

Whisked by a bistro into the pure perks of homemade butter

We have been eating out a lot of late because it is too hot to cook. Fortunately, it is possible to eat reasonably, and reasonably well, in Parkdale. I like my dill soup with a schnitzel. I like pork hocks. I like dumplings.

But a new bistro has just opened near us on Queen St. at Sorauren — talk about a plate of optimism — so we decided to drop by the other night. The menu is local, seasonal and organic. When the waiter brought our bread, he said, almost casually, “We make our own butter.”

I have never heard of such a thing. After we finished eating, the chef, Mark Cutrara, came by to ask if we had enjoyed the meal — yes, thanks, very much — so I asked him about the butter.

After some brief talk of the phi-



JOE FIORITO

losophy of fresh and local he said, “It’s not difficult, and nobody does it.”

I am not always fond of butter — I have a marked preference for olive oil — but it is clearly crucial in baking and cooking, and anything made by hand, with care, is almost always better than anything made in a factory. I said I had never seen butter made. He invited me to drop by and watch. I took him up on the offer on a recent morning.

Parkdale, as the sun ascends, is clean and bright and the streets are full of hope. Cutrara pulled up on a motorcycle, unlocked his front door and led me in.

His restaurant is called Cowbell and he keeps several of these behind the bar; gifts from friends and relatives. He said, “I have a tin one that we use to call for service. It has more of a clunk than a ding.”

He made espresso and we talked butter right away. The inspiration? “When I was in Grade 3 my teacher put some whipping cream in a jar and had us give it three shakes each and pass it around. It was the best butter I had in my life.”

How did he eat it? “We put it on Wonder Bread; a kid’s delight.”

I don’t know about the bread, but I know a bit about the pleasures of the table, and the ones we learn

early tend to last a lifetime.

In addition to the grade school revelation, Cutrara’s grandfather had been a pastry chef, and any boy with a palate knows there is nothing more buttery than the taste of a croissant.

Cutrara’s immediate family worked in the trucking business, and I suppose it would have been easy enough to work with them. But he always liked to cook.

He remembers walking up and down Yonge St., stopping in restaurants, asking for work. He found a job peeling potatoes at Centro, worked his way up and on to the line, and eventually he went to cooking school in Stratford.

Since then, he has worked with some of the best of Toronto’s tall toques. Another butter story: “I remember once we were making

whipped cream, and we got distracted.” Chef threw out the results.

Not any more.

Cutrara led me down to the prep kitchen. He poured three litres of organic 35 per cent cream into a giant mixer fitted with a whisk. He added a splash of crème fraiche, a dash of salt, and turned the mixer on.

Come, butter come.

Soft peaks, then stiff ones and then, of a sudden, lumps and clumps of yellow butter in a small pale puddle of buttermilk.

He got three pounds. I cleaned the whisk with a piece of bread — the taste clean, pure, almost tangy — and got converted.

Joe Fiorito usually appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Email: jfiorito@thestar.ca