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An Inconvenient Tooth

There's going green, and then there's driving to Redwood City for Pamplemousse

By Cheryl Sternman Rule



Photograph by Felipe Buitrago
CUSTARD'S LAST STAND: Pamplemousse keeps it fresh and sweet.

IN this age of green everything, driving 30 miles from San Jose for a pastry makes no environmental sense. After all, every time we hop in our car we're contributing to the obliteration of the ecosystem —melting the polar ice caps, releasing iniquitous greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and furthering the extinction of exotic species. You know what, though? Pamplemousse's pastries just may be worth it.

Approaching the cafe's grapefruit-adorned awning (pamplemousse means grapefruit in French) on a Sunday at 10am is like driving through a 19th-century ghost town. Redwood City is all but deserted, and the closer you get to Pamplemousse the less action you see. A single car here, a lone pedestrian there. Why isn't a line snaking out the door? (I imagine that during the weekday commute the scene is altogether different.) Certainly anyone who's licked the satiny pastry cream from an apricot custard tart (\$2.95) would immediately be hooked. Atop the cream floats a single apricot, moist and yielding, giving the impression of a perfectly cooked sunny-side-up egg. The person with whom I shared it kept saying "Oh" in a voice so tiny it was just this side of dirty.

French-Canadian owner Kelli Manukyan opened the spacious, light-flooded cafe exactly a year ago a block from the Redwood City train station. She's flanked by New Kapadokia Restaurant across one corner and Siciliano's Ristorante on the other, as well as a mess of banks within a single-block radius. If ever there was a place to spend your ATM withdrawal on pastries, Pamplemousse is it. Manukyan's breakfast treats —impossibly flaky plain (\$2.25) and chocolate croissants (\$2.95) and pastry-cream enriched brioche in a quartet of flavors (cinnamon, chocolate chip, cranberry-orange and wild huckleberry, \$2.75 –2.95) —aren't cheap, but they're made so skillfully they're worth your hard-earned cash.

The gleaming pastry case that dominates the store's central hub is divided in three. To the right perch the morning pastries and some small but beautiful frangipane-filled tarts (\$3.95). The center showcases individual desserts (\$3.95 –\$5.45) —towers of white, dark and milk chocolate mousse, a stunning cake of mango and passion fruit with coconut-rum cream and toasted coconut shards, and a dark chocolate cake with apricot cream and brandied apricots. My two favorites were the rève de figue (translation: fig dream), a dome-shaped fig mousse atop a tender pastry round, and the madame pistache (very rough translation: "Mrs. Pistachio," I guess), a thick slice of Manukyan's holiday-themed Bûche de Noël made from fluffy pistachio cake, smooth cherry cream and boozy nuggets of brandied Morello cherries. A dark chocolate adornment and pistachio macaroon garnish the pink and green dessert.

French-style macaroons (\$1.95 each, \$23.40 per baker's dozen), which occupy the left third of the pastry case, are Pamplemousse's most unique specialty offering. For those who think a macaroon is a chewy Passover concoction in a Manischewitz can, Manukyan's version of almond meringue sandwich cookies slicked with tinted buttercream will set you straight. They're beautiful, colorful and intensely flavored with nut pastes, extracts, reductions and liqueurs. She says she went a little crazy when she first opened shop, offering flavors like tarragon and basil. She's pulled back, but ever so slightly. You'll still find saffron, grapefruit, anise, violet and chestnut as well as more mainstream versions like chocolate, vanilla, lemon and strawberry. My favorites were the nut-flavored macaroons: the pistachio and hazelnut cookies, in particular, packed an enormous flavor wallop. Coffee and fig were also excellent.

Aside from Manukyan's skill with sugar and butter, the cafe offers a number of savory sandwiches, soups and quiches, most of which were very good. The turkey sandwich with cranberry sauce and melted brie (\$8.95) is pressed panini-style between slices of crisp baguette brought in from Bakers of

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Paris in Brisbane. An enormous hunk of quiche Lorraine (\$6.95, for what must be one-fourth of an entire quiche) offered a tall and airy custard filling and deep golden crust. The quiche and sandwiches come with a side of fresh greens napped with a creamy, herb-flecked dressing. The one soup I tried, cream of cauliflower (\$2.95/\$5.95), was only ho-hum. All soups are vegetarian.

In 2008, Manukyan expects her application for a beer and wine license to be approved and plans to add wrought-iron fencing and heat lamps to her small patio. For Valentine's Day, she promises romantic live music and a 1am closing time. Pamplemousse, so named because, says Manukyan, it's everyone's favorite French word, is clearly on the rise. It won't be long before those outside Redwood City's confines discover it.

Pamplemousse Patisserie and Cafe

Address: 2401 Broadway St., Redwood City

Phone: 650.599.9714

Hours: 7am -7pm Mon -Thu, 7am -9pm Fri, 8am -7pm Sat, 8am -5pm Sun

Cuisine: French pastries and casual cafe fare

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