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FOOD & DRINK

Let's Eat: Charge up with Colombian coffee and empanadas at Cafe Social

Let's Eat

BY GWENDOLYN RICE Oct 4, 2016



PHOTO BY SAIYNA BASHIR

Large windows at the new Cafe Social in the Uncommon Madison building let in lots of natural light.

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Café Social opened on Aug. 12, move-in day for many University of Wisconsin-Madison students who were settling in to their new apartments in the Uncommon Madison building, near Mifflin Street and the Kohl Center.

Nestled in the corner of the lobby on the ground floor of the building, Café Social provides excellent Colombian coffee drinks, exotic fruit smoothies, and a limited menu of tamales, empanadas, sandwiches and breakfast treats for apartment residents and the general public.

“It’s such a great neighborhood,” said Omar Lopez, who owns Social with Doug Swenson. “People have been very welcoming to us, very supportive.”

The affection seems mutual. When I stopped in midafternoon on a weekday, the café was already out of several menu items. The breakfast and lunch rush had been unexpectedly large.

The sleek, modern black and stainless steel of the café is a step up for Lopez, who has been selling Café Social branded coffee to Madison residents through grocery stores and at farmers' markets in Monona and at Hilldale. After sourcing and packaging the beans from his sister’s coffee farm in the Andes Mountains in Colombia, he opened a food truck that served brewed coffee and a limited food menu.



Café Social opened Aug. 12 near the UW-Madison campus.

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PHOTO BY SAIYNA BASHIR

When Lopez came to Wisconsin from Colombia in 1998, he did not know he would become a direct-from-farmers coffee importer. He simply wanted to embark on a new career in a new language.

After earning an MBA at Edgewood College Lopez decided to stay in Madison because he loved the city and the people he met here.

But there was one thing he did not love: the coffee.

"I tried what was available in shops here and thought, what are they doing?" Lopez said. "This is not right! So every time I would go home to Colombia, I would bring back more coffee."

What started as a simple yen for the Colombian coffee he grew up with became a business when he began selling the coffee that was grown on his sister's farm, and those of neighbors from his hometown Armenia, in the Quindio region.



Drinks at Café Social, like this passion fruit smoothie, are made with care and not too sweet.

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"It's the perfect environment for growing coffee," Lopez said. "High altitude, fertile soil, cool climate. Only the ripe beans are picked, all by hand.

"Then they are washed seven times in fresh water before they are roasted."

All of these elements, from the type of bean to the growing conditions to the equipment used result in a finished product that Lopez insists is rich and smooth, not bitter.

My 12 ounce latte (\$3.50) was very smooth indeed, with just the right amount of foam on top swirled into a lovely pattern. For more exotic beverages, try a maracuya (passion fruit) or guanábana smoothie (\$4 each).

The light yellow passion fruit drink had a slightly sour, citrusy kick. Guanábana, a from the green spiny tropical fruit, made a white and very creamy smoothie with a subtle fruit flavor similar to pear or cantaloupe. Neither drink was very sweet, which made them even more refreshing.



Tamaleria El Poblano makes the tamales at Café Social, including this pork tamale with green and red salsas.

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The rest of the menu is influenced heavily by Lopez's time working the farmers markets — he serves food from local producers who he knows well.

Tamales (chicken with green salsa, pork with red salsa and cheese with jalapeño, \$2.75 each) are made by Tamaleria El Poblano's Reyna Gonzalez. Gonzalez is also the owner of El Sabor de Puebla.

Both the chicken and cheese/jalapeño tamales were excellent, soft, pillowy masa wrapped around tender, flavorful fillings with a bit of heat. Red and green salsas upped the spice level.

Empanadas (\$2.75) are provided to Café Social from Violet Rose Artisan Foods, a new business started by the founder of Stella's.

The samosa, one flavor of empanada, had a golden brown, perfectly pinched flaky crust surrounding a filling of curried potato, carrots, red pepper and peas. It made for a great hand-held snack or light lunch on the go.

With an industrial/retro feel, expansive windows that let in natural light, neon art on the wall and a long counter with plenty of outlets, Café Social is primed to be a popular spot for grabbing a quick bite and beverage or lingering over rich Colombian coffee and plugging in for an hour or two.



Photos: Café Social in the Uncommon Madison building
Oct 4, 2016

Café Social

Uncommon Madison, 102 N. Bedford St.

305-4357

cafesocial.us

HOURS

Monday-Friday 7 a.m.-6:30 p.m.

Saturday-Sunday 9 a.m.-5 p.m.