

Cream puffs with Japanese flair

BY SHELLEY FRALIC, VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 1, 2011



Beard Papa's is a Japan-based franchise that is now a hit in the Lower Mainland.

Photograph by: Handout, File

It is hard to imagine there is a major metropolis with a more eclectic culinary landscape than Metro Vancouver's.

New York? Forget about it, at least if you're craving good cheap sushi. San Francisco? You'll spend hours in search of decent butter chicken. London? A bowl of pho will set you back \$15, if you can find a soup kitchen that serves it.

B.C.'s good fortune is that when we opened our doors to the world decades ago, in rushed multiculturalism, and with it the most diverse international cuisine to be found anywhere in the world.

Today, hundreds of ethnic eateries, from Mexican and Mandarin to Mongolian and Mediterranean, are dishing up exotic, scrumptious and mostly affordable fare on almost every street corner in the region.

If you're a foodie with any sense of adventure, you could (and should) spend the rest of

your life eating your way through a global menu, right here in your own backyard.

You'd probably start with Asia, of course, given its immersive influence on our culture, perhaps working your way from the posh dim sum joints in downtown Vancouver to the aromatic food courts in places like Richmond's Aberdeen Centre and the Crystal Mall in Burnaby.

If, for instance, you've never tried Asian baked goods, you'd make your way to the nearest Chinese bakery — they're everywhere — and fill up a cardboard bakery box with fresh egg tarts, mango pudding cake, red bean pie and, that most delectable of all Chinese treats, the fresh-from-the-oven coconut bun.

Aside from your mother's coconut cream pie, there is nothing more divine than a warm coconut bun when your sweet tooth is craving attention.

Unless you happen upon the latest Asian taste treat turning up around town: the Japanese cream puff.

This isn't your traditional, centuries-old cream puff that is also known as a profiterole and traces its roots to France, where it's most often filled with whipping cream.

The Japanese, as they often do, have put a different spin on it.

It all started in 1999 in Osaka, when entrepreneur Yuji Hirota opened his first Beard Papa's location (the name and logo were inspired by his bearded grandfather and Santa Claus). The shop and Hirota's flavourful, custard-filled cream puffs instantly took on Hello Kitty-like cult status, and today there are more than 300 stores worldwide, the majority of them in Japan.

It's not hard to fathom why. The puffs are divine, a thin, featherlight, two-layered shell with an inner layer of soft choux pastry and an outer layer of a crunchier pie-crust pastry. (The dough is shipped in from Japan and baked fresh each day.)

The puff is baked and then filled to order through a little hole in the side, with a preservative-free fresh custard/whipped cream filling that comes in flavours such as vanilla, green tea, strawberry, earl grey, pumpkin, mango, chestnut, chocolate and coffee.

The stuffed puffs are dusted with powdered sugar and, if at all possible, eaten warm. They are messy — the sugar wafts everywhere — but the minute you pick one up and take a bite, it's suddenly gone, leaving little globs of custard on your fingertips.

The chain also sells chocolate eclairs, cheesecake sticks and tiny fondant-au-chocolate lava cakes, as well as another custard-filled treat called the Paris Brest, which is shaped like a bicycle wheel and named after the French town famous for bicycle races.

Vanilla is the most popular of the thousands of Beard Papa's cream puffs, each weighing in at 220 calories and \$1.75 a pop, with specialty flavours at \$1.95. (There are closing-time bargains, like six for \$8, because company policy dictates that there be no leftovers at day's end.)

The first Canadian franchise opened in Aberdeen Centre in 2007, and today nine of the 11 Canadian locations are in B.C., in locations from Metrotown to Robson Street. There is one store each in Edmonton and Toronto.

Danny Leung is in charge of the chain's Canadian franchises and thinks that aside from their taste, it is the simplicity and maybe the surprise of the Japanese cream puff that attracts customers.

"It's French, right?" he says, "and when people think cream puffs they think whipping cream. But it's not, it's custard."

He was also pleasantly surprised that the Robson store, which opened just over a year ago, has done so well, because "this is an Asian product, and yes, we do very well in Richmond and Metrotown, but on Robson it's a more mainstream customer."

Leung is optimistic that cream-puff madness will soon catch on in Eastern Canada, and he's noodling the idea of what he calls "sweet cafes", where customers can sit down at tables and chairs at Beard Papa's and enjoy their puffs with tea lattes instead of being restricted to takeout.

If you have a culinary bucket list, and who doesn't, this one goes under desserts to die for.

sfralic@vancouver.sun.com



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