

In Crown Heights, Panini and a Melting Pot Wall Street Journal ~ 8/26/2010



Brian Harkin for The Wall Street Journal

Waitress Donauta Watson serves a pizza to (L-R) Sal Gabriele, Tom Sangiacomo and Dan Marucci at Basil, a wine bar and cafe in Crown Heights.

The morning pastries are homemade, the coffee is from Italian roaster Danesi, but the most remarkable thing about Basil, a café and wine bar in Crown Heights, may be who's working the front and back of the house.

At this strictly kosher, all-dairy restaurant, none of the wait staff are religious Jews, and a few are African-American and Caribbean-American. All are required to adhere to the Lubavitch dress code, so female wait staff must wear long black peasant skirts to match their Basil logo t-shirts. West Indians work in the kitchen alongside a few observant Jews and prepare items from a trendy menu that includes thin-crust pizzas and panini stuffed with ingredients like goat cheese and Meyer lemon jam.

Nearly 20 years after the riots that pitted Hasidic and Afro-Caribbean residents against one another, Crown Heights still seems deeply divided in many respects. But Daniel Branover, who moved to the area from Jerusalem eight years ago, is betting that the desire for a decent neighborhood meal can unite even a divided community.

"There's a lot of tension here. I thought the only way to bridge the gap is through breaking bread—as long as it's good bread," said Branover, 45, who lives in the Lubavitch community and is a religious Jew. "The irony is that Jerusalem is a lot less segregated. Even though there's a fundamental block, it's less severe than Crown Heights."

Opened in March, Basil is the kind of casual, upscale eatery that would be unremarkable in nearby Park Slope, but is unusual in Crown Heights, where dining options are limited to take-out on one side of Eastern Parkway, and kosher markets and restaurants on the other. The mostly non-Jewish staff are a mix of longtime residents and newcomers who live in the area for its affordable rent. They serve about 250 customers daily, mostly youthful, stylish Hasidic Jews from the other side of Eastern Parkway.

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Passers-by check out Basil's storefront.

"This is an expression of the younger community that has moved in," said customer Yosef Yitzchok Serebryanski, while he finished his mango-banana smoothie at the counter. "When the restaurant opened up, in here were Hispanics, Blacks, and whites. I can speak to people who have nothing to do with Judaism."

Hasidic reggae star Matisyahu, a neighborhood resident, is a regular, but so are State Senator Eric Adams and Caleb Buchanan, pastor of Saint Gregory Church. Basil's morning coffee window is popular with the Afro-Caribbean community since it's en route to the 3-train and there's no Starbucks in the neighborhood.

Still for some, a contemporary restaurant means dying traditions. When Basil interviewed for its server positions, several rabbis in the community lamented the candidates' miniskirts.

"It's really just a handful of hardcore people from when the Rebbe [Schnerson, whom some believed to be the messiah] was alive that have a problem with this place," said Michelle Gelker, 26, a server who grew up in the Lubavitch community but is no longer religious.

The staff has made other adjustments to the mores of the community. Manager Clara Perez, 53, who is originally from Colombia and grew up Catholic, can't play music with female vocalists, said to arouse Hasidic men. (She sticks to classical, Paul Simon and Julio Iglesias.) Once she asked a Hasidic teenage couple who were kissing to leave.

The local rabbi warned Perez before he koshered the restaurant.

"He said to me, 'first this must be a religious establishment and second a restaurant.'"

Then he gave the brick oven his blessing.

—Jessica Firger