

Looking past the label

By Mark C. Stevens

I was in a bad mood to start with. My lazy Sunday morning had quickly evaporated under the heat of house renovations, and I needed to run out for supplies before even that could be accomplished. The children were already grumbling for food and I wanted to get underway without fixing a big breakfast, so we opted for a road meal. Sunday morning options in Anchorage are not broad, and pleasing the palates of the whole bunch for breakfast—without resorting to least-common-denominator options like fast food—is often a challenge.

So it was that we found ourselves checking out Terra Bella. I admit to some trepidation at the outset. I tend to find “organic” to be a value-added term, rather than a value, and I was afraid that there might be a lax attitude toward the preparation of food—a resting on the laurels, so to speak. And I considered it a poor omen when the row of handicapped-accessible parking spaces was filled with high-end sedans that had no sticker and clearly belonged to people whose only handicap was an overblown sense of entitlement.

Still, it's my job to take an objective viewpoint when I review a restaurant. After all, what can the business do about an ill-behaved contingent of its customer base? And what was my own fear based on, if not my own prejudice? But the place looked fussy with festive centerpieces and chenille placemats. Fussiness sets me on edge (don't try to take me to a Michael's, I can't hack it), but again I stilled my unease and decided to focus on the menu.

And the menu delivered. There really was something for everyone. My son enjoyed one of the many quiche options—one with chunks of cheddar and chicken sausage in a tender cream custard with respectably generous dices of apple. It was crustless, true, but the egg was too rich and delicate to be called a fritatta, so I'll let the appellation stand. My daughter enjoyed an enormous plate of French toast, broad slices of sourdough boule dipped only in enough egg that they coated and did not soak the bread. I thought that my own choice, eggs Benedict, was the best dish that we sampled. Sitting atop rounds of whole wheat Pullman toasts, the eggs were soft-poached, so that the yolks were satiny and soft enough to mingle with the hollandaise sauce, which had a tartness that convinced me that it was an in-house preparation and not the powdered mess that is so often passed off.

My wife tested a ham and cheese abrazo—a sort yeasted turnover that I admit I'm unfamiliar with. This was clearly a nice piece of pastry, rich whole-grain dough enshrining lean ham and sharp cheddar that had leaked just a little in baking, leaving a tasty crackling at the seam. It was done a disservice, though, by being reheated in the microwave before being served. This left the entire thing with a rubbery crumb that could easily have been avoided and nearly spoiled an otherwise well-prepared dish.

As far as Terra Bella's lunch menu is concerned, I tried only one dish, but I found it to be a treat. It was the Terra turkey avocado sandwich, and I found it to be a feast for the mouth and for the gut. The sandwich was served on heavy slices of house-prepared white bread that had a hearty, not spongy, crumb. It was filled with creamy slices of avocado, sweet-tart cranberry cream cheese, and a generous heap of smoked turkey. The effect was autumnal, but it did not seem out of place on a winter afternoon, and though it was filling, it left me the opportunity to try a pastry or two.

Well, two to be exact. I had a rugelach with cranberry, walnut and cream cheese filling which hit all of the

notes that make a rugelach good. It had the sour-bitter-buttery dough, the sweet-tart filling, the crumble of pastry and the crunch of nut. A sticky bun, however, suffered the same fate as the abrazo. Subjected to the tortuous and uneven heat of the microwave, one end was so chewy that it seemed nearly unchewable, and the other became brittle, and splintered at my bite. This was clearly a nice pastry—yeasty dough wrapped in concentric rings around buttery, spiced glaze and topped with pecans that gave a savory offset to the sweetness. But it was destroyed in the reheating.

Still, my fears turned out to be false. Rather than finding what I feared—sloppily prepared food that hoped the “organic” label would be enough to carry a dish—I’d found very careful preparations that were not nearly as fussy as the décor would have led me to believe on entry.

Terra Bella Organic Coffee

601 E. Dimond Blvd.

562-2259

Mon. to Fri., 7 a.m.-6 p.m.,

Sat., 8 a.m.-6 p.m.,

Sun., 9 a.m.-5p.m.

