

restaurant review

By Melanie Barnard

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Joining the “fusion” fray is the new Basso Café in the Broad River section of Norwalk, an area blossoming into a veritable global culinary mecca. There are several traditional Italian restaurants, a Spanish/Italian place, an American steak house, sushi parlor, Indian takeout, Chinese takeout, a Venezuelan restaurant and a couple of Brazilian restaurants. Now, this self-proclaimed “Mediterranean fusion” café adds yet another dimension to the neighborhood.

In an old house formerly home to several deli-style eateries, minimal renovation has been done, though the space is open, airy and quite upbeat with lime-green and lemon walls, white-napped and simply set tables, and a sunny bar that will be in use once the restaurant receives its liquor license. (Until then, a corkage fee is charged for BYOB.) Service is friendly and low-key; the chef is often seen chatting with diners in this welcoming, home-style setting.

Chef/owner Renato Donzelli has a “fusion” background as well. Born in Venezuela, he was raised in an Italian family and trained as a computer

Basso Café

124 NEW CANAAN AVE.
NORWALK

TELEPHONE: 354-6566

HOURS: Lunch: Tuesday-Sunday, 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m.;

Dinner: Tuesday-Saturday, 5:30-10 p.m.; Sunday, 5:30-9:30 p.m.

RESERVATIONS: Accepted

CREDIT CARDS: AE, V, MC

PRICES: (Dinner) Appetizers:

\$6-\$14; Main Courses: \$18-

\$26; Desserts: \$5.95-\$6

www.bassobistrocafe.com

technician. Eventually he found his true calling in the cooking of his heritage and honed his skills at several restaurants and in catering. Basso Café is the fruit of these labors and the culmination of his dreams.

Open six days a week, the restaurant offers an extensive selection of panini, wraps and salads from opening until 5 p.m. Most lean toward the typical Italian restaurant lunch fare such as a salad of mixed greens with mozzarella and basil in a balsamic vinaigrette or a salami, pepperoni, cappiccole, mortadella and provolone

panini. More interesting, however, are a panini of broccoli rabe, provolone and hot cherry pepper on ciabatta, or a sophisticated panini of Prosciutto di Parma, figs and brie.

The dinner menu is available all day and changes often, updated daily on the restaurant’s Web site so you can check before you go. For the most part, the menu fuses cooking styles and ingredients, but it is more an assortment of dishes from various ethnicities than a true fusion within each dish. In reality, since true fusion is often forced and difficult to achieve, this range of dishes is often more successful. Here, it is clear that the chef’s heritage is Venezuelan and Italian.

From his Venezuelan birth are two outstanding appetizers. Beef empanadas, often deadly heavy in restaurants, here have a mild but richly seasoned ground beef filling in crisp and perfectly fried pastry. The accompanying peppery marinara sauce is light and fresh. Tostones, equally difficult to do well, are slices of unripe plantain lightly battered and just as expertly fried, then showered with shredded mild white cheese and sprightly fresh pico de gallo salsa. Both are terrific. Other starters are usually seasonal variations on bruschetta, such as prosciutto, roasted peppers, mozzarella and sun-dried tomatoes instead of out-of-season tomatoes, or wild mushroom and goat cheese crostini. An appetizer pasta might be homemade gnocchi

with shiitake mushrooms and white truffle oil. If the soup is Cheddar and apple, expect a pleasingly bright and slightly acidic, lightly creamy Cheddar-enhanced broth with diced apple “croutons.”

Main courses are often more Mediterranean than South American, and given the success of the Venezuelan appetizers, we’d wish that the chef would show more of his heritage in the entrees, too.

Still, his Italian upbringing does him justice, especially in the lamb dish that presents both with tender pink slices from a roasted leg and crisp-edged grilled sliced rack of lamb, though our rare-lamb lover in attendance did have to send them back for a tad more cooking to bring them up to rare. They arrived newly plated and perfect within minutes. But the best part of this dish turns out to be the bed of green pea-studded risotto — the real deal, cooked to an authentic creamy al dente perfection. Risotto is also often available on its own, sometimes in the exotic Venetian “nero” version “blackened” with squid ink. Grilled crisp-tender asparagus also demonstrates the attention to detail in the kitchen. Roasted pork loin is presented sliced in a light maple syrup-accented sauce, colorful roasted beets, and an airy turnip puree piped cloudlike on the plate.

The main course list, though usually limited to seven or eight, covers a wide range of options from seafood

to meat to poultry and pastas. On one evening, grilled wild Alaskan salmon is served over braised red cabbage and apples with fried yucca and lemon oil. Grilled chicken is seasoned with lemon and rosemary, then served with roasted potatoes and curried zucchini. Filet mignon has an avocado salsa, steamed potatoes and sautéed spinach. Cavatelli might be served in the traditional Italian restaurant style with boneless chicken chunks, cherry peppers and wine sauce.

Desserts are made in house and reflect the variety of visions of the chef. If you have a taste for citrus, order the passion fruit mousse, which is pucker-perfect with a rich, creamy, barely sweetened molded mousse sauced by even more sprightly passion fruit puree with a dollop of thick whipped cream. Avoid the lemon pie, which is bland, sweet and in a soggy crust. Coconut flan is smooth, rich and just the thing for custard fans. Other options are chocolate lava cake or braised pears in merlot over vanilla ice cream. But topping it all is the best version of tres leches I’ve tasted north of the border. The cake is moistened, but not soaked, leaving the top nicely crunchy with caramelized sugar syrup. Don’t miss this dessert.

The owner of Basso Café would do well to concentrate even more on Venezuelan dishes. Fusion is nice, but pure talent is even better.