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Dining | Norwalk

From Italian and Latin Heritage: Artful Plates

By PATRICIA BROOKS

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BASSO CAFE in Norwalk took me by surprise. It looks like a modest little cafe on Route 23 — trim, tidy and plain — but its “Mediterranean fusion cuisine,” salted with a few South American dishes, like empanadas and tres leches, belies its looks. Skip to next paragraph

In the Region

The surprise is thanks to Renato Donzelli, the chef and owner, whose Italian heritage was tempered by growing up in Venezuela. (The cafe is named for Campo Basso, the area in the province of Abruzzi, where the chef's father hails from.) Not only does the menu change several times a week, but also each dish served is as prettily arranged as the proverbial picture.

One evening four of us began with several winsome appetizers (preceded by excellent crusty Italian bread and a pungent olive oil dip). Most creative was the tuna and mango sashimi salad. The fresh raw yellowtail tuna was sparked by slivers of mango (a congenial coupling), soy dressing and sesame seed, punctuated by sprigs of cilantro and crispy fried wonton chips.

Also delicious was a warm goat cheese and mushroom tart — puff pastry layered with tangy cheese, meaty oyster mushrooms, caramelized onions, balsamic and red wine. Cilantro also decorated this plate.

Beef empanadas — a nod to Venezuela — were turnovers filled with ground beef accented by capers. This unexpected combo added bite to a familiar dish and demonstrated the chef's creativity. A spicy tomato sauce was the perfect topper. The pastry shell was lighter than on the usual empanadas, and though greasy it had good flavor.

Bruschetta di Parma was so generous a portion it might have served as a light lunch. Crisp crostini were brushed with a sun-dried tomato spread. They were then layered with paper-thin prosciutto, slabs of tasty fresh mozzarella and strips of roasted sweet red peppers.

Among a number of appealing entrees, the favorite was certainly the almond-crusted wild king salmon, which was lightly, perfectly broiled, with toasted almond halves cascading over the top. An added inducement: the best roasted fingerling potatoes I've had in ages — herbed with thyme, rosemary and basil, they almost melted in the mouth.

Another notable entree was oven-roasted pork loin, served over a cauliflower purée, alongside date purée, spicy rhubarb chutney and sautéed haricots verts. The Tuscan-grilled chicken was also well prepared. Half a juicy, well-marinated bird came in a piquant lemon-rosemary sauce, with roasted garlic mashed potatoes and also haricots verts.

Our only quibble was with the seared soft-shell crabs. The semolina-crust crabs were crunchy, with just enough of a drizzled passion fruit sauce for flavor, and the quinoa salad the crabs rested on added a nice touch. But the crabs were overly salty. As with most seafood, extra salt is rarely necessary.

Adding to the homey quality of Basso Cafe are all the house-made desserts. Top marks go to the piquant passion fruit mousse and rich chocolate molten lava cake. The coconut flan was also sweetly satisfying, if a tad too dense for my taste. My companions gave thumbs-up to the tres leches, with its caramel crunchiness, but this dessert has always been too sweet for me. For a lighter touch, you might try a refreshing mango or lemon zesty sorbet or some coffee ice cream.

Lunch at the cafe is just as rewarding, with a variety of tasty panini (portobellos, goat cheese and black truffle oil make a wonderful trio), wraps and salads (try the Mediterranean — romaine, peppers, tomatoes, olives, onions, fresh mozzarella).

With its talented chef, artful plate presentations and unpretentious atmosphere, dining at Basso Cafe should please you as much as it has me.

Basso Cafe

124 New Canaan Avenue

Norwalk

(203) 354-6566

www.bassobistrocafe.com

VERY GOOD

THE SPACE A small, bright storefront cafe with large windows, cocoa-brown wood wainscoting and walls in lime and white decorated with photos and colorful paintings. Ground-level entrance.

THE CROWD Mixed ages, mostly in neat-casual attire. Waiters friendly, but sometimes slow and distracted.

THE BAR Service bar, B.Y.O., \$6 corkage fee. (there's a liquor store a block away). Assorted waters, sodas, hot chocolate, smoothies, coffees and teas available.

THE BILL Lunch: paninis, wraps, salads, \$8.95 to \$10.95. Dinner: appetizers, \$7 to \$14; entrees, \$8.95 to \$32; desserts, \$5 to \$7. MasterCard and Visa accepted.

WHAT WE LIKE Beef empanadas, warm goat cheese and mushroom tart, tuna and mango sashimi surprise, bruschetta di Parma; almond-crust salmon, roasted pork loin, Tuscan grilled chicken, paninis; passion fruit mousse, chocolate molten lava cake, coconut flan, tres leches.

IF YOU GO Lunch: 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday. Dinner: 5:30 to 10:30 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday; 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday. Closed Mondays. Reservations accepted. The restaurant's parking lot is to the left of the entrance.

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