Norwalk Latin fusion cafe mulls expansion after 10 Years

By Alexander Soule
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Basso Cafe Restaurant and Wine Bar owner Renato Donzelli on Monday, Aug. 14, 2017, in advance of the Norwalk, Conn. establishment marking its 10th anniversary in early September.

Renato Donzelli confesses he was taken by surprise in May 2008, after learning a New York Times food critic had featured his then-new Basso Cafe in Norwalk.

The critic herself confessed to be taken by surprise by the eatery with the unassuming exterior on New Canaan Avenue, but Donzelli at that point had won no shortage of loyal regulars in transporting them to the two culinary influences that dominated his youth — and nearly a decade later continues to do so.

Basso Cafe Restaurant and Wine Bar marks its 10th anniversary on Sept. 7, with the Latin fusion restaurant employing 10 people, seating about 70 diners and managing an email list of some 3,000 more.

Dishes range from small tapas priced between $7 and $24 like roasted peppers and anchovies up through the Jamon Iberico, ham imported from Salamanca, Spain. Entrees are on the menu for a range of palates in the range of $30, options including seafood linguine, duck breast in a quince sauce or Steak Martin Fierro, sirloin served with tomato and avocado salad, fried yucca and parsley citrus salsa.

Tickets are $100 for Basso's 10th anniversary night on Sept. 7, including cocktails and dishes, with Basso contributing 10 percent of the proceeds to the Connecticut Food Bank.

Donzelli got exposed to two culinary cultures growing up in an Italian family in Caracas, Venezuela, with both he and his sister going on to study at a culinary institute. He came to Norwalk in the mid-1990s with little facility in English, getting a job as a dishwasher at Sono Seaport Seafood and later working in New York City and then at Match and Barcelona in South Norwalk.

He opened Basso the first week of September 2007, with Donzelli estimating it required 10 weeks and $250,000 to get the restaurant up and running, including loans he took on.

"That was risky," Donzelli said. "I said, 'well, I am just going to put in everything I have been building, and let's see what happens."

He still has vivid memories from the first day, including hurtling down to City Hall to secure a permit for the Basso Cafe sign hanging out front that he had not realized required one.

Donzelli said he otherwise did his homework, choosing the New Canaan Avenue site in part because there were few competing venues in the immediate vicinity. Still, he says there are benefits to competitors close by, both for forcing restaurant owners to be continually thinking about how to improve, and in drawing additional patrons that might give other establishments a try after seeing them.

Ten years after opening, Donzelli said he is considering an expansion of the Basso concept to other locales, without naming any that might be in the immediate offing.

"I like what (Basso) is — it's a way to express my background, my heritage," Donzelli said.

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