

Labriola rises to the occasion

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BY [PAT BRUNO](#) Dining Critic

Labriola Bakery Cafe in Oak Brook is way too good for my own good. If I could, I would eat everything on the menu and then start all over again.

When I first heard about this cafe, I thought it was interesting that Labriola, a boutique bakery (under the leadership of Richard Labriola) that supplies great artisanal breads to stores, hotels and restaurants, would open a cafe. I figured it would be a small place, with a few tables, some sandwiches, pastries and stacks of bread to take home. I was wrong on all counts.

Yes, there are sandwiches (plenty of options) and pastries, too (treats so unique that you get the urge to have one of everything). And there is bread to take home -- a selection that boggles the senses (if you have but one loaf to tote home, make it the French or semolina baguette). What classy bread-baking work goes into those two loaves alone.

And there are not a few tables; there are many tables. The atmosphere -- from wood-burning oven to granite countertop -- reminds me of a smart cafe that you might find in Milan. On top of that, the menu includes everything from soup to nuts (in the raisin walnut bread) with pasta, pizza and salads in between.

Here's how it works. You check out the overhead menu board (or grab a paper menu on the way in). Choose your dishes, pay, get a number to put on your table, and in short order, your food arrives. Or you can sit at the counter and watch the pizzaiolos doing their thing as they get the pizzas in and out of that centerpiece wood-burning oven.

The Labriola Cafe touts "Neapolitan Pizzeria," so let me start there. Great pizza (and you know I do not throw the word "great" around too often when it comes to pizza). The pizza here was very Neapolitan in style -- puffy edge with burn marks here and there, thin through the center and a light smear of San Marzano tomatoes. Slices of melted buffalo mozzarella (no skimping on that luxury) flowed gently into the red tomatoes beneath them. A wealth of fresh basil and a drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil rounded out the "Labriola specialty buffalo mozzarella" pizza. Don't miss it. At just \$12.95, it was quite a bargain.

On the subject of bargains, that \$12.95 pizza is as high as the prices go on the menu. Even a full order of pasta is only \$9.99.

With a name like Labriola, you might get the idea this cafe is all about Italian food. It's not. There are suggestions of Italian -- the pizza, for example, some of the sandwiches, several pastas -- but Labriola has put together a menu that has interest that goes beyond Italian.

Take the "Grilled Bread Salad," for example. This was a meal in a bowl that bowled us over with its grilled artisan ciabatta, tomato, black and green olives, shaved [red] onion, feta cheese, watercress and lemon balsamic vinaigrette. This was a designer salad that had so much going for it, it was hard to believe it cost only \$7.29. Everything came together nicely, but it was the grilled bread and the tangy dressing that gave it an edge.

The minestrone was a fine piece of soup work. The veggies were not mush and the flavor was true and fresh (not old, as in sitting around in a pot for hours). The soup came with several slices of that delicious baguette I referred to earlier, and that made it even more special.

The homemade, make that "made by hand" (as the menu states) ricotta gnocchi were nubbins of gnocchi as light as a feather, yet with just the right, pleasant chew. And the sauce -- a tomato/cream sauce enhanced with pecorino Romano cheese -- was every bit as delicious as the gnocchi. I added a meatball (simply because I love meatballs and I wanted to see what Labriola was doing with a meatball), and that beauty -- light yet firm and beautifully seasoned -- was every bit as good as some of the best meatballs around these parts. (You also can get those meatballs on a baguette with marinara sauce and provolone.)

Speaking of hot sandwiches, there's a French dip, a foot-long grilled

cheese (cheddar, Emmenthal, provolone) and roast beef splashed with giardiniera (a nice touch). And all sandwiches come with homemade chips so good that I defy you to stop eating them.

For dessert, try a couple of scoops of made-in-house gelato (pair the hazelnut with the pistachio for pure eating enjoyment). If you crave chocolate, have the thick, chocolatey rich brownie.

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