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Basil: Crown Heights goes Gourmet

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By Sara Trappler Spielman

Occupying a corner café on a narrow, quiet street, the newest addition to the culinary scene in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, comes alongside a revolution in upscale kosher cuisine.

Previously a non-kosher Caribbean restaurant, the new pizza and wine bar known as Basil is the only kosher restaurant in the part of the neighborhood north of Eastern Parkway. This slight departure away from the hub of kosher shops is telling of the clientele Basil's owners, Danny Branover and Isaac Alkaslasi, hope to attract. Executive chef Moshe Wendel says that even non-Jewish folk in the area have been requesting the establishment's signature offerings.

But Wendel assures that they're not ordinary slices of pizza. They'll come in individually sized pies with unique toppings; every ingredient will be prepared from scratch, he says. With flour imported from Italy, cheeses from Israel and Europe and a very expensive, high tech gas-run wood stone pizza oven — "The Rolls Royce of pizza ovens," in Wendel's words — baking everything to perfection, it's supposed to taste more like Italy.

The view from Basil's windows, however, reminds guests they're still in Brooklyn. From small, gray, marble tables and a matching bar counter, patrons can watch pedestrians on Kingston Avenue and Lincoln Place through floor-to-ceiling glass doors.

The menu offers the traditional mozzarella and tomato varieties of pizza, and also some more wild selections, such as "Pencil Asparagus and Ricotta" made with golden beets, mint and jalapeno; "The Sardinian Anchovy" featuring red onion, preserved lemon and goat's milk feta; and "Nutella," a concoction of hazelnut, banana and chocolate spreads.

Past the oven at the center, sauces are simmering on the stovetop during a recent visit. A line cook, whose job entails following the chef's recipes at a specific station, walks in with a plate of sliced eggplant.

"Sliced too thin," Wendel says, indicating with his fingers how much thicker to cut the vegetable.

Wendel's been working in kitchens for 14 years, and the staff at Basil are carrying out his vision to create gourmet food. Until recently, his experience was in non-kosher dining. Wendel is aiming for a casual, comfortable atmosphere with familiar food while also opening customers' palates to unusual delicacies. "It'll be good food, but you don't have to be serious to come in," Wendel explains. "You can still eat off of people's plates."

He believes Crown Heights, in light of the thousands of international visitors who regularly pass through, deserves good quality restaurants offering gourmet products.

“It’s kosher of course,” he says of his own venture, “but it won’t taste different. It’ll be good by all standards, a restaurant for everyone, because there are all types here.”

He imagines friends sharing their orders of pizza and pasta over glasses of wine. In the morning, there’ll be coffee with fresh croissants, muffins, breads and cookies all baked on the premises by the pastry chef, Ehud Ezra.

Opening at the crack of dawn, Basil will function as a coffee shop until 11:00 am. Then until 10:00 p.m., there will be a full menu of Italian-style personalized pizzas, paninis, pastas, fish and salads, as well as elegant desserts. The place will remain open until 2:00 a.m. every night serving a lighter menu with snacks and drinks.

Wendel takes out his handmade basil ice cream from the freezer, which will be paired with the funnel cake on the dessert menu. He says that he takes pride in personally crafting his artisanal offerings, such as the odd-sounding combination of herb and ice cream. “I’m a craftsman,” Wendel stresses. “What I do is not an art. It’s a craft.”

Wendel believes the art of cooking is best-learned hands on. After culinary school, he traveled to France, where he “learned about real food.” He scoured outdoor markets for fresh fish, produce and cheese, and toiled in beautifully-apportioned kitchens. When he returned home, he was motivated “to do the real thing.” At the time, he thought that encompassed only the food, but soon, he discovered more.

When he met his wife a few years ago, says Wendel, they both “wanted to become more Jewish.” They were familiar with basic traditions and lit candles every Friday night at Jangle, a restaurant Wendel was working at in Pennsylvania.

He reached a turning point one day when he woke up and could no longer taste anything. The life-altering experience — a nightmare for a chef — turned out to be related to an allergy to his cat, but it made him question his spiritual reality.

Maybe there was more to life than food and taste, he reasoned. “I became more G-d conscious,” says Wendel.

He decided to give religious Judaism a try, and went to a Chabad center in Philadelphia for the High Holidays. Two years ago, he and his wife began to keep Shabbat and moved to Hillside, N.J.

Before Basil, Wendel served as executive chef at Mosaica, a Mediterranean-inspired kosher restaurant offering French and Moroccan cuisine in Vauxhall, N.J.

Visitors and local residents often travel to Manhattan to dine out, a fact that Wendel and his bosses hope to change. Crown Heights, with its abundance of stores, children’s museum, and synagogues, draws people in for spiritual and cultural reasons. They want to add to its culinary draw, as well.

“Why not,” asks Wendel, “have something right here?”