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IN THE KITCHEN: Cranbury's Blue Rooster is well worth a visit

'Fresh, pure, rustic country fare -- simple but creative.'

By Pat Tanner Special Writer

Posted: Friday, October 31, 2008 2:02 PM EDT

One of Cranbury's own has come home to roost, so to speak. On Labor Day, Karen Finigan, who grew up in a house on Main Street but has lived elsewhere for the last 30 or so years, threw open the doors to the Blue Rooster Bakery & Café — also on Main Street — that she established with her husband of 15 years, Bob. The couple, who met while working for IBM, lived for the last few years in Dublin, and it was there that Bob Finigan, acting on a longtime passion, trained to be a professional bread baker.

The Blue Rooster, situated in one of Cranbury's pretty Victorian houses, is part bakery, part café, and part gourmet take-out shop, inspired, the Finigans say, by Irish and European versions. It serves breakfast, lunch, and four different afternoon tea services in two sunny, beautifully appointed dining rooms. Guests can also relax in cozy chairs in the "library," its shelves stocked with packaged teas, coffees, oatmeal, and jams and purchase pastries, hot and cold drinks, and, of course, Bob's artisan breads at a take-away area.

"The cornerstone of the Blue Rooster is our bread," says Karen Finigan. Her husband arrives at the site by 5 a.m., firing up the Bongard oven to produce, for example, baguettes, pain de campagne, sourdough rye, fougasse, focaccia, cinnamon raisin, apricot walnut, and, of course, Irish soda bread made from an old Finigan family recipe.

"Our philosophy is to serve fresh, pure, rustic country fare — simple but creative," Karen says.

Based on my already numerous visits to the Blue Rooster, I would say they are succeeding admirably. Breakfast has always been my favorite meal, and on my first visit I was immediately drawn to the selection of hot cereals, which include oatmeal, porridge, and Vermont multigrain, served with warm milk, brown sugar or honey, and/or dried fruits. But then I spotted the full Irish breakfast — authentic in its eggs, bacon, tomato, beans, white and black pudding, and toast — and couldn't decide. The solution? I had both, I am embarrassed to confess, and each was superb. I also took home a sticky bun.

The breakfast menu encompasses eggs in every style, French toast, pancakes, fruit salad, a smoothie, a parfait, and assorted pastries, including scones and brioche.

The kitchen staff includes bread baker Bob, chefs Peter van Antwerp and Lois Gullace, and pastry chef Advah Zinder. Together they produce lunch treats that include not only sandwiches, soups (including a stew that is sometimes Irish lamb), and platters of every description, but cassoulet and mac and cheese, and a risotto, pasta, and savory tart du jour.

Traditional afternoon tea service — sandwiches, scones, clotted cream, cookies, tarts, petit-fours — began earlier this week and, in typical Blue Rooster style, it comes in four interesting versions, from "simple Irish" to an Early American version called the "Cranbury tea party."

The Finigans live less than a quarter mile from the café, a seven-minute walk, which is a good thing because Bob's day doesn't usually end until around 8 at night. But, he says, it's worth it, "for the positive reception we've got from people in town. It's fun when I'm walking down the street and people recognize me, who just eight weeks ago didn't know us. The hometown feeling is great."

For Karen, "it's the concept that while we're in this as a business, we are so members of the community." Even in its short lifespan, the Blue Rooster has been involved in several fundraisers, including Cupcakes for the Cause (Cancer Care for Children) and it stocks the SchoolHouse Kitchen line of mustard, chutney, and vinaigrette, for which 100 percent of profits go to education.

"We want more than the business part of this to work," says this hometown girl.

Below are recipes for two of the Blue Rooster's fall specialties.

"We adapted the pumpkin pancake recipe from one given to us by a customer who really loves them and wanted us to be able to provide her with a favorite," relates Karen Finigan, who adds that the risotto with apples makes an ideal side dish for roast pork or seared duck breast.

The Blue Rooster Bakery & Café is at 17 North Main St., Cranbury. It is open for take-away every day from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. For breakfast, lunch, and afternoon tea hours, phone 609-235-7539 or visit www.bluroosterbakery.com.

BLUE ROOSTER PUMPKIN PANCAKES

½ cup pumpkin puree
2 eggs
1¼ cups milk
5 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
1¼ cups all-purpose flour
½ teaspoon salt
4 teaspoons baking powder
½ cup sugar
¼ teaspoon ground ginger
¼ teaspoon ground cloves
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
½ teaspoon ground nutmeg

Put first 3 ingredients in a large bowl and mix thoroughly with whisk. In another bowl, mix all dry ingredients. Whisk dry ingredients into wet a bit at a time until completely incorporated. Slowly add melted butter and mix thoroughly. Pour onto hot griddle and cook as you would all pancakes. Serve with browned butter and or maple syrup.

Serves 3 to 4.
BLUE ROOSTER CARAMEL IZED ONION,
APPLE & BACON RISOTTO

8 cups water
2 tablespoons vinegar (white or cider)
2 sprigs fresh thyme or 1 tablespoon dried
1 onion, diced
4 slices thick-cut bacon, cut into large dice (lardons)
1 cup Arborio rice
¼ cup white wine
½ cup apple cider
1 apple, diced
2 ounces Gouda, diced
Salt and pepper to taste

1. In medium saucepot bring water, vinegar, and thyme to a boil; then keep on simmer.

2. In separate large, wide pan place onion and bacon and cook gently until onion is lightly caramelized. Add rice, cook, stirring, for 1 minute, then deglaze the pan with white wine and cook until the liquid is just absorbed. Add 1 cup of the simmering water mixture and stir constantly until liquid is just absorbed. Add 1 more cup of water mixture and repeat process. Add apple cider and 1 more cup of water mixture, and repeat process. Check rice to see if tender, if not repeat process one more time, or until tender. (You will have leftover water.)

3. When rice is just tender/al dente, remove from heat, stir in diced apple and Gouda, and season with salt and pepper. Serve immediately.

Serves 4 as a side dish.

Dining by ballot

Za Restaurant in Pennington has dubbed election evening, Nov. 4, as "The Big Wait 2008" and is celebrating the occasion with a tempting and satirical prix-fixe ballot menu.

The restaurant's owner and chef, Mark Valenza, known for both his comfort cuisine and his sense of humor (the venue features a velvet Elvis and a framed Albert Einstein action figure) has recast his most popular dishes and priced the three-course shindig to move for the current economic meltdown milieu.

"Don't forget to vote," admonished Chef Mark. He reminds one and all that the first results don't come in until at least 10 p.m. The staff has been handing out "sample ballot menus" to promote Election Day business.

Za Restaurant's gimmicky Election Day ballot features dishes like "Grassroots Salad," an onion soup with "sinking swiftboats" of Fontina cheese, "gerrymandered" chicken breast saltimbocca, "Lame Duck & Chicken Jawboned into a Pig in a Poke," "Red Meat for the Base," which is "worked up to a frenzy" with caramelized onion sauce, and, for dessert two mini "crony cannoli" as well as "Landslide Chocolate Soufflé."

The full Za seasonal menu will also be available on Election Day, www.zarestaurants.com. Za is a B.Y.O.B. restaurant at 147 W. Delaware Ave., Pennington, 609-737-4400.

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