

Basso Café Happy Hour Crushes It With Atmosphere, Evocative Plates

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Pan con Tomate (\$6) is a bowl of bright red tomato sauce, cooked with garlic and fresh oregano, the top slicked with extra virgin olive oil. The fragrant sauce is spooned on slices of Italian bread, brushed with olive oil, and grilled. (Courtesy of Basso)

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Basso Café is one of Fairfield County's most original and best restaurants. Food and wine lovers have been traveling to chef-owner Renato Donzelli's highly rated Mediterranean-Latin restaurant in the Broad River section of Norwalk since 2007. After being BYOB all these years, Basso now has a liquor license, small bar and wine cellar. And at the new happy hours, 11 a.m. to 12 p.m. and 4 to 6 p.m., we found ourselves chatting with the chef, whose meticulous eye for detail is everywhere at Basso.

Basso looks the same, with vivid art work in bright colors. The renovation added space but not extra tables. When the lights are dimmed and candles lit, there's a warm glow to the room. Music is part of the mood. Spanish guitar plays on the sound system and sometimes live, with Renato playing bongos.

To make the Chili Crush (\$9), the bartender muddles jalapenos and cilantro, adds vodka-infused with green chili, triple sec, and a touch of simple syrup. Topped with a slice of jalapeño and a sprig of cilantro, this spicy hot and sweet libation is Renato's favorite. Happy hour cocktails are \$7 and \$9.

Basso's customers know wine and love food and wine pairing. Most are happy with the new liquor license, Renato said, though a small percent have balked at the new \$25 corkage fee. The new wine list is evolving. The chef loves wine, and his servers are trained to know the menu and suggest pairings. Happy hour wines are \$6 and \$7 (certain bottled beers are \$4).

Basso's food is evocative; it comes from Renato's heritage. He was raised in Venezuela by Italian parents. (Basso is the name of his grandfather's hometown in Italy.) One of the chef's favorite tapas is pan con tomate (\$6), a bowl of bright-red tomato sauce, cooked with garlic and fresh oregano, the top slicked with extra virgin olive oil. We spooned the fragrant sauce on slices of Italian bread, brushed with olive oil and grilled. Simple yet transporting.

The happy hour plates mostly land in the \$6 to \$7 range, but go as high as \$14 (the artisanal cheese and prosciutto platter). The polpo alla gallega, octopus cooked until just the right texture of tender chewiness, then tossed with potatoes, paprika and sea salt, was so simple and so good, and just \$8. The potatoes were scooped into little balls.

Croquettes, with Iberian ham and fontina cheese, were deep-fried golden brown, and rich, salty, satisfying bar food (\$7). Eggplant, super-thin slices, roasted, then dressed in sweet-sour vinaigrette, is for real eggplant lovers (\$6). It's served on Italian bread.

Basso Café, 124 New Canaan Ave., Norwalk, is open Tuesday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., 4 p.m. to 10 p.m.; and Sunday 5 to 10 p.m. Happy hour is Tuesday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 12 p.m.; 4 to 6 p.m. 203-354-6566 and bassobistrocafe.com.