



The bubble-light light fixture in the cafe is from Oly Studio.

RIDDLE ME THIS

Talking Designing and Dining with Douglas Riddle, President & COO of Bittners and Chef Bobby Benjamin, owner of Butchertown Grocery and Butchertown Grocery Bakery

Written by Bridget Williams / Photography by Andrew Kung

Merely crossing the threshold of the newly opened Butchertown Grocery Bakery makes me feel as though my cool quotient has risen exponentially. European-inspired and comfortably chic, the aura isn't accidental, as I learned over coffee with Douglas Riddle, President & COO of Bittners and Chef Bobby Benjamin, owner of the Butchertown Grocery Bakery (BGB).

"Douglas has ruined me," joked Benjamin, who credits Riddle with opening his eyes to many of the finer things in life. Douglas concurred, grinning like a Cheshire cat as he added, "Bobby and I are both really good and really bad together." Members of a mutual admiration society, and admitted perfectionists, the pair feed off of one another's respective passions for their craft.

BGB is part of a contiguous string of structures that will eventually link directly to Bittners. The concrete block building was formerly an automotive repair shop, complete with green

shag carpet and lots of cats. Bittners had been using the building for warehouse space, and Riddle had long thought that the corner, strategically situated at the border of Butchertown and the threshold of Whiskey Row, would be ideal for a café. The building sat vacant for two years until Riddle, who also designed the interiors at Butchertown Grocery, learned that Benjamin was on the lookout for a space to shine a deserved spotlight on Barbara Turner, his pastry chef. With room for a café and plenty of prep space, the property certainly fits the bill.

Benjamin considers celebrating and elevating his team members as an essential part of his job description. "I try not to forget where I came from; those moments on first days when I had butterflies in my stomach and wished I had someone coaching me," he explained. He singles out chef and restaurateur Thomas Keller as someone he holds in high esteem, particularly for the way he treats his staff.



Douglas Riddle and Bobby Benjamin



When it came time to conceptualize the design, Riddle said that they spent a good deal of time strategizing about how they wanted customers to experience the space. Fans of Butchertown Grocery will undoubtedly find familiar design elements at BGB. "We agreed that if it's not broken, don't fix it," said Riddle, adding that it was essential to everyone that they stay true to the brand as much as possible. "We are always aware of authenticity in everything we do," explained Benjamin. "I love that we are physically connected to Bittners, a company similarly focused on authenticity. It's a true fit."

Classic design elements, including a black-and-white striped awning, gilt window lettering, mosaic hex floor tile, French café chairs, and marble-topped tables resting on substantial iron bases draw inspiration from quaint European bistros. To this, Riddle added elements that are both rustic and refined.

An L-shaped workstation in front of the nearly floor-to-ceiling windows was crafted by the artisans at Bittners using

wood salvaged from nearby Whiskey Row. Pulled up to this are Midcentury leather and chrome swivel lounge chairs—whose shape recalls a cupped hand—that Riddle found in Chicago. Here you'll find everyone from corporate bigwigs to starving artists working away under the soft glow of Thomas O'Brien antique brass barrister-style desk lamps. Riddle said that what he loves most about Benjamin's restaurants is that while the food and environment are elevated, neither is intimidating, resulting in a truly diverse clientele.

Riddle curated an eclectic collection of artworks, predominantly black-and-white photographs, to adorn the space. As seriously good as the food and design are at BGB, Riddle's installation of a photo of Muhammad Ali checking out his waistline near the pastry counter is a tongue-in-cheek reminder not to take things too seriously. "It's perfectly ironic for a bakery," Riddle said with a hearty laugh.



At the center of the dining area, and beneath an original wood ceiling Riddle had refinished to bring out its warm caramel coloring, is a beguiling blown glass chandelier that resembles a bunch of bubbles ascending in a cluster. But this piece, as spectacular as it might be, isn't the star of the show. That would be the goodies in the lighted pastry case that draw in patrons like moths to a flame. "It's the perfect setting to let everyone know just how talented chef Barbara is," said Benjamin. Here, food and design meld into a complete sensory experience.

Benjamin's passion for his craft is infectious, and his work ethic is enviable. He seems to possess the energy level of a Labrador puppy, which is even more amazing when you consider that he often puts in twenty-hour days. Whether he's discussing the history of Bananas Foster or Italian food specialties by region, you can almost see a Venn diagram forming in Benjamin's head as he speaks. "There's so much to learn about food," he explained. This innate curiosity, which



encompasses everything from cultural food traditions to emerging trends, helps him stay dialed in to what's next.

"Everything we do is carried out with finesse and respect," Benjamin said. At BGB, this begins with using the best ingredients, including Valrhona chocolate and maple syrup from Vermont's Northeast Kingdom. From here Benjamin explained that he will propose different flavors and textures to get his culinary team going and then see where that leads. The Cookie Monster, a chocolate pain au chocolate-like pastry stuffed with cookie dough, is the result of this creative exercise. Benjamin joked that the list of ingredients in this decadent confection "almost sounds illegal."

As our delightful conversation wound down, it became clear that success breeds success, and both Riddle and Benjamin are quick to cite one another's role in theirs. **sl**

Located at 743 East Main Street, the Butchertown Grocery Bakery is open seven days a week from 7am – 7pm. For more information visit butchertowngrocery.com/bakery/



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