learn about on Facebook. We're already signed up.