



The culinary

Karen Virag

As much as any creature from sci-fi, neighbourhoods are shape-shifters, morphing as the generations pass, falling into and out of popularity as demographic and economic conditions change. One day, you might look around and realize that a former cute little mum-and-pop store has been replaced by a multinational chain or that the alternative video store is now called Pussy Cat Video (which is an alternative of sorts, I suppose). And so it was with 118 Ave — also known as Alberta Ave.

Running through some of the oldest parts of the city, Alberta Ave (hereafter referred to as The Ave) saw some hard times over the last couple of decades. But now, thanks to some imaginative residents and a neighbourhood renewal project called the Avenue Initiative, the area from NAIT to Northlands is being transformed. Arts on the Ave, a grassroots group that promotes neighbourhood revitalization through the arts, has helped breathe new life into The Ave, and the area is now home to the largest number of artists in Edmonton as well as an eclectic mix of immigrant communities.

And where there are arts and ethnic communities, there is food. And what food there is!

The custard tart wars

Two notable Portuguese bakeries grace The Ave: **Handy Bakery** and **Popular Bakery** (the Portuguese Canadian bakery at 118 Ave and 53 street is another contender, but this article deals with the area between 82 and 96 streets only). Each sells a wide selection of breads from heavy, dense cornbread to pagnotta (a large crusty white loaf) as well as a variety of sweets. For many, however, the battle is really for the best custard tart crown.

Portuguese custard tarts have been a tradition since Catholic nuns began making them over 200 years ago. Handy and Popular both put their unique spin on the deep yellow crème-brûlée-like custard caramelized inside a puff pastry shell. Handy's tarts are delicate; Popular's rich. Both are excellent, and fabulous with coffee.

Each bakery has expanded in the last few years to offer cooked meals in addition to baked goods. Handy's menu includes classic Portuguese dishes like bacalhau (salted cod) and kale soup, which, now that warm weather is here, can be eaten on the pleasant outdoor patio. Popular Bakery has a nice on-site grill for chicken and pork, and inexpensive meals of grilled meat, rice and salad can be had for under 10 dollars, though your tastes might run to a *bifana* — a garlicky roasted pork sandwich.

Tomatillos, pupusas chicharrones, oh my!

Paraiso Tropical (tropical paradise) has been selling authentic Mexican and Central and South American food for years, including corn tortillas and dried chiles such as pasilla ancho, arbol and habanero. You can also get sugar cane, frozen and fresh chorizo (sausage) and tomatillo salsa (a staple in Mexico, the tomatillo is related to the cape gooseberry and is known as tomate verde, or green tomato. Tomatillos are used to make green salsa). On Fridays and Saturdays, they make empanadas, tamales, soups, tacos, yucca (cassava) and more for takeout.

El Rancho offers up Salvadoran and Mexican cuisine at good prices. Some of their most popular items are the pupusas, a corn-based dumpling stuffed with cheese, beans, cabbage and chicharron — the latter possibly the most enjoyable word to say in any language, but only if you really roll your R's. Tacos, flautas (deep-fried tortillas filled with meat), and enchiladas with mole (a popular Mexican sauce that contains chiles and, sometimes, chocolate) as well as seafood and fish like whole deep-fried tilapia and *camarones* (shrimp) in garlic figure prominently on the menu.

y wonders of The Ave

Getting stuffed, Italian and Jamaican style

Calzone is from an Italian word meaning trouser leg (but be careful, in Central and South America *calzones* means girls' underpants). Looking at a calzone, you can see how it got its name: it's essentially a pizza turnover stuffed with ingredients like mozzarella and tomato. **Battista's Calzone Company** is rumoured to make a good one, though its hours seem a little capricious — best to phone ahead.

Next door to Battista is **Saffron Caribbean Delights**, whose hours are anything but capricious and whose owner and chief cook, Safron, learned to cook at his grandmother's knee. Safron's menu is pure Jamaica: jerk chicken (jerk refers to a method of cooking where meats are dry rubbed or marinated in jerk spice (traditionally containing allspice and hot peppers, as well as cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon, thyme and garlic), curried goat, fried plantain, oxtail, and Jamaica's national dish, ackee with salt fish (ackee is a tropical fruit related to the lychee; the salt fish is cod).

For dessert, Safron proudly showed me a sweet potato pudding and *gizzarda*, which has nothing to do with gizzards and everything to do with a pastry shell filled with sweetened and spiced coconut. To wash all this down, try a bottle of Jamaican Red Stripe beer or a ginger-flavoured soft drink. You'd almost think you were in Montego Bay.

If you make it, they will come eat it

The Ave is home to two fine caterers that have expanded their operations. **Creative Quality Catering & Bistro** has a nice little café. **Absolutely Edibles Real Food Fusion and Wine Bar** is a full-service restaurant and bar.

The owners of Absolutely Edibles, Brenda Dutton and Bjorn Cochran, told me that they make almost everything from scratch. They

also composte all their bio-waste and use biodegradable materials. Of course, they also try to use as much local products as they can.

To attest to this, a nice little outdoor patio runs along the front part of the restaurant, replete with beds planted with cabbage, cucumber and rosemary. The day we ate there, we sampled a number of items from the extensive menu — excellent homemade spanakopita, delicious thin-crust pizza, wild mushroom dumplings, sweet potato skins, and a dessert of bananas and coconut sautéed in butter and served with vanilla ice cream and liqueur. Lovely.

Fee fi pho fum

The arrival of Vietnamese people over the last few decades has been a boon to food lovers, and the wonderful Vietnamese broth soup, *pho* (pronounced "fah"), has become a city-wide favourite. **Pho King** does a very nice pho (order the small unless you are really, really hungry). They also make other typical Vietnamese dishes that are definitely worth a try.

Africa on The Ave

Perhaps the most striking development on The Ave is the establishment of a vibrant African community. Hailing primarily from Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea, these new Edmontonians have established many businesses and some fine restaurants. Primary among them is **Habesha**, a word that refers to people from Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The menu at Habesha asks the philosophical question: "Cutlery, who needs it?" Ethiopian and Eritrean food is traditionally served with a spongy flatbread called *injera*, made from *teff* — a grain derived from a grass native to eastern Africa. Diners rip off bits of injera and use it as a spoon or fork to gather up the highly flavourful sauces of such dishes as *doro tibs*, seasoned cubes of chicken and *gored gored*, beef cubes marinated in wine and spices. On Wednesdays, they offer

a vegetarian buffet (don't worry, they will give you a fork if you really want one). Habesha has another distinction — for \$12, diners can rent a hookah filled with herbal molasses blended with fruit flavours, the smoke of which infuses the restaurant with a delicate and pleasant scent.

A block east of Habesha, **Dur Dur** serves up Somali cuisine, as does the **Mareeg**, just across the street.

Jamming out on The Ave

As if all of this weren't enough, the **Alberta Ave Community Hall** hosts one of Edmonton's few year-round farmers' markets. On Thursday nights from 5 to 8 pm, patrons can buy organic meats, produce, jams and jellies, bread from local bakers and The Queen of Tarts, and homemade crafts. Lucky attendees this year got to try the cuisine of Brad and Cindy Lazarenko, of Culina restaurant, who ran the concession at the Market Cafe in June.

What to bring to The Ave

The Ave continues to evolve: a large multi-use arts facility will soon take over the old Alberta Cycle building; the Avenue Theatre is going gangbusters; the **Carrot Coffeehouse** is a mecca for musicians, visual artists and craftspeople; and the neighbourhood, with its fabulous festivals (Kaleido in September, and Deep Freeze in January), continues to entice interesting and creative people to move in or just walk the increasingly walkable streets. A major part of the attraction is food, but food on a human scale.

All of the venues mentioned above are small, family-run restaurants that have a vested interest in the health and viability of the neighbourhood. So, we on The Ave await you. Bring yourself, your kids, your dog, and most important of all, your appetite. 🍷

Writer and editor Karen Virag lives in Cromdale and is on the board of Arts on the Ave.

Handy Bakery
8660 118 Avenue
780-477-8842

Popular Bakery
9307 118 Ave
popularbakery.ca

Paraiso Tropical
9136 118 Avenue
780-479-6000

El Rancho
11810 87 Street
780-471-4930

Battista's Calzone Company
8309 118 Avenue
battistascalzonecompany.ca

Creative Quality Catering & Bistro
8905 118 Avenue
mgluska.webs.com

Saffron's Caribbean Delights
8307 118 Avenue
780-474-9005

Absolutely Edibles Real Food Fusion and Wine Bar
9567 118 Avenue
780-424-6823

Pho King
9103 118 Avenue
phokingedmonton.com

Habesha
9515 118 Avenue
habeshacuisine.com

Dur Dur
9409 118 Avenue
780-756-6884

Mareeg
9420 118 Avenue
780-757-2223

Alberta Avenue Farmer's Market
Alberta Ave Community Hall
9210 118 Avenue