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Issue 2 Winter 2009



**A SLICE
OF PARIS
IN EAST ELMHURST**

**LIDIA BASTIANICH'S ASTORIA • BREW THE BEST-TASTING COFFEE
SOUTH-INDIAN SNACKS • CELEBRATE THE YEAR OF THE TIGER**

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THE UNITED NATIONS OF PASTRY SHOPS

Cannelle Patisserie sweetens up an urban strip mall

BY BENJAMIN SCHMERLER • PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAURIE RHODES

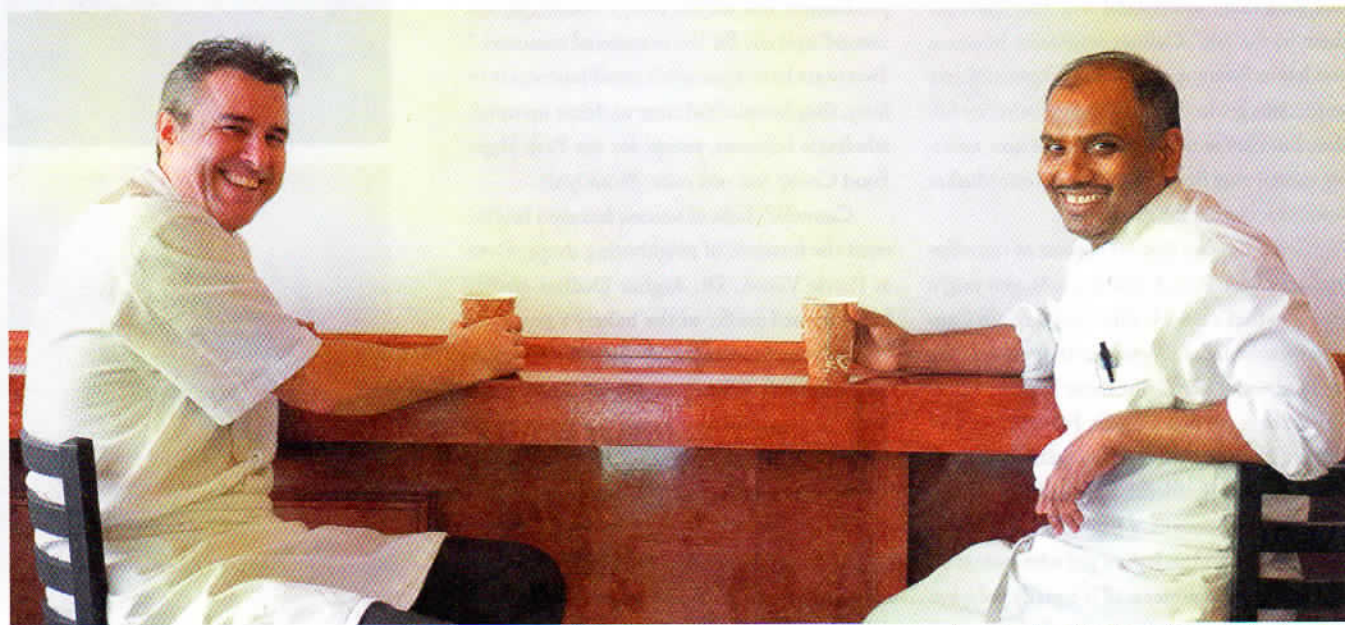
Imagine riding your bike around Jackson Heights one weekend afternoon, then crossing Northern Boulevard to explore East Elmhurst. You pedal up to a shopping center so sleepy the parking lot is half-full. You notice, between a nail shop and a Greek restaurant, a bakery. You decide to check it out. Your real motivation: A demonstration of your sweet tooth willpower, and based on the uninspiring environs, this one is going to be a piece of cake.

But then you enter and see display cases with the likes of chocolate mousse cake topped with artfully arranged chocolate circles of varying sizes, gold leaf and a vertical chocolate fence; an exacting hexagonal *Framboisine* cake with Rothko-like swaths of strawberry-colored “paint” along its sides; perfect wheel-shaped *Paris-Brest* (a tribute to the dessert’s origins cel-

ebrating a bicycle race between the two cities). Has Manhattan’s famed, but recently defunct, Payard Pâtisserie & Bistro relocated? No, this is Cannelle Patisserie, one of Queens’ great unsung bakeries. So much for your willpower.

On a typical Saturday, Cannelle’s seating area is a symbol of all the sweet harmony that immigrant life brings to Queens. At one table, an elderly Irishman disassembles the layers of a flaky Napoleon. Down the aisle, a young Thai mother and her son enjoy a *croque-monsieur* and a middle-aged Frenchman is deep in reverie over a *macaron*. In most cases, these patrons come not for the familiar baked goods they may have grown up eating, but for the foreign, sometimes very foreign. “Our Chinese customers love the *St. Honoré* cake,” says co-owner Gnanasampanthan Sabaratnam

(also known as Samba by the regulars), who emigrated from Sri Lanka to the U.S. in 1995. Sabaratnam started out as a dishwasher at La Boulanche, a French restaurant in Manhattan. “One day the owner said to me ‘You have good hands, you should work in pastry,’” he says. Sooner than you can say *mille-feuille*, he was being sent on annual *stages* to France’s famed L’École Lenôtre and once even did a stint at Fauchon under legendary pastry chef Pierre Hermé. His partner, Jean-Claude Perennou, was the executive pastry chef at the Waldorf-Astoria, where Sabaratnam also worked, for a decade. “Working there exposed us to many different cultures,” says Perennou, who often still wears his former employer’s uniform around the bakery. “We were often asked to make specialties for the international VIPs.”



Pastry chefs Jean-Claude Perennou and Gnanasampanthan Sabaratnam (a.k.a. Samba) share a rare coffee break.

Eighty percent of Cannelle's offerings are classic French baked goods, but more than ten different nationalities are represented by the kitchen staff.

The chefs' willingness to adapt to their environment means that this holiday season, in addition to *Galette de Rois* and four types of *Bûche de Noël*, customers can order German *stollen* and, yes, good old American pecan, apple and pumpkin pies. "We make it with fresh pumpkins—no one does that anymore," says Perennou. Despite these holiday offerings, some customers remain loyal to a few favorites. Josselyne Caillot, a senior citizen from Haiti and regular customer, says she'd "rather miss [her] bus to work than Cannelle's apple tarts." Aysha Shah, a teenager from India who works a few doors down at Waldbaum's, "loves the quiches." Maria Walkuski, who has lived in East Elmhurst for 55 years and gets her regular manicure next door, doesn't play favorites: "Everything is outrageous."

Some customers can become too attached to Cannelle's pastries. "It was challenging at first to make people understand there's a seasonality to everything we make," says Perennou. "They see our fresh peach or cherry Danish in the summer then don't understand why they can't get them in the fall." Culinary curiosity, however, also has its limits, such as when religious dietary restrictions get in the way. "Our gelatins are kosher, but they're not halal, so we're now ordering special ones from France so that our Muslim customers can eat the mousses."

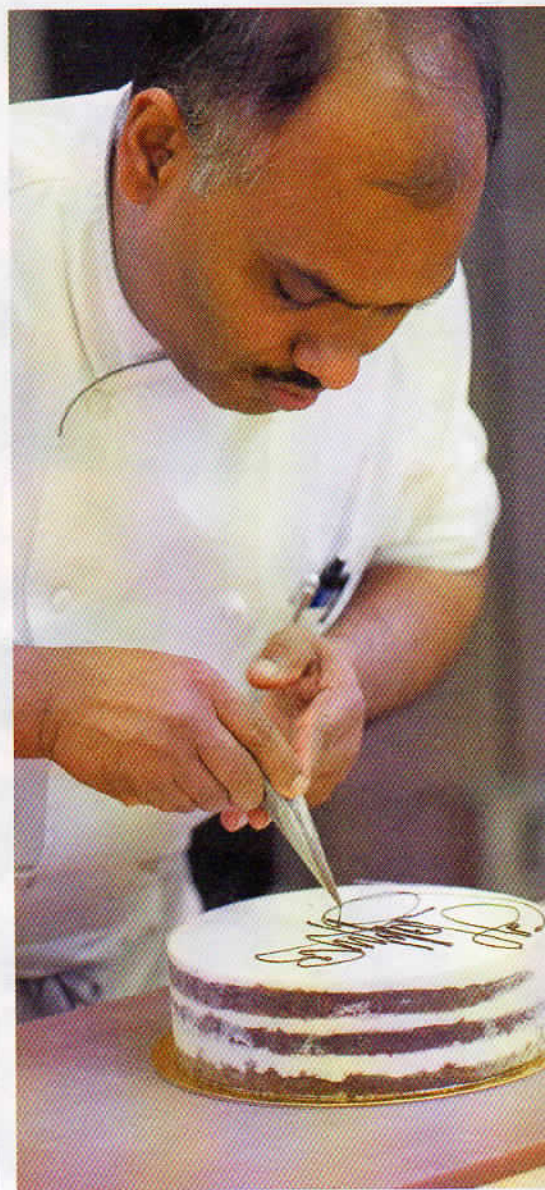
Given the fact that 80 percent of the offerings are classic French baked goods, you might expect to find a large Gallic contingent in Cannelle's kitchen, but, Perennou dryly notes, "We are a minority here." For those keeping score, Cannelle is owned by one Frenchman and one Sri Lankan. The kitchen staff consists of a Belgian, a Bangladeshi, four Haitians, a Moroccan, two Mexicans, a Bolivian, an El Salvadoran, a Thai and an Italian girl who interns on weekends. The counter staff is equally polyglot. Take Zinath Laskar, who speaks Spanish, Ben-

gali, Hindi and Urdu, plus some sign language to communicate with students from the nearby Lexington School for the Deaf. (If Zinath can't convey what's in that *Tropezienne* cake you're considering, ask for dishwasher Sebastian Bartelone; he speaks Italian, French and Moroccan Arabic.) Having first worked at the less ambitious bakery that formerly occupied the space, Zinath readily admits she's learned a few things. "At the old bakery, we'd make everything once a week. Here, everything is baked daily, and whatever doesn't sell is given away to charity at the end of the day."

Perennou has the warm, easy smile of someone whose croissants are flying out the door at the rate of 1,000 a week, but he's quick to point out that the two partners never expected to be as successful as they are. In fact, they really didn't expect to do much retail business. "Samba, who lives across the street, knew that the former bakery here had a large basement," he explains. "Our original plan was to use the basement to do wholesale production and maybe have a counterperson around upstairs for the occasional customer." Two years later, Cannelle's retail business is so busy, they haven't had time to drum up much wholesale business, except for the Park Slope Food Co-op (eat our cake, Brooklyn!).

Cannelle's halo of success has even brightened the fortunes of neighboring shops. Over at Pearle Vision, Dr. Asghar Dedhar credits his increased traffic to the bakery's presence; he now provides samples of Cannelle's pastries for customers. "We're neighbors," says Dedhar. "If their business grows, so does ours." Of course, the proximity of delicious sweets can have its drawbacks. "We have clients who come here, do an intense 30-minute workout, and burn 500 calories," Christine Romano of Curves Fitness says. "Then they stop by Cannelle's on the way home!" 🍩





WHERE TO GO
Cannelle Patisserie
75-59 31st Ave.
East Elmhurst
718-565-6200