

ARTICLE:

Crown Heights Dining Gets a Hint of Basil



I walked down Kingston Avenue and immediately spotted the small, circular sign for **Basil**. It stood out as the only non-residential building on the block. I was on my way to Basil's private grand opening. Upon arrival I was greeted by a friendly hostess who kindly told me I was in the wrong area and that I had to walk outside and around to the back. Before leaving, I caught a glimpse of the restaurant's dining room. There were beautiful hanging lights, a very simple, elegant décor, and an open kitchen from which you can hear the food sizzle. The bar extends from the kitchen, with seats in front of the beer taps and the blazing oven.



(Left to Right: Co-Owner, Daniel Branover and Basil's PR Rept, Yossi Soffer)

Owners Daniel Branover, and Izhak Alkaslasi have created a one of a kind restaurant in Crown Heights: a

kosher, Italian style bistro. It has only been open for one month, but Basil could corner the market, being practically the only upscale dining establishment in the area. It is also one of the only kosher restaurants in the neighborhood, but that was not the motivation behind this endeavor. “I wanted a place I could enjoy,” Branover told me. “If it also makes money, great.”

The restaurant was made kosher because the owners wanted to have the pleasure of enjoying their own fare. But a typical kosher menu won't be found at Basil. There is no meat or shellfish, but there is fresh seafood delivered daily, including bronzino, and sea bass. The mozzarella and pasta are made fresh, on the premises, and the vegetables are roasted in the brick oven, freshly and daily. Basil does not neglect the mornings, either. Pastry chef Udi Ezra, formerly of Whole Foods, arrives early each morning to bake fresh scones, croissants, and other breakfast pastries. Coffee and espresso drinks are also available.

I entered the private entrance at the back of the restaurant and was again, very warmly greeted. The back room, which can hold about forty to fifty people, featured a small, marble bar, several tables, and a simple, elegant décor of dark wood topped by white walls. With small votive candles on each table, and a jazz band playing in the corner, the atmosphere and décor balanced each other perfectly.

Ever the gracious host, Branover immediately had the bartender pour me a glass of wine. Basil only serves wine and beer, but the selection is decent in both size and substance. The beer menu includes four on tap and several fine Belgian beers by the bottle. I sipped my glass of Sauvignon Blanc (clean, light, and crisp), and tried some of the tidbits that had been laid on the bar. There was a gorgeous tray of fluffy focaccia bread, topped with grape tomatoes and black olives. I took a piece of bread, and as I munched on it (and yes, it was as delicious as it looked) Branover brought me a small piece of toast with tuna tartar, which melted in my mouth and superbly complemented the wine. Lastly I tried some mini versions of their wood burning brick oven pizzas, topped with fresh mozzarella, thinly sliced red onion, and a small piece of roasted red pepper. Everything was delicious—and not at all what you might expect from a kosher restaurant.

Branover told me the story of a trip he took to Spain, where he fell in love with the concept of tapas. He decided he wanted to open a tapas bar somewhere in Brooklyn. It was more for the purpose of a place to enjoy himself, rather than the interest in starting a business.

Alkaslasi and Basil's PR and marketing rep, Yossi Soffer were more interested in opening something closer to a pizza parlor. When the three of them put their ideas and concepts together, an eclectic Italian and seafood restaurant is what was born.



I completed my meal of scrumptious mini pizzas and focaccia with a small terra cotta—basil terra cotta. I looked at Branover a little doubtfully as he handed me the plate, but his confident, infectious smile suggested my doubt was misplaced. I shrugged and tasted the dessert. I could definitely taste the basil, but it worked. It was smooth, robust, and sweet, all at the same time. The dessert plate was garnished with a drizzle of raspberry anglaise, adding the perfect dose of color to the white of the terra cotta and the green of the small basil leaf sitting on top.

The thing to remember is that Basil offers unique, delicious food, prepared by gourmet chefs. The fact that the food is kosher is almost incidental. It does mean that the locals who keep kosher now have a great place to go out to dinner, but you don't have to keep kosher or even be Jewish to appreciate Basil's fine food, wine, and atmosphere.

Basil | 268 Kingston Avenue, at Lincoln Place (Crown Heights)