



BLUEBERRY HILL MARKET CAFÉ

A Welcoming Oasis in New Lebanon

On a road trip, sometimes you have to settle for convenience mart coffee and dubious treats sheathed in plastic. Those are not happy moments. Other times, the prospect of a favorite coffee shop or deli can pull you through the miles and steel your resolve to bypass gas station grub. Blueberry Hill Market Café provides plenty of incentive to stay strong till you hit New Lebanon. Your hardest decision will be whether to hunker down inside or take your meal on the road.

This healthful, homey eatery is a welcome oasis along Routes 22 and 20. First you notice the blue wooden sign in the shape of a cup proclaiming “Local Roasted Coffee!” Then you see a cheerful lemon (“Fresh Squeezed Lemonade!”) and a flaky pie. Those humorous and funky placards set the tone for the offerings inside.

Chef/owner Melanie Hunt opened Blueberry Hill on Memorial Day week in 2012. Hunt grew up on Blueberry Hill Road in Old Chatham and went to school in New Lebanon. She spent 15 years as a private chef and worked in a number of restaurants both locally and in Philadelphia. Hunt moved back to the area and in 2011 bought the building that would soon house Blueberry Hill. “The building had been vacant for three years. I had been looking for a space so I pulled into the empty lot in a rainstorm and called the number listed,” Hunt remembers. “The guy met me the next day. I spent three months renovating the kitchen and interior. I wanted an open kitchen so people could see how their food was being prepared and who was making it.

We don’t open a bag or a box, nuke it and throw it on a plate.”

The staff makes at least 80% of what they serve. “Because we make so much food to order, I usually have eight or nine people working in the kitchen,” Hunt says. “All my staff has a real appreciation for excellent food. We do fresh squeezing, coffee drinks, salads, baking, prepping veggies. Our menus change weekly and we have specials every day. We focus on lighter fare, salsas rather than heavy sauces.”

The menu offers peasant fare with a modern twist. Top sellers include homemade soups, veggie lasagna, pastries and baked goods and anything with a Mexican flair such as quesadillas and tostados. Burgers are house-ground beef from Kinderhook Farm. The Reuben is Blueberry Hill’s most popular sandwich, with braised red cabbage, flat pastrami, cheese and dressing on marble rye. Paninis, especially those with oven-roasted tomatoes and homemade pesto, also earn accolades.

Breakfast items are served all day. “We tried to say no but our customers persisted,” Hunt laughs. “We blow through at least seven cases of eggs a week just for omelets!” Trust me, the Florentine omelet loaded with spinach and the bacon Brie omelet will fill you up for the day. Other options include crunchy French toast served with wild blueberry sauce and lemon curd or a hot-off-the-grill egg sandwich. An array of pancakes, corned beef hash and homemade English muffin bread also satisfy one’s inner craving morning or afternoon.

Although comfortable with vegan and raw, local meats and dairy, pastry remains Hunt’s true love. “I’m pretty picky so we bake daily.

Breads, muffins, pies, croissants, cookies.” The café uses local ingredients as much as possible. Veggies from Uprising Farm, Abode Farm and Kinderhook Creek Farm. Beef and lamb come from Kinderhook Farm, cheese from Four Fat Fowl in Stephentown and Cricket Creek in Williamstown, and local syrup, honey and eggs. Dairy comes from Ronnybrook, and the Berry Farm and Samascott Orchard provide a variety of fruits. Coffee travels a few miles over from Liquid Assets in neighboring Chatham. “Chris, who is one of my bakers, also works at Liquid Assets, and she roasts beans specifically for us every three or four days. We get kind of spoiled,” Hunt adds with a smile.

Hunt keeps her retail shelves stocked with organic staples and healthy snacks, along with local jams and fresh produce such as tomatoes, onions, potatoes and fruits. Ronnybrook milk and yogurt fill the refrigerated cases, and Liquid Assets coffee beans and a wide assortment of Harney teas are available as well.

Blueberry Hill’s cozy interior can accommodate 50 people. Hunt believes in up-cycling, so all the tables and chairs are repurposed from various friends and tag sales. “I have 150 vintage tablecloths all donated by local women. They love to come and sit at the table that has their tablecloth still in use.” All the dishes and mugs are mismatched as well, creating a homey, eclectic ambience Melanie calls a “hodgepodge of life.” In the warmer months, diners can choose a table on the front porch or relax at an outdoor picnic table.

Hunt loves the way the café has evolved over the past four years. “We have a unique team working here, and each person brings his or her own talents. I’m glad I was able to come home and start a successful business in this town. I love being able to support local farms and businesses. We need to keep local dollars local. Blueberry Hill has created job opportunities, and I have 15 people on payroll. This stretch of Routes 22 and 20 has such potential because of the number of people who pass by daily or travel en route to Vermont or the Berkshires.”

“In a small business like this,” Hunt concludes, “you’re fixing, creating, thinking every day. There’s always some new glitch to deal with. But I like being independent and doing things our way, not being mainstream.”

Thanks to Hunt’s can-do attitude and commitment to her roots, Blueberry Hill provides a welcome reason to stop whether traveling near or far. #3



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