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FABIENNE SOULIÈS – PITCHOUN FRENCH BAKERY & CAFÉ

STYLE | Breaking Bread

By Diane Haithman

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Pastry Presentation: Souliès is as likely to conduct business in the main dining room over a pastry and coffee as she is to hold meetings in her office above the restaurant. Photo by Thomas Wasper

Don't try to impress the staff at downtown's Pitchoun French Bakery and Café by approaching the bakery counter to order a bag of fresh pitchouns to go. The term does not refer to a food, but rather is an affectionate term meaning "kiddo" from an old dialect used in Provence and the Southwest of France.

But if you have traditional French fare on the brain, you'll find it at Pitchoun, located on Olive Street near 5th Street and open for about three years. Husband and wife owners Frédéric and Fabienne Souliès are both from France, but met in San Francisco where they lived some 20 years ago.

Client: Pitchoun Bakery

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"We love California, we'd been coming back here ever since," Fabienne Souliès said. "We always said we would come back here."

Souliès said even with California's abundance of great restaurants of all varieties, there wasn't too much competition in the French baking arena. "We have a lot of bakeries, and very nice ones, but American bread and French bread are very different," she said. "It is so specific, the bread and the doughs and the timing. We thought this would have added value abroad."

That even applies to that San Francisco treat, sourdough.

"Sourdough in America is very sour, very bitter," Souliès said. "The starter is not made the same and the fermentation of the bread is shorter, so for us you have a softer and nicer taste."

Frédéric hails from the Southwest of France, and Fabienne is half Italian from the French Riviera. "I cook everything in olive oil. He is butter," she said with a laugh. "A lot of our recipes have a Mediterranean touch."

Plenty of imported French butter reigns in the kitchen, particularly for the pastries. In fact, Pitchoun is among the six finalists in the upcoming "Croissant Battle" to name L.A.'s top croissant, to be held at downtown's Le Petit Paris restaurant on June. 2.

Frédéric, who comes from a family of bakers and farmers, controls the kitchen, with Fabienne, who comes from a family of restaurateurs, overseeing marketing, sales and human resources, including catering and partnerships with hotels and Aroma Café and Tea Co. and Joan's on Third restaurants. Pitchoun is open for breakfast, lunch and until 5 p.m. for afternoon snacks or a glass of wine.

The company's small business office is upstairs, but Souliès said she's as likely to meet clients and colleagues in the dining room over a bakery treat or the house specialty sandwich, the Pan Bagnat. In order to avoid personal pastry overload, Souliès often chooses chouquettes, small, light sugar puffs that offer just enough sweetness with coffee.

Pitchoun stands out among L.A.'s many fusion restaurants by remaining strictly French, although the restaurant makes sure to have gluten free and vegan options to appeal to contemporary diet restrictions.

"In France, we are very traditional, the recipes don't (change)," Souliès said. "When you have the best ingredients, you have the best dish. It doesn't have to be complicated."

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Pan Bagnat is a specialty from Nice, with tuna, tomato, egg, Niçoise olives and other goodies. Pitchoun bakes the authentic bread in the correct size, shape, weight, and with a touch of oil. (photo by Thomas Wasper)



Wines served at Pitchoun are dominated by Bordeaux varietals from the Southwest of France where husband Frédéric grew up. Pitchoun also serves French wines from other regions. Between 20 percent and 30 percent are from American vintners. (photo by Thomas Wasper)

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Instead of plain order numbers, Pitchoun's table cards include vintage postcards from the early 1900s handwritten by Frédéric's grandmother. Some were exchanged with a secret lover. (photo by Thomas Wasper)



You could say it with flowers, but Pitchoun's "Silly Cookies" also do the job. (photo by Thomas Wasper)

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