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RESTAURANTS

REVIEW

Driving force behind Mom's was 'trying to perfect that tourtière'

The small pie is rich and satisfying, and with a crisp green and nicely acidic salad to accompany, it's enough for two to share, writes Andrew Coppolino.

Feb. 1, 2024 Updated at 8:00 a.m.  



Kristie Bannon, owner of Mom's Bread and Pie Co., with a Rickard's Red beef pie.

Andrew Coppolino photo

By Andrew Coppolino, Special to Waterloo Region Record

Don't feel like dining out? Don't want to prepare a meal? Then snag a frozen savoury pie from Mom's.

My choice from a few selections I've sampled at Mom's Bread and Pie Co., a small bakery in downtown Kitchener, is the tourtière, an icon of Quebec cookery with big flavour and rich history.

Kristie Bannon opened Mom's about 10 months ago. The takeaway shop is home base for her sweet and savoury pies — including her interpretation of the tourtière that started with family history.

“My granny Kay was a Cape Breton Acadian,” Bannon says. “It was my quest to replicate her recipe and nail the spice blend. When I did, I thought, yes, this is her tourtière.”

Duplicating a dish without a recipe is no small task, especially when it has as many variations and permutations as there are regions that make it, from northeastern Ontario to New Brunswick to the New England states.

Often pork, beef and veal, the tourtière is a Christmas-holiday staple with distinct ingredients whether it's tourtière du Lac-Saint-Jean or another Québécois pie loaded with moose, rabbit or partridge.

But Bannon's tourtière relies on her Acadian grandmother's interpretation and her own diligence in perfecting a memory.

A self-taught baker who previously worked in supply-chain management, Bannon says conquering the dish was a driving force that encouraged her to open Mom's.

“It started with trying to perfect that tourtière over a couple of years. I fell in love with baking and thinking about being a business owner,” Bannon says.

She prepares a range of foods — cookies, breads, buns, biscuits, hand pies — but focuses on the savoury side.

“I enjoy making them the most and developing new flavours. I probably made over two dozen versions of the tourtière until I got it right slowly adjusting the spices.”

Working in just under 60 square metres on two floors, and where only a few customers at a time can squeeze in at the sales counter, Bannon fills her freezer case with four to six savoury pies at any one time from a repertoire of 12 to 14.

Pies come in five- or nine-inch sizes, and there are vegan and vegetarian options (she was making a spaghetti squash and chickpea pie on my last visit).

I've recently devoured bubbling-hot chicken pot pie and gobbled greedily a juicy ground beef pie with caramelized onions and a dosing of Rickard's Red beer that contributed a touch of sweetness.

The tourtière, though, was the standout: the small pie is rich and satisfying, and I made a crisp green and nicely acidic salad to accompany. It was enough for two to share.

The pastry crisps nicely after just under an hour or so in a hot oven — I gave it a blast under the broiler too — and helps produce that pleasing fattiness on the lips, thanks to Bannon's secret ratio of shortening to lard: the former for the flakiness, the latter for the flavour.

"It's taken years, and I'm still adjusting it," she notes of the crust. "It's a challenge to balance the structure with the flakiness, especially for larger volumes."

Flavour it most certainly has: the meat — all pork, in this case — is dense but finely textured and layered with spices, notably cinnamon.

The binder, a small addition of bread crumbs, is Bannon's tweak on traditional potatoes, allowing the pie's luscious porkiness to balance with the pastry.

"I find the bread crumbs give it superior texture," she says.

Spring is not yet here, but Bannon is already looking ahead to next Christmas season and perhaps making a tourtière that is pork, beef and veal.

The pastry process will continue to evolve, too, and Bannon is contemplating finding more kitchen space in which to create.

For now, though, she's busy enough and motivated by the community aspect of her business and the camaraderie she's experienced, whether it comes from customers returning for an apple hand pie or the bestselling tourtière.

"The relationships with customers, neighbouring businesses and other food establishments have been great. And much more important than I thought it would be. There's a real sense of community here."

No doubt. People come together over pie.

Mom's Bread and Pie Co.

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Note: Before visiting, check with the venue regarding dish availability and hours of opening.

Andrew Coppolino is a Kitchener-based food writer and broadcaster. Visit him at andrewcoppolino.com.

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