

# Sensational Seasonal

Basil Seasonal Dining does wonderful Italian-inspired fare in a tiny Carmel spot.

By Jeanne Howard



NIC COURRY

**W**elcome back!" I was surprised to hear this greeting addressed to nearly every customer who arrived at Basil, a new "seasonal dining" restaurant in Carmel.

It has only been open since April.

My guest and I also met some visitors that said they ask for locals' recommendations when traveling and that a Carmel shopkeeper had recommended Basil. I was impressed that an infant restaurant, semi-hidden in a courtyard, was able to fill its 22 indoor seats by word of mouth on a weeknight. There are also 18 seats on the courtyard.

The logic was revealed to me over four excellent courses. The food is so carefully made, it seemed I could taste the attention to detail along with the ingredients. It's no wonder. Owner Michele Cremonese personally makes most every item in-house from fresh ingredients, including the desserts. He looks for the most natural products available, local when possible; seafood is wild rather than farm-raised, and many produce items are organic.

A native of Verona, Italy, Cremonese recently moved to Carmel from Santa Monica where the competition among modern-Italian restaurants is intense. Since no eatery in our burg was doing anything quite like Basil, he decided to give it a go. The cuisine is predominantly Italian, but based on seasonal and local produce, with some Asian and broader Mediterranean influences, too.

The contemporary interior almost seems designed to avoid distraction from the food. A long mirror occupies one main wall and glass occupies the other. There's no art, but less is more in the comfortable, sophisticated small space.

When we received ciabatta and a complimentary puréed basil sauce, I hadn't yet looked at prices but began to sense a vibe of quality and expensiveness. I glanced at the right side of the menu and noticed all entrees cost less than \$20. Desserts cost \$5. Not bad at all. Starters are \$7.50 to \$10.25, four pasta dishes are \$13.50 to \$15.25. I soon decided that Basil easily deserves higher

prices, given its quality. Cremonese said he's addressing current economic realities, but also aims to appeal to locals, who want to be able to dine well, regularly and reasonably.

It's a thrill to discover some refinements not compulsory at a small restaurant in a small town, but would be in a large, big city restaurant. Cremonese waited to open until he could procure a liquor license, becoming one of few small restaurants on the Peninsula to offer cocktails. And there's a late-night menu served from 9:30pm to midnight. For a mere \$4 each, you can enjoy a small plate of spicy midnight pasta, duck prosciutto piedina (on flatbread), mini cheeseburger sliders, and more.

I didn't order a cocktail, but am glad they're available. There are some house drinks (\$7-\$9), like an Italian Margarita and a Pineapple Ginger Infusion (fresh fruit-infused vodka). The wine list is short, carefully selected and mostly local. Glasses cost \$7 to \$9 and most bottles cost \$25 to \$38, with a few more deluxe bottles. The Santa Lucia Highlands appellation is favored, and deservedly so, since some of our area's top wines hail from its elevations.

The grilled baby octopus appetizer seemed like a good indicator dish to begin with, since this mollusk is often chewy and somewhat tough (\$8.50). Served over canellini beans and arugula, this delicacy cut like butter. A light accent of aged balsamic vinegar, basil and tomato added a nice counterpoint.

I ordered the only purely vegetarian salad: arugula with thinly sliced baby artichokes, fennel, Parmesan and olives (\$9.25). Large, and with lemon vinaigrette, it was a diplomatic accord of diverse flavors. Basil turned out to excel at achieving strong flavor not with strong spices, but through a skillful marriage of ingredients and technique.

I was in the mood for pasta and cheese and stereotypical Italian food,

Wine Time: Patrons at Basil's in Carmel share laughs, recommendations with their server/sommelier, Philippe.

but our server, the genial Philippe, recommended the halibut special. He commanded respect, gliding around the room with his French accent and master sommelier cred, so I didn't refuse. As promised, the halibut was moist, tender, and topped with a caponata that again demonstrated Cremonese's abilities: well-chopped, well-flavored and well-textured by good olive oil.

My guest indulged me by ordering short rib ravioli (\$13.50). With flat, starchy ravioli epidemic throughout the land, I was overjoyed that these were almost as round as meatballs. The rib filling was flavorful, the pasta was not starchy, a light tomato sauce and garlic spinach were a fine accompaniment. I loved it.

The seafood soup entree tried on another visit is worth mentioning. It was more luxuriant than "broth" implies—spicy, with sundry flavors, not simply a pawn of its prime constituent, tomato, and infused with clams, octopus, prawns, and a white fish (whatever is seasonal). Certain dishes are permanent, like the best-selling Thai short ribs, but expect seasonal items to ebb and flow. The summer menu is imminent.

If you're local and not allergic to tiramisu, you should be an expert on our area's most ubiquitous dessert. The tiramisu at Basil, Cremonese's mother's recipe, is exceptional. It's served in a martini glass, well-chilled and is slightly less sweet and less alcoholic than most.

As with everything I tried, the tiramisu represents Cremonese's remarkable ability to manage flavors. He directs ingredients like a good conductor, where each instrument is heard, and no one overplays. ☒

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**Basil Seasonal Dining** San Carlos between Ocean and Seventh, Carmel. • Open Monday-Saturday 11:30am to around midnight. • 626-8226.