

Brilliant Alaska breakfast tempts skiers and cruisers

Larry Olmsted, Special for USA TODAY 7:56 a.m. EST January 30, 2014



(Photo: Larry Olmsted for USA TODAY)

The scene: Ski season is about half over in most of the country, but not in Girdwood, Alaska, where the Alyeska ski resort stays open through the end of April, thanks to twice as much average snowfall as any major destination resort in the Lower 48. But even if skiing isn't your thing, you need not miss the breakfast specialties for which the Bake Shop is locally famous - Girdwood and Alyeska are even busier in summer, Alaska's prime tourism season. Cruise passengers and visitors flock here for an endless schedule of weekend festivals, hiking, mountain biking, and most of all, to ride the tram to the top of the coastal mountain for incredible vistas of high peaks, ocean and glaciers. The town is an easy day trip, less than an hour outside Anchorage, and in summer you can even get here by the same scenic train that visits Fairbanks and Denali National Park.

Whenever you come, make sure to have breakfast at the Bake Shop, located in a small retail complex at the base of one of the ski resort's lifts – a small town Alaskan version of a strip mall. It's a simple place, a storefront with one large room, the open kitchen in back barely separated from the dining area. As you enter there is a huge menu board down the right hand wall, and you order at the kitchen counter, fill your coffee, grab a seat and wait for food. The furnishing is vaguely Swiss Alpinesque with heavy wooden tables and worn benches, except the walls are painted cinder block, one covered with black and white photos of the state's high peaks, another with paintings by local artists for sale. Because the food is cooking right there, the main entertainment is the sound of sizzling breakfast meats and the smells of home cooking. It doesn't get much more local than this.

GREAT AMERICAN BITES: [Snow City Cafe serves uniquely Alaskan experience \(/story/travel/columnist/greatamericanbites/2013/07/25/great-american-bites-snow-city-cafe-anchorage-alaska-best-breakfast/2585407/\)](#)

GREAT AMERICAN BITES: [For USA's freshest seafood, head to Alaska \(/story/travel/columnist/greatamericanbites/2013/04/11/great-american-bites-for-usas-freshest-seafood-head-to-alaska/2072965/\)](#)

Reason to visit: Sourdough pancakes, sweet rolls, ham steak

The food: The love of sourdough was brought to Alaska from Northern California during the Klondike Gold Rush, and today San Francisco and the 49th state remain the hotbeds of passion for the bread made from fermented batter. Sourdough is also used to make pancakes, typically very thin, almost crepe-like and known as 49er flapjacks throughout the Pacific Northwest where they are widely available. However, in Anchorage and southern Alaska, where breakfast is a very popular meal, I saw only buckwheat pancakes – except at the Bake Shop, which every local I spoke to knew for their sourdough version.

The pancakes are served either solo by the stack of five – or in the "Summer of '76" special on a plate also loaded with eggs and bacon. They are very, very thin and layered but not really separate; I don't think you could peel them apart. They are not fluffy at all like many thicker pancakes and have a unique spongy consistency that really soaks up butter and syrup, disappearing almost as soon as it hits them. They have the slight yeasty sourness that gives sourdough its name, a flavor which lingers after you have taken a bite. They are simply unlike any pancakes I have had, sort of a cross between a buttermilk pancake and a custardy crepe – almost the consistency of bread pudding. There are no "flavors," such as blueberry or banana, just plain, though they come with lots of butter and the table is covered with a trio of jams and marmalades, fake and real maple syrup, plus ketchup and Tabasco. In general, the region is not big on light cuisine or small portions and the Bake Shop is no exception.

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Like sourdough bread, the pancakes are not good or bad, they are different, and you will either like them (I did) or not. If it's the latter, don't worry, as there is plenty of other good stuff to choose from. Most notable are the enormous sweet rolls, also served with lots of butter, decadent and delicious. These are fluffy swirls covered with sugary icing, raisins and slivered almonds, baked in large trays so they meld together. There's full assortment of omelets, eggs, breakfast meats and such, with pizza, soups and sandwiches added to the menu for lunch (no dinner). Everything is homemade and

fresh, with several choices of house-made breads - including a good sourdough, of course. They get the little things right here, like the ham steak, the standout breakfast meat choice, which is not the typical very processed uniform slice, but rather a thick slab hand-cut from an actual whole ham, irregularly shaped with some skin and slightly browned on a griddle, really good. Even the most basic breakfast choices have the from-scratch homemade feel that is increasingly hard to come by, and it's tough to imagine anyone who would not find a very satisfying breakfast at the Bake Shop – and they sell lots of those sweet rolls to go.

What regulars say: "If I go down to Girdwood for a meeting, my wife considers it mandatory for me to bring back sweet rolls from the Bake Shop," said Jack Bonney, an executive in the Anchorage tourism and visitors office.

Pilgrimage-worthy?: No, but if you visit Girdwood or the Alyeska ski resort, breakfast here is a must.

Rating: Yum! (Scale: Blah, OK, Mmmm, Yum!, OMG!)

Price: \$\$ (\$ cheap, \$\$ moderate, \$\$\$ expensive)

Details: Olympic Mountain Loop C1, Girdwood; 907-783-2831; [thebakeshop.com](http://www.thebakeshop.com) (<http://www.thebakeshop.com/>)

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