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What's New in Princeton & Central New Jersey?

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Let's Try...The Blue Rooster

by E.E. Whiting

Somewhere in Dublin, a cozy English tearoom fell in love with a robust French cafe and then settled into a Victorian house in Cranbury, New Jersey. The Blue Rooster, the newest addition to the delights of Cranbury's main street, is this blend of old and new world. Cheerily decorated in soft blue and yellow, the warmth envelops you as you mount the steps of the broad front porch and enter the wood paneled cafe portion of this eatery.

Small tables and comfy chairs invite you to linger over your coffee and treats from the on-site bakery, which produces artisan breads and pastries of all sorts. Displayed in the wall-to-wall book shelves are a variety of cheeses, pates, relishes, and the like to take home. One special feature is fine Italian olive oil and aged balsamic vinegar in huge urns — bottles are provided to allow you to take oil and vinegar home and return for refills.

This entry leads to the bakery proper. The smell of bread and the sight of the pastries will have you standing still, simply to absorb it all. The design of the shop invites you to sit and savor even though the staff is prepared to get you breakfast, lunch, or a snack to go. Through a door is the dining area where, on a recent Monday afternoon, I was greeted by an almost full house of convivial diners, many of whom were clearly repeat customers.

The menu is comprehensive and highlights the handmade breads. Soups abound, and sandwiches and salads complete the luncheon choices. Grazing is the order of the day. Fresh quiche is \$8.50 and a daily savory tart is \$5. The pate plate is \$11 and a salmon plate with salad is \$13. A non-traditional mac & cheese has become the favorite of adults as well as kids and a hearty portion to accompany the meal is only \$2.50 — the elbow macaroni is the only familiar feature of this dish. Coffee and tea are offered in three different size pots for \$4, \$5, and \$6.

I succumbed to the lure of the mac & cheese, along with a generous (but not too) cup of black bean soup and a side salad of wild rice and yellow beans — a lot of variety for under \$10. While I dined, I overheard a server saying good-bye to a table of business folk. "See you tomorrow?" she asked. "You bet" was the unanimous reply.

This lure of a return visit was irresistible and I came back for breakfast. The ambiance is cozy and at around 10 a.m. there were other late risers filling the cafe. The Fog Cutter coffee blend is a marvel and the cup is endless. I couldn't resist the makings of a full Irish breakfast, with a few alterations, and found myself with a plate of poached eggs, a taste of blood and white sausage, and real kippers, along with the bread, of course. As with lunch, the portions are just right and with all that I did not feel guilty that I had overindulged. The tab? A tad over \$10.

Picnic baskets can be ordered for two to six people, ranging from \$25 to \$72. They can include cheeses, pates, breads, salads, fresh vegetables, pastries, and other sweets. In addition, fresh pies will be offered for the coming holidays and various vendors will be coming for presentations in the coming months.

The Victorian house that is home to the Blue Rooster has been lovingly restored. The cafe and the dining room have retained their fireplaces. Upstairs are two meeting rooms that are available for the asking. One is set up for moms to meet for play dates or just to gather for a chat while the kids are entertained with toys compliments of the owners. The other room is available for small business meetings of up to 10. All that is required is a bit of advance notice and you are free to take your libations and nibbles upstairs.

Hosts Karen and Bob Finigan are very much in evidence in both areas of the shop. Both are refugees from the corporate world of IBM who chose to "go for it" and moved to Dublin simply because they wanted to. It was there that Bob indulged in his passion for baking and refined his skills. Karen, a Duke alumna, is a native of Cranbury, where her parents and a sister still live. Her dad ran the family business in New Brunswick before moving into administration at Rutgers. Her mom was a homemaker until later when she too moved into the IBM fold. Bob was born in Orange but, as the son of an Exxon executive, lived in many places on the East Coast as a child before going to Cornell, where he earned a degree in engineering. His mother was a homemaker whose recipe for soda bread inspired Bob's love of baking.

After Ireland, the couple chose to return to Karen's roots and open their bakery in Cranbury. They follow a very traditional baking process, using stone tiles and steam baking in ovens imported from France. They place a great emphasis on using local ingredients and employing local residents. They have expressed a vision to participate actively in the community. Karen even mentioned to me that she is considering instituting a barter system of sorts where local gardeners can bring in their produce to be incorporated into the menu.



The Blue Rooster is fast becoming a favorite haunt. This is a jolly alternative to the mass produced meals along Route 1. It is a welcome stop for the girls' day out or a relaxed venue for a business meeting. Just follow the scent of warm bread and rich coffee to a cheery corner of Cranbury. My car already knows the way.

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— E. E. Whiting

The Blue Rooster, 17 North Main Street, Cranbury, 609-235-7539, www.blueroosterbakery.com. Weekdays: breakfast, 7 to 10:30 a.m.; lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. on weekdays. Weekends: breakfast 7 a.m. to noon; lunch, 1 to 4 p.m.; Sunday breakfast, 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., with select lunch items available at noon. The bakery is open all day.

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