

DINING OUT

Satiating our senses in hip South Wedge

When my 19-year-old niece, Erika, landed on my doorstep last week for a much-needed respite from dorm life at Syracuse University, I knew just where to go to recharge her batteries: The South Wedge.

Close to downtown and not far from the University of Rochester, this easily walked neighborhood, with its historic storefronts and artsy parking meters, features an eclectic mix of specialty shops and restaurants that I knew my niece would love. Plus, most of the places we wanted to check out were within walking distance of one another, which made our jaunt even more enjoyable.

Did we have a great time? Definitely! We got exercise; we ate well; and we each bought something out of the ordinary: she, a funky top from Thread (a trendy clothing boutique); I, an antique doorknob from Historic Houseparts.

Eco Bella Bakery

We started our trek at a spot my niece was eager to visit: Eco Bella, a tiny bakery (no seating) that specializes in vegan and gluten-free baked goods made with organic and local ingredients. Erika, who can't tolerate gluten (because of celiac disease), is always on the lookout for foods she can eat, especially baked goods. The verdict? To quote my exuberant niece: "OMG, this is the best raspberry muffin (\$3) I have ever eaten! It's not dry!" (I guess "dryness" dogs many gluten-free products.) I tried a muffin, too, and thoroughly enjoyed it, right down to the last "I can't believe it's not wheat" crumb. Eco Bella Bakery, 732 South Ave., limited hours, (585) 503-2488.

Coffee Connection

After walking a bit and poking around in a few shops, we decided to take a load off at the Coffee Connection. The somewhat plain exterior belies what's going on inside — and, trust me, there's a whole lot going on in this vibrant, little establishment. The color palette is south-of-the-border beautiful; the Peruvian coffee is fair trade; the light



ADRIAN KRAUS/MESSENGER POST
Coffee Connection is at 681 South Ave., near the corner of Gregory Street in Rochester's South Wedge.



ANNE PALUMBO

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menu features soup, quiche and other baked goodies; and the staff consists of women looking to enter (or re-enter) the work force. A little sleuthing on our part revealed that owner Nancy Sawyer-Molina began the Coffee Connection (formerly the Women's Coffee Connection) with the goal of helping struggling women in our area get back on their feet. How great is that?

While we waited for our hot drinks — a cappuccino for me; an Almond Joy latte for Erika — we checked out photos from Mexico's coffee-growing regions (exhibit runs until March 27) and also perused all the cool Peruvian merchandise tucked along the wall: jewelry, sweaters, cards, hand-crafts, more.

Loving our street-side

window seats at a small round table, we decided to stay for a light lunch. Although the menu is limited, we found just what we were looking for: Italian wedding soup (\$3.50) for me, and an asparagus, roasted red pepper and provolone quiche (\$3.99) for Erika (Auntie Anne got the crust). Both hit the spot.

As hard as it was to resist CC's yummy-looking desserts, we had our hearts set on chocolates from a little chocolate shop we spotted while strolling around and bid this oasis of cozy comfort

a fond farewell. Coffee Connection, 681 South Ave., 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. weekdays and 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturdays, (585) 442-2180, www.womenscoffeeconnection.com.

Hedonist Artisan Chocolates

Tucked in an alleyway directly across the street from the Coffee Connection, Hedonist is not your typical chocolate shop. Geared more for online sales than walk-ins, this ultra-small shop with the ultra-original confections captivated us nonetheless.

The shop, which specializes in handcrafted chocolate truffles made from French chocolate and other natural ingredients, features some of the most unusual flavor combinations I have ever encountered in a truffle. We're talking combos like coconut curry, peanut butter cayenne, raspberry wasabi, and lemon spice — to name just a few.

Since we were both hankering for something with nuts, we purchased two hazelnut truffles (\$2 each) and a bag of ginger-pistachio chocolate bark (\$10). The truffles, devoured before we made it to the car, were rich and luscious, worth every penny. The chocolate bark, which took us through the weekend, was equally divine. Note: Many of the shop's products are available at a handful of local retailers; check Web site for locations. Hedonist Chocolates, 674 South Ave., limited hours, (585) 355-7913, www.hedonistchocolates.com.

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