

The Power of PANINI

Grilled sandwiches go gourmet. BY BOBBIE WILLIS

If there's a rising star in the sandwich world right now, it would have to be panini. Panini (singular panino) are traditional Italian sandwiches that combine two kinds of old-fashioned goodness — that of artisanal breads and the familiarity of a grilled cheese sandwich — into something that feels fresh and newly discovered.

In Italy, the word panini means "small breads," describing the rolls used to make the sandwiches. These rolls are the first things that distinguish the panino from its grilled cheese cousin, giving both a good crust and a hearty chewiness to the final grilled product. Also, panini can be filled with anything from savory pesto, pungent Italian cheeses and salty deli meats, to milder, creamy cheeses with sweet jams or jellies for a dessert-like sandwich.

Finally, panini are grilled in a grooved sandwich press called, logically enough, a panini grill. The pressure and heat of the grill give the panino both its distinctive grill-marked crust and a melted, basically squashed (in the gourmet way) texture. The warmth and density of the sandwich seems to intensify the flavors of the fillings.

To see what's going on with panini in Eugene, I visited three delis and sampled the sandwiches. If you're pondering the panini, these three may convert you from your old grilled cheese forever ...

Tre Amici: The Beauty of Bread

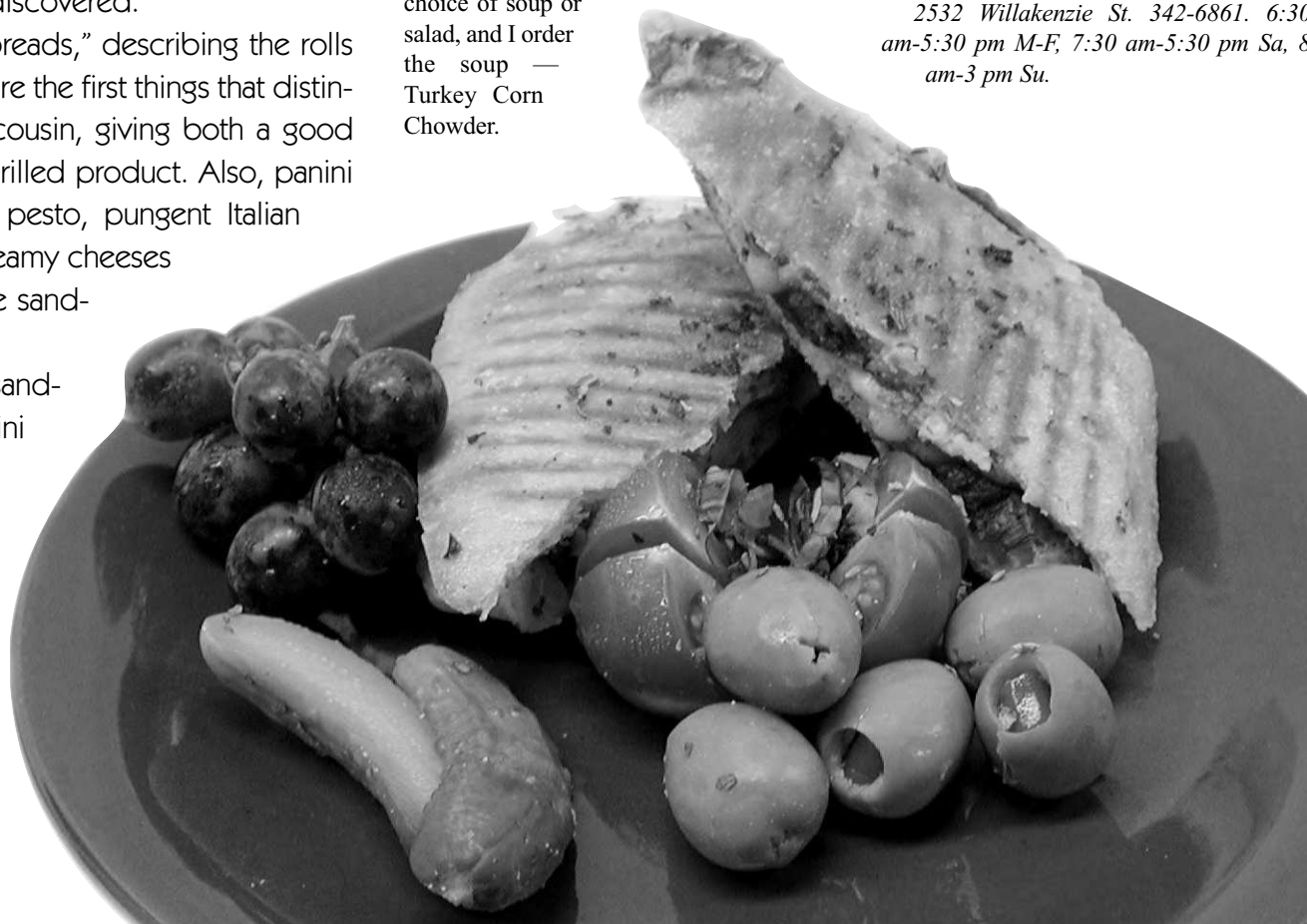
Tre Amici is kind of hidden in the Wild Oats/BiMart shopping center across from Sheldon High School on Willakenzie. It is, however, worth the search. Not only will you find a long list of breakfast and lunch items, but you'll also be delighted to see a variety of coffee drinks, Italian sodas, and gelato desserts. It has plenty of seating, including a couple of outdoor tables, and the décor leans toward Tuscan yellows, reds and oranges with accents of black trim and cherry wood.

Here I order an Under the Tuscan Sun panino (\$6.95) filled with Tuscan Soppressa salami, provolone cheese, roasted red peppers, extra virgin olive oil and balsamic vinegar all grilled on foccacia bread. Panini at Tre Amici come with a choice of soup or salad, and I order the soup — Turkey Corn Chowder.

The flavors of the sandwich combine very nicely: the mild provolone and fruity olive oil complement the strong flavors of the salami and balsamic vinegar. The roasted red peppers add just the right touch of sweet smokiness. The foccacia bread is really wonderful, maybe the best bread of my panini taste testing. It has a good crust, and the inside is tender and chewy — perfectly balanced. But this particular sandwich could use a few more minutes on the panini grill — it comes to me without the characteristic grill marks and not nearly as melted and warmed through as I expect. The Turkey Corn Chowder is dynamite: creamy, but not too rich, filled with chunks of potatoes, carrots, turkey and kernels of sweet corn.

Tre Amici has eight other panini selections to choose from, not to mention a whole slew of breakfast items, salads, wraps, and Italian specialty dishes.

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