

FOOD

The city's best buns are in the 'burbs

The finest little bakery in the GTA may be Scarborough's Cliffside, where a husband-and-wife team still craft handmade loaves

PETER SCOWEN

It's just before 10 a.m. on a steaming hot weekday morning at Cliffside Hearth, a new bakery on Kingston Road, when two women walk briskly through the open door and up to the counter. They're all business: One has a Bluetooth earpiece in place, poised for whatever urgent call might come, and the other is cradling a clipboard.

Clipboard Lady announces that she and her accoutred colleague are from a nearby church, that they are holding an upcoming bazaar, and that they are wondering if the bakery could give them a deal on – and here she checks what's written on her clipboard – 15 dozen hot-dog buns and a gross of hamburger buns.

Welcome to Scarborough. Cliffside Hearth is way out there on Kingston Road, past the eastern end of Danforth Avenue, past the Cosy Hungarian Dining Lounge at Midland, beyond even the Hav-A-Nap Motel at Brimley Road. It's embedded in a strip mall, of course, hard by a pub and around the corner from an Ontario government service centre. And it is producing, thanks to baker and co-owner David Aplin, some of the finest handmade breads in the city of Toronto.

Mr. Aplin, 53, and his wife and partner Camelia Proulx, 46, gently inform the two church ladies that they do not, in fact, mass produce hot-dog and hamburger buns, but thank them for thinking of Cliffside Hearth, which opened in April and is just beginning to become known in the area.

"Bread has a noble past," Mr. Aplin, a lanky, self-taught scholar on the subject, says a little later, "but now it's relegated to hots and hams."

Mr. Aplin, dressed all in white, works at his baker's bench in the tiny 740-square-foot space, manipulating and cutting sticky dough with a self-assurance that is intimidating to anyone whose experience with the substance is restricted to biannual attempts at pie crust. To his left is the giant Italian bread oven, its four shelves ready and waiting for their next assignment. Behind him is a stack of 40-kilo bags of untreated and unbleached flour from Saskatchewan; to his right on a large cooling rack are



David Aplin is a scholar of bread's 'noble past'; his wife, Camelia Proulx, quit managing a restaurant to open Cliffside. DEBORAH BAIC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

deep-brown *miches* the size of hubcaps and dusted with flour, lighter-hued five-grain *levains* the size of partially deflated American footballs, and baguettes with sharp pointed ends ("the signature of a hand-rolled baguette," he points out).

Parallel to the cooling rack lies a small counter dominated by a cash register and offerings of shortbreads and cookies; then comes the tiny retail area, a maybe 45-square-foot collection of shelves and baskets in the storefront window, all meticulously laid out with pumpernickel loaves, raisin bread, *fougasses*, more baguettes and more varieties of breads.

Nary a hot-dog bun in sight, although there are some large seed-sprinkled buns designed to hold the hockey-puck-sized Kobe beef burgers from The Butcher Shop, located in the next strip mall east (and another culinary gem in the area, with its dry-aged USDA prime steaks, Korean ribs and gargan-

tuan kebabs). The Butcher Shop was an early champion of Cliffside Hearth and sells Mr. Aplin's baguettes and buns in its busy shop, helping to spread the word.

Not that the couple started from zero. Cliffside Hearth has its origins in Mr. Aplin and Ms. Proulx's backyard in the nearby neighbourhood of Cliffside, where six years ago they built a brick bread oven and started producing pizzas and loaves for personal consumption. Mr. Aplin was baking for a local grocery chain, working at a massive bench with experienced bakers from around the world but growing disillusioned with the chain's move away from the fresh and toward the frozen; Ms. Proulx was, unknowingly at the time, coming to the end of a long career managing a popular restaurant in the financial district.

When a German neighbour tasted the bread they were producing in their small oven, she

told them she would pay them to bake for her. So they did, and from there it wasn't that long before the two of them found themselves on a midwinter Friday evening firing up the oven in -25 degree weather, feeding the sourdough starter, preparing the dough for 200 loaves of bread for a long list of clients, and then baking until 4 a.m. Sunday, followed by four hours sleep and then another 12-hour day. "I was mixing the dough without an electric mixer," recalled Mr. Aplin. "I was doing it with my arms. That was the difference between craft and stupidity."

Ms. Proulx, meanwhile, had to find the time between her job and raising the couple's son to scrounge wood for the oven from local lumberyards and woodworks. And then the restaurant she'd been at for more than 20 years closed down. She bounced around in a few other jobs in the hospitality industry and took a course in small-busi-

ness management, which eventually led to Cliffside Hearth.

Mr. Aplin comes in at 4 a.m., biking to the bakery to get started on the day's bread. He gets to combine his ingredients in an electric mixer these days, and he doesn't have to struggle to maintain the proper temperature in his oven – all he has to do is push a button – but every loaf is still hand-formed, free of preservatives and naturally leavened. The couple read incessantly about bread and its history, searching for new recipes and techniques; they recently added pizza *cavolfiore* – a white pizza with cauliflower and rosemary – to their repertoire.

"Many people will travel for good bread," says Ms. Proulx as the traffic on Kingston Road whizzes by. Mr. Aplin is loading more baguettes into the oven, and classic rock is playing on the radio.

Cliffside Hearth: 3047 Kingston Rd. in Cliffcrest Plaza; 416-261-1010

ARCHITECTURE

Enchanted courtyard is one of Toronto's secret treasures

The Philippe Starck-designed space on Portland Street is playful and surreal, miles away from the usual moribund condo design

LISA ROCHON

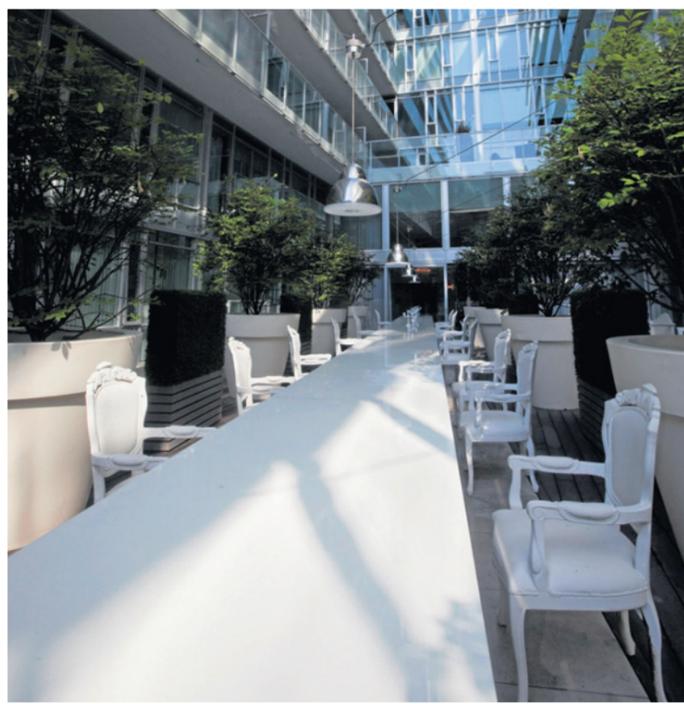
A white glass table that seems to run to the vanishing point of infinity; pompadour-styled chairs, outlandishly carved and heavily spray-painted in white resin; black candelabras dotting the tabletop and metal globes suspended overhead – all are set like props of enchantment in a narrow courtyard. Here is one of Toronto's secret spaces: A set piece of decadence and surrealism, hardly what you would expect from a typical condominium lobby in Toronto's King West warehouse district.

Alice in Wonderland could happily frolic here. Design illusions and a twisted sense of scale – outdoors, white planters lushly planted with burning bush shrubs rise two metres high – are what clearly intrigued French powerhouse Philippe Starck when he sketched a design for the interior lobby and its narrow atrium at Seventy5 Portland. Commissioned by Freed Developments, the dominant builder of mid-rise condominiums in the King West area, Mr. Starck sat in a corner and sketched his idea for the atrium during a meeting with his production design house, Yoo, and the condominium architect, Charles Gane of Core Architects. "The courtyard had already been set out in terms of its dimensions and height," says Mr. Gane, recalling the meeting with Mr. Starck in London. "He sketched for about an hour, coming up with a long table half in the lobby and half out. That really became the genesis of his design. It seemed that he conceived of the whole project while sitting off in his corner."

The interior courtyard measures only 11 metres wide with 10 storeys of condominiums rising above. Facing east, the space is



Shades of Alice in Wonderland: An oversized table appears to extend through a glass door, above, and into the outdoor courtyard at Seventy5 Portland, a condo by Freed Developments that has distinguished itself from other King West spaces. MICHELLE SIU/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



naturally enlivened during the day by morning light. But the conscious artifice of the Starck designs, the ironic flashback to the Belle Époque, the way that the chairs have been heavily spray-painted with resin as if royal thrones from Versailles had been plastic-wrapped and flash-frozen in time, all of this lends a deliciousness to the space. It opens up to possibilities. What a welcome treatment it is, especially considering the formulaic designs (an amoeba-shaped glass table, a couch by Mies van der Rohe, a white shag carpet) that beat most condominium ground floors into submission.

Seventy5 Portland distinguishes itself with its lively white facade and glass-fronted, cantilevered balconies suspended intimately over the street. The condominium, which houses about 250 people and includes a 2,000-square-foot penthouse now on the market for approximately \$2.4-million, recently won the 2011 PUG Awards best new residential building. A flash of yellow, the only concession to colour, is emblazoned over the front entrance and repeated again within the front entrance hall. (Mr. Starck has long promoted the eerie tones of yellow and green, starting with his iconic Café Costes in Paris during the mid-1980s and including New York's Hudson Hotel.) A massive glass sheet hovers just inside the front lobby entrance, the better to enlarge the space and reflect the play of colour, while, next to the concierge desk, a big glass door seems to cut the epic table in half. Rolled away, the table and plasticized, gaudy chairs reveal a courtyard theatre, ripe for anybody willing to match Mr. Starck's obsession with love, romance and urban wit.

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