

Pop go the sandwiches

ED MURRIETA; The News Tribune

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Cabernet with steak. Check. Stout ale with chocolate cake. Check.

Japanese cream soda with sake-poached sockeye salmon on sliced French bread with fennel dust and wasabi vinaigrette? Whoa.

The thought didn't just make my taste buds pop; it made my mind pop. Sure, Coke adds life to burgers and fries. But beyond that, I've never given much thought to pairing soda and food.

William Mueller has. It's the latest twist he's added to his two-year-old Proctor District business, formerly named Dinner Solutions and recently re-christened Babblin' Babs Bistro.

Actually, the twist is larger than soda pop. Dinner Solutions was a commercial kitchen where customers could prepare entrees that they cooked at home.

Now, it's a 14-seat bistro serving fresh, thoughtfully prepared sandwiches, salads and soups, while continuing to offer a freezer full of take-and-cook entrees and a "party solutions" catering menu.

Babblin' Babs is a cozy space with a lot going on. Bread is baked fresh. Meats are hand-cut. Soups are made from scratch. Pork and chicken are hormone-free.

Many ingredients are locally sourced, including produce from the Proctor Farmers Market.

Even its soda pop – from Japan, Germany, Australia and elsewhere – has a neighborhood connection: Sodas were paired with the sandwiches by the proprietors of Pour at Four, the Proctor wine bar.

With that kind of pop pedigree, I was inclined to take soda seriously, even at 3 bucks a pop. (Hey, some are organic, and most are made with cane sugar, not corn syrup.)

The sodas are fun – especially Japanese Sangaria Ramune, which gets a boost of carbonation when you push a marble from the cap into the bottle.

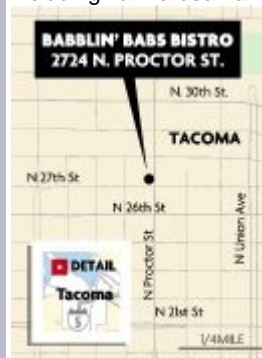
They also complement the flavors of some sandwiches: Herbal and citrus notes in Brainalizer soda smartly accented buttery-sweet-pungent notes of Mueller's prosciutto, pear and blue cheese sandwich. Smooth vanilla bean soda mellowed the spicy pungency of Caribbean jerk pork.



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LUI KIT WONG/THE NEWS TRIBUNE

Babblin' Babs Bistro owner William Mueller shows off the renamed and reimagined cafe's Caribbean jerk pork sandwich, left, and a prosciutto-pear-blue cheese sandwich. The bistro also specializes in unusual sodas, including vanilla bean and herbal brews.



Sources: ESRI, TeleAtlas
AMANDA RAYMOND/The News Tribune

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ADVERTISING

German ginger soda, however, competed with strong flavors of horseradish, Dijon mustard and chipotle vinaigrette on beef brisket. Sangaria Ramune cloyed against the clean flavor of salmon.

But soda is a mere sideshow. The stars of Mueller's menu are sandwiches, made fresh to order and thoughtfully prepared.

These aren't deli sandwiches, but they're far from frou-frou. They do, however, hint at Mueller's fine-dining background – he's an alum of the Four Seasons Hotel.

Brisket (\$8.95), salmon (\$8.95) and jerk pork (\$6.95) sandwiches were meaty mouthfuls contained by soft, crusty French bread.

West Indies curry chicken salad (\$6.95) was deliciously messy, with tender oven-roasted chicken, walnuts, raisins and celery spilling out of an impossibly buttery croissant.

Egg salad (\$5.95) was also messy – but only because the chopped, boiled eggs were not overly yolked or bound with globs of mayonnaise. The traditionally leaden sandwich became lively, thanks in part to tarragon and capers.

Shredded Asiago cheese and roasted red peppers gave oven-roasted eggplant a dual pungent-sweet accent, but a wet schmear of black olive pesto lacked bite.

Pico de gallo and white cheddar (\$6.95) could have been just another cheese sandwich with lettuce, tomato and onions. But the cheese – though less abundant than I'd wished – was shaved, and the spring greens were dressed in jalapeño vinaigrette.

Sandwiches are served with side salads. German-style potato salad with whole-grain mustard got a light French lift from white wine, tarragon and chives. Moroccan couscous was sweeter than some sodas.

Soups include an onion gratinee – think French onion, but with light, shredded cheese replacing molten goop.

Any sandwich can be ordered as a salad. I'm not sure how the eggplant or egg salad would be without bread, but prosciutto shined amid greens.

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Babblin' Babs Bistro

2724 N. Proctor St., Tacoma, 253-761-9099

CUISINE: Sandwiches, salads and soups

ATMOSPHERE: Cozy French bistro

PRICES: \$5.95-\$8.95

HOURS: 7 a.m.-6:30 p.m. Mondays-Fridays, 8 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays

SERVICE: Real good

BATHROOM: Nice

NOISE LEVEL: OK

KID-FRIENDLY: Yes

ACCESS: No barriers