



Sabrosa Cafe's avocado smash-up. Photo by Chris Kessler

## RESTAURANT REVIEW: SABROSA CAFE & GALLERY IS SERVING UP DELICIOUSNESS

 [ANN CHRISTENSON \(HTTPS://WWW.MILWAUKEEMAG.COM/AUTHOR/ANN-CHRISTENSON/\)](https://www.milwaukeeemag.com/author/ann-christenson/), ✕ DECEMBER 25, 2017

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A familiar name is back in the restaurant business with Bay View's charming Sabrosa Cafe & Gallery.

The call came last spring. Francisco “Frank” Sanchez, whose family ran the old Taqueria Azteca on Oklahoma and Chase, was back – returning to the industry after several years out of the dining limelight. Only not at a straight-up Mexican place as he was known for before. Sanchez and his partner, Florentine Opera pianist Ruben Piirainen,

were renovating a storefront in Bay View, off the beaten path of busy South Kinnickinnic Avenue. They were building a morning-to-midday meal joint from ground zero.

His excitement for the project was infectious. The idea had evolved out of the sauces Sanchez and Piirainen started selling a few years ago under the name Sabrosa. The word is Spanish for “delicious,” which became the apt moniker for their sit-down place, **Sabrosa Cafe & Gallery** (<https://sabrosa.cafe/>). Their logo, the cempazuchi, is a marigold or “flor de muerto” (the flower used in Aztec culture to honor the dead), which also memorializes Sanchez’s late brother, Sal, who with his partner opened **Cempazuchi** on Brady Street in 1999 (it closed in early 2017 (<https://www.milwaukeeemag.com/brady-streets-cempazuchi-restaurant-close/>)).

When Sanchez and I spoke the second time, the leaves were turning, and he and Piirainen were getting ready to place a Day of the Dead altar in the “gallery” where there’s a live pianist on the weekends and an art exhibition of some sort. When you enter, the first things you see are the tables, the quirky surfaces covered in collage wallpaper art, and the bar/bakery counter (fashioned partly from a Milwaukee Rep prop) where frosted cinnamon rolls are arranged in a covered glass pedestal stand and your neighbor might be drinking a Oaxaca old fashioned (mezcal, reposado, poblano simple syrup, grilled oranges, marinated dark cherries) next to you.

Eggs are well-represented on the menu. The scrambles (\$13-\$14) are what you’d think – fluffy eggs cooked with meats, spinach or arugula, and even with marinara or country sausage gravy. They also come with the house campesino hash – potatoes, seasonal vegetables and herbs sautéed in olive oil. The kitchen makes a great loaded fried egg sandwich with spicy brown sugar bourbon bacon, cheese blend, avocado cream and sour cream (\$12). The “perfect” omelet combines the cheese-blend and above-mentioned creams for a soft blanket of eggy goodness. You can think of the avocado smash-up (\$13) as power toast, with thick, chewy Tuscan bread, sunflower sprouts, radish, tomatoes and poached eggs. I like the plate-size, carb coma of buttermilk pancakes, too (short \$8; full \$10).

The breakfast concept gave Sanchez freedom to stray from the expected Mexican establishment. But it didn’t keep him from weaving in several Latin dishes, such as huevos rancheros (\$10) with sautéed corn tortillas and beautifully seasoned Oaxacan black beans. From the Taqueria Azteca days come wonderful layered chicken enchiladas verdes with roasted poblano peanut sauce and queso fresco (\$14).

Sanchez has also been busy with the oven, turning out blueberry lemon scones, cinnamon rolls and crazy-rich flourless chocolate Azteca cake with cream and fresh berries. You can tell someone is happy when you taste his food. Here’s a prime example.

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## A Quick Convo With Sanchez

**Since “gallery” is in the name, how do you see that side?**

Pretty much anything goes. We want to do wine dinners, cooking classes, poetry readings or opera ...

**What’s the story with the clipboard art on the south wall?**

That’s Ruben! [Each of many clipboards holds a sheet of paper with the word “delicious” in another language.] There’s even a key to that, so you know what language it is.

**What are some things you plan to bring to the menu?**

We started doing sandwiches like the meatloaf [open-faced, with a hard-boiled egg inside]. The mollete, a warm open-face sandwich, with black beans, queso fresco, mixed greens and avocado fresco. I also want to make guisados [stews] and calabacitas – squash, corn and roasted chile.

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**Sabrosa Cafe & Gallery** (<https://sabrosa.cafe/>)

3216 S. Howell Ave., 312-834-1929

**Hours:** Tues-Fri 7:30 a.m.-3 p.m.; Sat-Sun 9-3 p.m.

**Prices:** \$8-\$16

**Service:** Attentive, friendly

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**‘Golden Days’ appears in the December 2017 issue of Milwaukee Magazine.**

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