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## Basso: Gutsy Mediterranean Fusion



Basso Café's seared sea scallops over polenta with crispy pancetta. (Elizabeth Keyser / Special To CTNow / April 22, 2014)

By ELIZABETH KEYSER Special To CTNow  
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When an obscure restaurant snags one of the highest ratings in Zagat, it's got a dedicated following. Over the last seven years, Basso, the BYOB Mediterranean fusion restaurant in the Broad River section of Norwalk, has built up an excellent reputation with people who know food. I was introduced to Basso by members of a wine club. It's their favorite place. Step into this old farmhouse and you get a contemporary sense of originality. The art is vibrant and colorful. The jazzy music is just right. The bare tables are set with contemporary woven placemats. The passion of chef-owner Renato Donzelli is apparent everywhere. The chef was born in Venezuela of Italian parents. Basso is the name of the town his father came from in Italy. Basso's food embraces the freshness and simplicity of Italian cooking. Whole, grilled sardines are only on the menu when the chef can buy them fresh. Salt, pepper, lemon, olive oil and garlic – thick slices of it, the dish is called sardinas al ajillo after all – and the charred fish, head, tail, bones and all, creates truly succulent flesh. This is gutsy food, expertly prepared. Plump, meaty Medjool dates are filled with formaggio capra, a creamy goat cheese, and wrapped in applewood bacon and fried. It's like a confection: crisp bacon, sweet date, creamy cheese.

Grilled asparagus with shaved black truffle and minced mushrooms bring together early spring flavors. This dish will only get better in asparagus season, especially if the spears are cooked a bit longer. Beet salad has lots of lettuces, dressed in Dijon, and hunks of beet, pieces you have to take knife and fork to, which we enjoy, and chunks of Gorgonzola and candied walnuts — not the same-old-same-old beet-and-goat-cheese salad. Beef empanadas are deep fried and crisp, well executed. Our table of four shares an entrée, seared sea scallops over soft polenta studded with crisp pancetta. The large, fat scallops have a beautiful golden brown crust. Glistening segments of ruby red grapefruit, and watercress micro greens dressed in black truffle citrus vinaigrette, create a salad. The women at our table are swooning. They order an extra side of the polenta. In a corner by the window, chef-owner Renato photographs a new creation. (His beautiful photographs of Basso's dishes are featured on his website.) Afterwards, he brings the dish to our table and offers it to us. It's sautéed kale, drizzled with crema, over crisp, fried plaintain. It's a winner and it's now on the menu. Some of us protest, yet the wise prevail. We must try a house-made dessert. And why not? So we quarter the dark chocolate and white chocolate mousse, with orange caramel, honey-caramel sauce. Each mouthful is a delicate taste of perfection.

(Corkage fees at Basso are \$10 a bottle. Don't complain: Remember you could be paying \$12 a glass for lesser quality, marked-up wine elsewhere.)

Basso Café, 124 New Canaan Ave., Norwalk, is open Tuesdays to Saturdays, lunch 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and dinner 5:30 p.m. to 10 p.m., and Sundays dinner only, 5 to 10 p.m. Closed Mondays.

Information: 203-354-6566 or [www.bassobistrocafe.com](http://www.bassobistrocafe.com).

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