

Liege-style waffles are served sweet or savory at Gigi's Café in Hillsdale

RESTAURANT REVIEW

By Janet Goetze
The Southwest Portland Post

Here's a tip for eating Liege-style waffles: Don't pour syrup on them. Not even pure maple syrup.

They are made not from the usual waffle batter but a thicker, brioche-style dough with small pearls of sugar kneaded into it right before baking.

Syrup makes them too sweet unless, of course, you want that much sweet flavor, explained Charlene Wesler, co-owner of Gigi's, a breakfast and lunch cafe developed around the waffles identified with Liege, Belgium.

Gigi's opened in November at 6320 SW Capitol Highway, in the former Korkage and Three Square Grill space in the Hillsdale Town Center.

Gigi's is the brick-and-mortar dream of Wesler and partner Mike Susak, who opened a downtown food cart, *Gaufre Gourmet*, featuring Liege waffles with a variety of toppings in 2010. *Gaufre* is French – or Belgian – for waffle.

When the Hillsdale space became available, the pair scrambled to take advantage of it, gaining some of their financing in a Kickstarter campaign.

This was on top of winning a Food Network competition in early 2014, when diners preferred their gourmet waffles over a pressed sandwich, giving them national attention.

While the basic Liege waffle is sweet, Wesler and Susak have developed savory variations. A favorite among diners at the cart and in Hillsdale is the "Porklandia," a cornbread-jalapeno waffle with pulled barbecue pork and cabbage apple slaw, Wesler said.

A recent diner, Carolyn Rossi, had one word for the cornbread waffle: "Killer."

The jalapeño, she said, "adds a little kick... That appeals to me. It's not overdone."

Rossi, who lives in the area and works for a property management company with a Hillsdale office, asked for additional cabbage apple slaw. The original helping got lost in the pulled pork, she said, and she wanted to taste more of it.

Susan Pryor, a Northeast resident meeting a friend at Gigi's, ordered the Monte Cristo, which she described as a combination of sweet and savory.

"It has a very sweet waffle, but a generous serving of turkey, ham and cheese," she said. The meat and cheese don't seep into the waffle, she said.

Gigi's has a dedicated waffle iron for gluten-free selections, but they are



Charlene Wesler and Mike Susak serve sweet and savory liege-style waffles at Gigi's, a new cafe in the Hillsdale Shopping Center. (Post photo by Janet Goetze)

lighter Brussels waffles rather than Liege style.

The milk and honey waffle features Chevre mousse with house-made balsamic caramel sauce and toasted pistachios. Jars of caramel sauce are for sale at the cash register, for those who want to take the sweet taste home.

Gigi's also serves grass-fed beef in a waffle burger and Italian meatballs on a Parmesan waffle. The latter is a

favorite among some cast members of television's "Grimm," who periodically call on Wesler and Susak to bring dinner at the end of a day's shoot in Portland.

Sometimes customers insist they must have syrup because they are, after all, eating a waffle. They have never had one with pearls of sugar imbedded in the dough, which makes syrup superfluous, Susak said.

"This is more pastry-like," he explained, noting it isn't like the fluffy Belgian waffles that Americans know. "It's denser, chewier and very buttery. It's crispy on the outside."

The waffle style was created more than 300 years ago for the Prince of Liege, Wesler said. She first saw the waffles on a television program about a ski resort, where athletes skied up to huts along the trail to pick up pearl sugar waffles in their hands.

In Belgium and parts of France, the Liege waffles are eaten as snacks on the street, Wesler said.

"We thought it was a good canvas for what could be developed for a food cart," Susak said. Before creating their own recipe, they visited the half-dozen restaurants from Seattle to Eugene that serve Liege-style waffles.

The couple opened the food cart in 2010 after meeting in 2008 in a catering kitchen, which closed in 2009. They also decided to complete their degrees at Portland State University by scheduling classes around food cart hours.

They have a following among cart diners, but they planned a "soft opening" without fanfare in Hillsdale

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