

More than java abrew in Ossian

By Ryan DuVall
Restaurant critic

School is back in session, and parents everywhere are rejoicing. I couldn't help but think of that during my recent visits to Brew Ha Espresso Cafe in Ossian because it just seemed like a perfect place for those liberated parents to convene for breakfast, lunch or just a good cup of coffee and a sweet or two.

Dining out

I am usually very harsh on coffee-houses. When I go someplace for java, I don't care about what else is on the menu. If you aren't making good coffee, I am not going to try your soup-and-sandwich lunch special. But when I stopped at Brew Ha for a triple cappuccino one evening, I was taken by the place. It has the perfect artsy, casual decor a coffeehouse should have. Aside from the usual carpet, paintings and other flair, the thin, metal, high-back chairs and black-and-grey-speckled tables were very cool. There also is a cozy little parlor with padded lounge chairs tucked away just off the front entrance that would be a perfect place to laze around without the young ones.

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|------------------------|
| Brew Ha |
| ★★★½ |
| Out of a possible five |
| \$ |

And, just so you know, the coffee is great. Roasted by the Espresso Gallery in The Shoppes at Scott Road in Fort Wayne – a great place of its own – the cappuccino was perfect as were the regular coffees, blended iced mocha and the blackberry-sage iced tea I sampled. If you like rich, hearty coffee, I suggest taking home a bag of Brew Ha's samba blend. Also, I have had a few cups of joe at a Brew Ha coffeehouse in Columbia City and just assumed this place was affiliated with it. But when I asked, I was told they are by no means related, and I just left it at that because it seemed this name coincidence was a bit of a touchy subject.

So, with that out of the way, let me tell

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you that this cafe has plenty more to offer even if coffee isn't your cup of tea.

Brew Ha offers a variety of panini sandwiches, soups, wraps, salads and quiches. I started with a smoked turkey Dijon panini. The pressed and grilled garlic herb focaccia bread on this sandwich was clearly the star. It was crispy outside, chewy inside and flavorful, but not overpowering. There was a fair amount of turkey, bacon and cheddar cheese, and the only complaint I had was that the sandwich was fairly small for a panini. It wasn't too small, just not as big as I would have hoped. The pizza panini wasn't as impressive, as its fillings were even skimpier.

By far, the best panini option was the tuna melt. Tuna melts don't normally knock me out, but this one did thanks to its freshness and slightly sweet, but still pickley, tuna salad. The addition of a touch of boiled egg to the tuna salad, along with red onion, tomato and provolone cheese as toppings, made this quite possibly the best tuna melt I have had outside my kitchen.

I found the paninis to be a better bet than the wrap I sampled, which also contained smoked turkey and bacon. It was plenty big and full of fresh lettuce, tomato and onion, as well as the meat and cheese, but the wheat wrap surrounding it was refrigerator cold.

During both of my visits, the soups were nearly identical — one a cheese and vegetable mix and the other a broccoli and cheese. Both had a Cheez Whiz color and flavor to them and were quite satisfactory. Chili was listed on the menu, but it is seasonal and was not yet available.

Salad was a better bet on the side. Brew Ha's chicken Oriental salad with its rice noodles, pecans and tart Oriental dressing was better than the summer salad, which was bettered by crumbled bleu cheese but was hurt by a raspberry vinaigrette I found more tart than the tart Oriental dressing.

I chose to sample half salads, which were served next to my paninis in very attractive quarter-moon serving dishes. I would suggest half salads also, because you are going to want to leave room for dessert. Although Heyerly Bakery just a few doors down is a tempting after-lunch destination, there was really no reason to leave Brew Ha because there were plenty of cakes, muffins,

cookies, cheesecakes, pies, fruit bars, scones and goodies there to choose from.

From the cakes, I would have to strongly suggest the snickerdoodle version. I am not a big fan of snickerdoodle cookies, but this light, moist, delicious cake was full of cinnamon goodness and was slathered with a super sweet white icing similar to one you would find on a cinnamon roll.

The cheesecakes come courtesy of Eli's in Chicago so, if you are familiar with the brand, you know they are good. Brew Ha offers Snicker's, Reese's, triple-chocolate truffle, raspberry-white chocolate and plain varieties. I sampled the Snicker's and Reese's and, well, what can I say, they were great.

I also couldn't resist a giant chocolate brownie that was calling my name from the dessert case. This cocoa-infused behemoth was quite rich and reminded me a lot of German chocolate cake. I also took home a few cookies and muffins and found them to be quite good. But who am I kidding, there are very few muffins and cookies I haven't found good in my day.

The most unique dessert I sampled, however, was the zucchini pie. That's right, pie, not bread. This topless dessert looked and tasted

similar to sugar cream pie. It has a custardy base and was dusted with cinnamon. What really surprised me was there was nothing green in it at all. There were no bits of zucchini visible. Whoever's recipe this was put a hurting on a blender when creating this dessert.

If you have a sweet tooth, the last few paragraphs have probably convinced you to try Brew Ha. But if that isn't enough, let me — a true coffeehouse skeptic — tell you, it is well worth the trip to Ossian. Is the food out of this world? No, but it isn't at all sub-par and it is more than acceptable for a coffeehouse. But the coffee is well above par, as are those sweets. Add that in with the fantastic atmosphere and you have a winner.

And, hey, with the kids back in school, what better way could you waste away an afternoon alone?

Restaurant: Brew Ha Espresso Cafe

Address: 122 S. Jefferson St., Ossian

Phone: 260-622-4259

Hours: 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Thursday and Saturday, 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday, 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday

Smoking status: Non-smol
Handicapped accessible: ?
Alcohol served: None
Credit cards accepted: Yes
Kid-friendly: Yes

Menu: Tuna melt panini (\$3.45), smoked turkey panini (\$3.45), smoked turkey and bacon wrap (\$5.25; \$3.25 soup (\$2.35 cup; \$3.25 bowl), mer salad (\$5.50; \$3.50 half), chicken Oriental salad (\$5.25; \$3.25), quiche (\$3.50 with fruit without), coffee (\$1.25 12 ounce; \$1.50 16 ounce; \$1.70 20 ounce), cappuccino (\$2.50; \$3.05; \$3.50), cheesecake (\$2.95 plain, \$3.50 specials); cake (\$2.95), pie (\$1.25)

Note: Restaurants are categorized by price range: \$ (less than \$20 for three-course meal), \$\$ (\$20-\$29), \$\$\$ (\$30-\$39), \$\$\$\$ (\$40-\$49), \$\$\$\$\$ (\$50 and up).

Ryan DuVall is a restaurant critic for The Journal Gazette. This review is based on two unannounced visits. The Journal Gazette pays for his meals. E-mail him at rduvall@journalgazette.net or call at 461-8130, or go to the "Dining out" topic of "The Boonville Journal Gazette" at www.journalgazette.net