

Vaniyé

– creating a destination



by David Tossman

Vaniyé is in a characterless building on a tiny side street with very little parking. The location does not, at first sight, attract or inspire. To succeed, any shop here has to be a destination. Vaniyé is certainly that.

Modest it may be but the location is strategic, just off upmarket Parnell Road, a favoured location for “ladies who lunch” and other residents of Auckland’s old-money suburbs. For a discreet, carefully made coffee and macaron or two, or a stunning dessert to take home, this little boutique could hardly be better.

The interior of the shop, like the exterior, is understated, almost stark: dark wood fittings, white walls, just a few paintings. It leaves the products to shine, and shine they do. The visual appeal of the products is paramount, in the shop and on the net.

Vaniyé’s advertising describes it as “a luxury Parisian-style patisserie.” Fans – a more appropriate word here than customers – use words like dainty, exquisite, detailed and divine to describe the delicious delights on offer.

“We’re passionate,” proclaims the Vaniyé website, “about the refined art of delicate desserts, bringing you a new sensory experience starting from visual presentation through to the intense aromas and flavours from our quality ingredients. [...] We welcome you to our boutique where our hôte/hôtesse will personally guide you through our many culinary delights. Vaniyé is the sweet side of fine dining.”

Sonia and Laurent Haumonte set up the shop last year but before doing so they tested the Auckland appetite for these treats at farmer markets in Grey Lynn and Howick. “We saw it did work pretty well, so with caution – we know that the risk is still high – we just jumped in.” says Sonia.

The choice of location was merely a matter of realism. “The main road is not affordable, and since we do unique specialised products, we chose a destination place,” Sonia says.

Cosmopolitan

Laurent is French, with a passion for fine food typical of his nation. Sonia is cosmopolitan (as she says) in both background and experience. Born in New Zealand of Thai and German parents, brought up partly in Thailand, she trained in patisserie in France. It was a thorough grounding. She did a Cordon Bleu in Paris “more than 10 years ago,” she tells me, and then did an apprenticeship in a well established boulangerie/patisserie “so

we covered all areas of bread, of Danish pastries and dessert,” she tells me.

She then moved on to work in “a couple of Michelin-starred restaurants and luxury hotels, as well as smaller establishments like boutiques.” Sonia worked for seven years altogether in Paris.

Today that diverse training still serves here as they produce a small line of “basic baguette and croissant” while concentrating mainly on those exquisite delicacies and desserts.

Laurent is a management consultant by day but dons an apron in the mornings and evenings to hand roll the baguettes and croissants he so likes.

Out the back

Out the back when I visited, two young patissiers were hard at work. The place is simply set up. “We don’t do a lot of bread,” says Sonia, “so our oven is a really small, compact, convection oven.

The rest is basic: a dough sheeter, a mixer, and a prover for croissant, “The rest is all hand-crafted,” says Sonia. “The same with chocolate, we do our own tempering, we don’t have a tempering machine or anything like it. So it’s just learning technique by hand really.

“The hard part is getting people to come this way to discover us ...”

“If you can master by hand, you can always use the machine – we can always buy new machines afterwards. But we like to get it right by hand first.”

Training

Like any bakery, Vaniyé has difficulty recruiting staff suitable for training, but more so given the nature of their patisserie. Sonia points to New Zealand’s less refined, less decorative and more homely style of baking making familiarity with even the basics of patisserie rare. “We do struggle to find the talents.”

“We get a lot of CVs from kids who did some culinary schools, but just looking at the photos of what they do or having them on trial, sometimes the level is not quite as high as we were hoping for, compared to Europe or Asia. If they can’t pick it up fast, then it’s a waste of our time as well. So that’s the one side of the business which has been a challenge ... we want someone who knows the basic things like a crème pâtissière, genoise, ganache, just very simple basic. And then later we can teach them to elaborate on it.”



Sonia Haumonte – cosmopolitan

Lessons

Vaniye offers object lessons not only in patisserie but also in small business marketing and promotion. High and consistent quality and service are clearly the first essentials – they will give you word-of-mouth advertising – and that has worked well for Vaniye.

“The hard part,” says Sonia, “is getting people to come this way, to discover us basically. But once they do they’re sort of hooked and they come back. So 90% of our customers are actually regular customers, and then we keep adding new customers who found out about us through their family or friends.”

“We get new customers every day.”

Facebook “wonderful”

The Haumontes have also pursued publicity. “We had a couple of nice people who wrote up about us in the newspaper a few times, and magazines, so that helps,” says Sonia.

Beyond word-of-mouth, Facebook has been central to their efforts and, according to Sonia, it has been wonderful for them.

“As soon as we have a new product – because I get bored I change my creations all the time – we put up a photo on Facebook and straight away we get people coming in on the same day to buy them, so it really works for us very very well – probably because we have a lot of images.”

“A lot of customers are very attracted as soon as we put up a photo of a cake. Then we just see an immediate response.”

“We do a bit of Twitter, but just through our Facebook. It automatically goes into Twitter. People repost what we post.”

“Apart from that it’s just our own little website and our Facebook. We do Instagram as well, that’s just with photos. That works as well.”

The location may not inspire but for anyone aspiring to make it at the quality end of the food business, Vaniyé has plenty to think about and aspire to.

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