

Satisfying a taste for the home-grown



Organic breads are baked at Wheatberry in Amherst. (Amy Mayer for The Boston Globe)

WHEATBERRY BAKERY & CAFE 321 Main St., Amherst, 413-253-4290,
www.wheatberry.org.

By Amy Mayer
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AMHERST - Ben and Adrie Lester began selling bread they had baked and vegetables they had grown because they felt passionately about eating and sharing good food. When they shifted their Wheatberry business from farmers' markets and wholesale to a small storefront here, they found a hungry audience. "The first two weeks we were open, people just started pouring through our doors," Ben Lester says.

In September, Wheatberry Cafe celebrated its first anniversary. What the couple doesn't grow comes from other locals; even the names of the dishes are borrowed from places they know. The Wheel-View, a slow-roasted beef sandwich grilled with a touch of Dijon, is named for the

Shelburne farm that provides the meat. The Quabbin is a ham sandwich with apple butter and Cabot cheddar; the Sugarloaf, a high-end PB&J. The shop is so locally oriented that no one seems surprised when a woman stops in with two dozen eggs in the midst of the lunch crowd.

"We get our local fresh eggs from a number of families," Lester says. Other raw ingredients come from community-supported agriculture programs and a Hadley dairy. Despite the intriguing lunch offerings (how about eggplant soup?), Wheatberry - as its name implies - specializes in grains: breads and pastries. Delicate croissants win praise from customers who compare them to ones they remember in Paris. "Evil good brownies" may be hard to resist, but chocolate lovers can also select flourless chocolate cake, an ironic but decadent player in a wheat-centric place.

Lester says that regulars clamor for a particularly humble baked good. "The whole-wheat cherry scone people are bananas for," he says. He didn't expect such success for the simple scones, but he says they keep selling out. Breads, many sourdough, some whole wheat, and all organic, feature beautifully-browned crusts in various shades. Some are baked with sandwiches in mind - more American style, Lester says - while others reflect French underpinnings. Baskets atop the cafe's counter contain lanky baguettes, rosemary olive rounds, and country French loaves. Slathered with fresh local butter or dipped into fall harvest stew, any of these is a winning accompaniment to a meal. Bagels made on-site are also available.

Much business is takeout, but two counters with high chairs line the shop. Teas, some grown in neighboring Shutesbury, where the Lesters live, and organic, fair trade coffees are also available. For the Lesters, being a community-focused business means decisions are not predicated on finances alone. "Our bottom line," Ben Lester says, "is to do something good in the world." They are partnering with the New England Small Farm Institute on an experiment to grow grains in the area, to serve the bakery and members of a new CSA.

Still, they are running a business. Lester says the three-fold hike in the cost of organic flour over the past year translated to higher prices for his goods. He regrets that some area students may find the expense insurmountable. But he adds that college and high school students both count among the regulars.

Because of the quick success of the cafe, the staff of Wheatberry expanded last year to 11 employees. The Lesters worked hard to train and retain new bakers to keep up with wholesale and retail demand. As business tripled, they implemented streamlined baking procedures to speed production and maximize efficiency.

Alas, the frenzy didn't meet their definition of success. "There is this idea that growth is necessary," Ben Lester says. But the couple saw that the pace threatened to turn their shop into something like a mini factory. So they scaled back their wholesale business, dropped down to four employees and now do just about all the baking themselves.

"We're a little bakery again," he says. And, happily, still a busy one.■

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Flourless chocolate cake

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Makes one 9-inch round

Despite its decadence, this cake calls out for a small dollop of whipped cream. For serving, beat 1/2 cup of heavy cream with 2 tablespoons confectioners' sugar and 1 teaspoon vanilla extract to soft peaks.

Butter (for the pan)

Flour (for the pan)

10 ounces dark chocolate (60 percent)

9 tablespoons (1 stick plus 1 tablespoon) unsalted butter

4 eggs

1/2 cup sugar

1. Set the oven at 325 degrees. Butter a 9-inch springform pan. Line the bottom with parchment paper. Butter the paper, then dust pan with flour, tapping out excess.

2. In the top of a double boiler over hot but not boiling water, melt the chocolate and butter. Remove the top of the pan and wipe the bottom dry; leave to cool slightly.

3. In an electric mixer, beat the eggs until they are pale and double in size. Gradually beat in the sugar. Remove the bowl from the mixer stand. Fold the chocolate into the egg mixture until the batter is smooth and uniform in color.

4. Pour the batter into the pan. With a rubber spatula, smooth the top. Bake the cake for 25 minutes or until 1 to 2 inches around the edges start to firm. The cake should be soft and creamy in the middle.

5. Transfer to a wire rack to cool for 20 minutes. Run a long metal spatula around the edges of the cake to loosen it from the pan. Open the spring. Let the cake cool completely. Cut into wedges to serve, adding a spoonful of whipped cream to each one. Adapted from Wheatberry Bakery & Cafe■

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