

Raising the Bar

Basil Brick Oven Pizza debuts new wine bar

BY LISA YAKOMIN

A local pizzeria restaurant is probably the last place you'd expect to find an upscale wine bar, but for Ugo Mattei, co-owner of Basil Brick Oven Pizza on Astoria Boulevard, the new addition made perfect sense.

A native of Campania, Italy, Mattei has been managing restaurants in New York City for over 20 years, and longed to bring the food and flavors of his childhood to the neighborhood he now calls home.

"I love living in Astoria," Mattei said. "It's a multicultural neighborhood, with great people who are looking for traditional Mediterranean cuisine, but also want to eat healthy. There are plenty of restaurants here, but I felt that we needed something that was truly authentic, with great atmosphere, a big selection of wines, and also affordable."

Established in 2011, Basil Brick Oven Pizza was already a local favorite when Mattei took over in 2016, with a diverse list of 37 specialty pizzas and a traditional menu of hearty Italian fare. What was once a 15-seat pizzeria had grown to a 50-seat dine-in restaurant, but Mattei saw even more potential there. As a first step to realizing his vision, Mattei set to work expanding and elevating the menu. He brought in chef Fabio DeSantis, adding lighter seafood dishes and Southern Italian-inspired entrees with nuanced flavors, accompanied by freshly prepared sauces.

"All of our sauces are made here," Mattei said. "It takes three hours every morning, and nothing is done commercially; we like to say that we make it the way Grandma would do it."

It is also their dedication to using imported ingredients that sets the restaurant apart, Mattei said.





"We have everything flown in from Italy twice a week – fresh cheese, herbs, tomatoes – that's what makes the difference."

The desserts at Basil are also made in-house each day, created by expert pastry chef Antonio Diaz. Popular choices include tiramisu, panna cotta and ricotta cheesecake.

After securing a liquor license in late December 2017, Mattei was finally able to combine his lifelong passion for great food with his expertise as a certified sommelier, replacing the restaurant's gelato area with a fully stocked wine bar with cozy, informal seating.

"We needed something like this in Astoria," Mattei said, "something in the style of New York City, where wine lovers can come and enjoy a nice glass of wine at an affordable price."

Since then, Mattei has personally selected more than 120 different vintages stored in Basil's ever-growing wine cellar, where the inventory is already at over 5,000 bottles, procured from wineries all over the world. One of the most popular wines at Basil is the Aglianico, a deep, complex red made from black grapes that are indigenous to Mattei's native Campania, where his family still owns land, and his father and grandfather continue the tradition of making their own wine.

The wine list at Basil changes on a weekly basis, ensuring a steady flow of regular customers eager to try the latest arrivals.

"Every week, we have new wines coming in," Mattei said. "We taste, sample and shop around for the best quality wines we can find, and then we get them at the best price, so that it stays affordable for our customers."





Prices range from just \$10 to \$12 per glass, or \$30 a bottle. There are also some higher-end choices for those seeking to indulge with a nice Barolo, super Tuscan or Meritage. Of course, there are also plenty of wines suitable to accompany the restaurant's signature menu item: hand-tossed, Neopolitan-style brick-oven pizza, which Mattei recommends pairing with a dry, red Malbec. (This explains the extensive selection of a dozen Malbecs on the wine list.)

Although some menu items remain consistent throughout the year, Basil is also known for switching things up with a variety of seasonal selections. Their spring 2018 menu will feature grilled octopus, homemade squid ink pasta, grilled fresh fish selections served over arugula and chef DeSantis' much-anticipated

roasted lamb, a favorite during the Easter holiday season.

"We season the lamb with white wine and fresh rosemary," Mattei said, "and we let it sit to infuse the meat with flavor. Then we roast it in the brick oven so that it's crispier outside, but still juicy and delicate inside."

Another exciting dining option set to return this spring: starting in March, Basil will resume its Passport to Italy Tasting Dinners. The restaurant will host a series of customized dinners featuring a four-course tasting menu (appetizer, pasta course, entrée and dessert), highlighting the cuisine from a different region of Italy each month, and each course paired with a different wine or spirit that perfectly complements the dish. First-time attendees receive a realistic-looking "passport," and earn stamps





from the various regions each time they attending a tasting. After collecting six passport stamps, diners are rewarded with a magnum of Italian wine. Tasting menus last year included dishes from Tuscany, Campania, Venice and Sicily, with guest chefs from each region spotlighting their signature favorites. Seating for the Passport to Italy tasting dinners is limited to 40 people, and reservations must be made in advance. Cost is typically \$50 to \$65 per person, all inclusive.

Now that his vision of offering freshly prepared Italian cuisine, paired with high-quality, reasonably priced wines in a comfortable, relaxed setting has been realized, Mattei has even more expansion plans in store: in April 2017, he will open a gourmet food shop next door to Basil, stocked with hard-to-find, high-quality products imported weekly from Italy. Antichi Sapori (which translates to "Old World Flavors") will be a traditional salumeria-style shop featuring over 30 different Italian cheeses, 20 varieties of handmade, imported pastas (including organic and gluten-free options), as well as freshly prepared foods and sauces.

There's also a long-awaited project that Mattei plans to debut by next summer: a patio with outdoor seating in the back of the

restaurant, reminiscent of the open-air cafés so popular and pervasive in Europe.

"What we strive for with everything – the food, the wine, the atmosphere – is authenticity," Mattei said, and the new patio will be no exception. "It will feel like being back in Italy, right here in Astoria."

Basil Brick Oven Pizza

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