

Table Talk: Freshness reigns at Carmel's Basil

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She said it tastes like the sea — like that's a good thing — although it sounded kind of scary, and kelpy, and the idea of black squid ink didn't help, but since I was taking advice, I proceeded.

This was at Basil in Carmel, a courtyard restaurant reminiscent of a European off-street find, belying its location only yards off the San Carlos sidewalk. Lights sparkled and a fire pit was ablaze. At most of the tables sat guests who seemed chic and worldly (languages flowed like the restaurant's signature homemade limoncello).

I never would have found it, but the resident foodie at Citibank in Carmel at the mouth of the valley — a propitious name for locating food advice — said I had to go to Basil. My interest piqued, I banked on it, as it were.

Now I was facing a menu with Black Squid Ink Linguine (\$18) with sea urchin sauce, which sounded to me fairly terrible. But in the spirit of seeking and taking advice, on behalf of you, Dear Reader, I asked my server what dish people cried for.

It arrived: swirls of noodles black as a Sicilian island volcanic beach, and curls of undulating fish cut as if you sliced a stem of asparagus, white against the Odyssean sea eddies of pasta, and then, like flowers or stars, two pink-rose mini squid resembling delicate starfish.

The plating was beautiful, like a painting. One bite confirmed it was the thing itself: pasta, delicious, gentle yet savory in the cream sauce with garlic — and strange to say, for how strange it was, it was a deeply comforting dish and absorbing for the mind and eye and palate.

The Basil-tini (\$11) was the perfect complement with its yellow gold brightness, its tangy sweetness.

Basil's menu is fresh — not just in freshness of foods, some from the chef's garden down the street, but in how they are aligned. This excitement was communicated by Basil's team from the start.

I was taken with the Grilled Peach Salad (\$12), and respected the spirit that had to tell me the wild factor, local factor, green factor, in each ingredient and dish (East of Eden Schoch Farm cheese, Meyer lemon vinaigrette). I asked for the Summer Corn Ravioli (\$17), realizing the concept here in sweet corn puree with the Vegan Roasted Vegetable Plate (\$19), leek-sweet corn ragout with the Rabbit Sausage (\$26), and carrot puree for the Fogline Fare Raised Chicken (\$24). I asked for the carrot puree on the summer ravioli, and I also ordered the Small Plate Summer Gnocchi, homemade truffle gnocchi with brown butter and seasonal vegetables.

That's a lot of food, politely observed my food consultant server, and you see, Dear Reader, what embarrassment I nobly take on in order to fairly represent to you the offerings.

The gnocchi arrived in a soup bowl. Now, if I had not known what it was, I would not have known it was gnocchi. It was a glistening, colorful terrine of savory textures and tastes, potatoes being one. The carrot puree was a great sauce for it. I hope this does not cause a run on carrot puree, but if so, perhaps Basil will add such purees to all its dishes.

The Summer Corn Ravioli (\$17) was interesting to me — I had never had corn ravioli, much less with non-GMO Swank Farm organic sweet corn, Vidalia onions, marjoram, saffron pasta and light tomato broth. The tastes were soothing and pungent, like walking through a Carmel Highlands meadow.

This brings up the sides (\$7), which are worth eating as entrees. You can get broccolini with garlic and chili pepper, cauliflower with golden raisins and pine nuts, mashed potatoes with cream and rosemary, and Umbrian lentils with fresh herbs. Many herbs the chef grows himself, and they do show up in the drinks and dishes. Chef/owner Soerke Peters and general manager/owner Denis Boaro told me that Basil is the first and only Certified Green Restaurant in Carmel.

What? Oh, you are waiting for the dessert report? Even though you know I ate basically three entrees, plus the fresh bread with fresh basil dipping sauce, and the Basil-tini?

I confess, yes, I did — for you, Dear Reader, I ordered three: Limoncello Cheese Cake with fresh Berry Compote; Olallieberries Cobbler with house-made Vanilla Gelato; and Italian Bread Pudding with Warm Flan, Brioche Bread Panettone and Port Wine Poached Pear (\$7).

I took them home, a true test of desserts, separating the substantive from the flimsy and fragile. Basil's cheesecake was dense, pudding-ish, and rich, not stiff and stingy; it oozed in my mouth. I wanted more. (You can get more of this in-house limoncello as an after-dinner drink for \$10.)

The cobbler is a flavonoid poster child — bright, not gushy or floury, but lumpy and oozy. It is wonderful warm and the gelato is the real thing, tasting homemade of startling vanilla. The bread pudding you want because of the pear, in port with flan, and you can ask for carrot puree — just kidding, but Basil would do it, and it would taste delicious.