

WHAT THE FORK



Photo courtesy of Pamela's Bakehouse

LEMON CRUSH *Braxton's version of a lemon square has a one-day shelf life to guarantee maximum deliciousness.*

Sweet

PennDel's Bakehouse switches up El Cerrito's 'bakery desert' with tantalizing treats **BY JEFFREY EDALATPOUR**

If a baker doesn't incorporate artificial ingredients into a lemon square, the square can turn stale quickly. That's why they aren't on the menu at the newly opened PennDel's Bakehouse. In their joint venture, co-owners Gayle Tule-Chen and Pamela Braxton explained that they make their baked goods from scratch. Braxton, formerly of Braxtons' Boxes, says their version of a lemon square is great but delicate, with a one-day shelf life. They don't like to use additives or preservatives, and they are trying to use organic ingredients whenever possible.

If there's such a thing as a "bakery desert," El Cerrito might qualify. During the pandemic, El Cerritans turned to

the glass cases at Fat Apple's for an olallieberry pie or two. But for a stand-alone bakery, they had to make the trek to Kensington, Solano Avenue and further south into the heart of Berkeley. PennDel's Bakehouse sits on the edge of a strip mall, about a block north of San Pablo Avenue. Inside, one striking wall color would make a blue jay proud.

When I arrived to inspect the baked goods, Tule-Chen was filling an enormous baking sheet with balls of chocolate dough. I watched her concentrating on the task at hand, through a window framed like a gilt mirror. Meanwhile, Braxton greeted customers; a welcoming trill informing every syllable she uttered. Her happiness was palpable. They

both acknowledged the presence of nearby competitors like Fat Apple's and Semifreddi's Bakery, but in that particular corner of the city nobody's making homemade cakes, muffins and biscuits.

"It was like the angels sang when we found this space," Braxton said. During the previous two years, they had talked together about wanting to become more a part of the El Cerrito community. "It's just so walkable," Tule-Chen added. "There are so many new apartment buildings going up—it's going to be the up-and-coming area."

The left side of PennDel's vitrine is cake city central, including cupcakes. Their mutual dislike for the taste of fondant turned them

toward buttercream finishes. With a background in art and art history, Braxton is in charge of the swirls and decorations. Muffins galore line the right side of the case, where there's a splendid blueberry, an apple streusel and an unexpected orange variety.

Tule-Chen, along with her late husband, ran the Solano Grill & Bar for many years. Instead of making a lemon beurre blanc there, she made an orange one. "I don't like doing what everyone else does," she said. Her version of a tiramisu contains a crunch. "I love putting a handful of chopped-up chocolate in it just so you know you're getting something a little bit different." Her first attempt at an orange poppyseed muffin, though, was a miss. On a test run, their "unmitigatingly honest" kids nixed it. In the second iteration, they decided to omit the poppyseeds, and to simply top it with her streusel. Et voila, they'd arrived at the winning formula.

With summer fruits arriving at farmers markets, Tule-Chen and Braxton have so far been happy with the raspberries and strawberries. They make their own fillings with them. But lemon and fresh stone fruits are also in play. Cherries are key to making a black forest cake authentically German. And, according to Braxton, Tule-Chen is the queen of cheesecakes. She had made two lemon ones, which were in the case when I visited. Who needs a lemon square when there's lemon cheesecake at hand?

Despite a slight Covid-19 delay to their opening day in March, everything worked out according to their business plan. "Gayle said a while ago that she'd always had this plan in the back of her mind," Braxton said. "PennDel's Bakehouse is coming to fruition exactly as we put it down on paper." It took a long time for them to find the right location, but now that they've opened their doors to the neighborhood, "We're following our dreams." Braxton doesn't insert the word "sweet," but it's definitely implied and realized—like a spoonful of sugar, in the most delightful way.

PennDel's Bakehouse, 6491 Portola Dr., El Cerrito. 510.375.8007. Open Thurs–Sun, 9am to 2pm. penndelsbakehouse.com