



Basilico Restaurant



Rodrigo Gonzalez

FOR THE LOVE OF Italy

Two South Florida eateries are doing Italian cuisine right.

It is easy to be smitten by Italy. There's its rich history, art and architecture. Native sons Verdi, Puccini and Fellini have made legendary musical and cinematic contributions to the world. And, of course, there's the food. This month Table Hopping is pleased to feature two South Florida restaurants whose dedication to authentic Italian dishes have diners craving to *mangia*, time and time again.

BASILICO RISTORANTE

Slow down on the approach to Basilico or you just might miss it. The restaurant has been housed in an unimpressive strip mall adjacent to the Miami International Airport for 20 years. Once inside, though, it's a different story. The compact

45-seat eatery immediately puts diners at ease with its dim lighting and mahogany wood tables covered with crisp white linens.

Co-owner Luciano Gonzalez, a lean 41-year old clad in a t-shirt and baseball cap can be found slurping a bowl of pasta alongside patrons in the crowded bar. Not to worry, though, the minute anyone comes in, he jumps up to greet them, most often adding a hug and a kiss. "There are no regulars here, everyone is a regular," Luciano explains. He's original from Argentina but now calls Doral home.

Gonzalez began working in the industry at age 16, after his father passed away, explaining "I got a job to help my mom out with the bills." He followed in the footsteps of his



Basilico's linguine frutti di mare

older brother, Rodrigo, working at a trendy, Northern Italian restaurant in Coconut Grove. That was 1994. Fast forward four years and the brothers found themselves opening Basilico in a forgotten, run-down part of town.

"Why here?" Gonzalez shrugs, when asked. "Because it was cheap!" he laughs, before stopping to embrace an older gentleman who has approached him before heading out. The brothers opened with a third partner and friend, Carlos Loya and began preparing Northern Italian dishes inspired by their former workplace. All the recipes were Rodrigo's. Because of

the compact kitchen (there are only six burners, one of which, is taken for stock and a grill) everything is fresh and used right away. Fish is delivered daily. "What comes in the back door goes out the front!" Gonzalez adds.

They began with a \$5.95 lunch, which drew in blue-collar workers from the airport and warehouses nearby. Before long, there was a line to get in. "The workers' bosses were wondering what this place was all about," Gonzalez reveals. They began increasing their prices and the crowds continued to come. "Because we have a small overhead, we can really focus on using the best possible products. All our beef is Angus beef and we use whatever fish comes in that day."

Popular dishes include the linguine frutti di mare, crab ravioli (made with lump crab served in a cream sauce with shallots, leeks, and shrimp), and the pear and gorgonzola cheese ravioli with marsala cream sauce and caramelized dried figs. Meat lovers will want to order their signature filet mignon, which comes with various different sauces to choose from, bone-in rib-eye steak, or the grilled Australian lamb chops with an apricot demi-glaze. End the evening with any one of their in-house desserts, which range from the traditional tiramisu to the decadent chocolate soufflé made

TABLE HOPPING

with Belgium chocolate.

Specials are also coveted items. Take their osso buco, a time-intensive Italian favorite on the radar of so many Basilico fans that Gonzalez has created an osso buco contact list on his phone. "When we get ready to make it, I send a text out to everybody on the osso buco list letting them know." Clearly, Basilico prides itself on its rapport with its clients. Most have been coming since they opened in 1998. "I see kids now that are 20 that I met when they were in their mom's belly!" Gonzalez says.

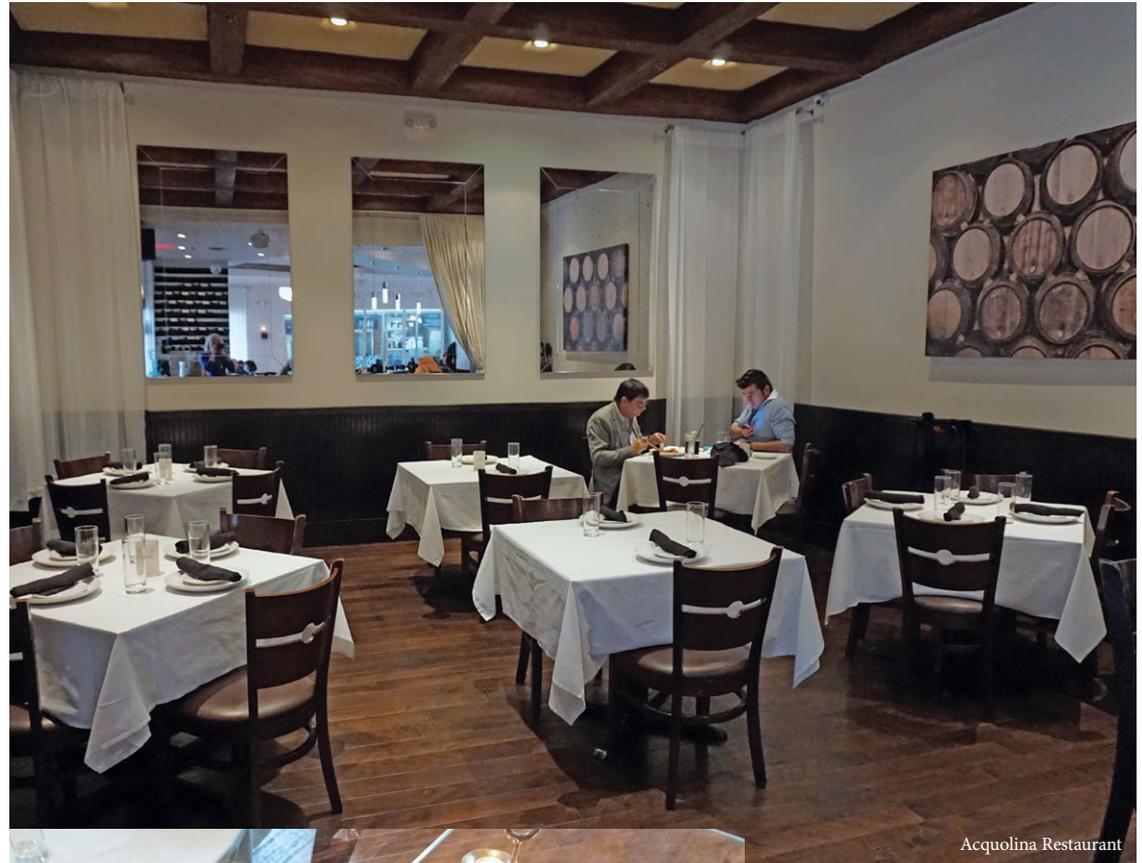
It is this family feel that has kept Basilico thriving and successful. In 2010 they opened a second, larger location, which is run by Rodrigo. Luciano happily oversees the original Virginia Gardens location. "You become family," he adds, stating the obvious. At least seven people have stopped by to chat. Employees also feel the love. The chef, Jaime Rodriguez, has been here for 18 years. The shortest time anyone has worked for Basilico is eight years. "Once people come, they stay."

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ACQUOLINA

Owner Salvatore Greco just celebrated the 10th anniversary of Acquolina, a family-style restaurant, which opened in Weston in 2008. The eatery exudes an elegant classy feel, with white table linens and dark wood playing harmoniously with the minimalist setting. Those wanting a romantic, al fresco experience will enjoy the outdoor patio dining overlooking the water.

The focus is Italian-American cuisine, dishes immigrants created once they arrived in the United States. Prime steaks are also a popular dish served here. Chef Gonzalo Lauz, who has been with the restaurant since day one, creates appetizers like calamari arrabbiata (calamari, fried or sautéed, served in a cherry pepper infused marinara sauce) and melanzane pila, fresh mozzarella and tomatoes, layered with pan-fried eggplant and arugula



Acquolina Restaurant



Spaghetti and meatballs.



22oz Bone in Ribeye.

then drizzled with a balsamic glaze. Pastas are plentiful, with traditional standards like aglio e olio (garlic, extra virgin olive oil, and parsley), lasagna, gnocchi pesto, and pasta and meatballs, which are slowly simmered in the chef's tomato sauce. Guests can choose what pasta they prefer and for those with dietary restrictions, Acquolina offers both whole wheat and gluten free options. Other Italian-American staples include chicken or veal marsala and eggplant parmesan.

Acquolina prides itself in its meat dishes. There's prime filet mignon, served with broccolini and potato croquette and black angus skirt steak which comes with roasted peppers, onions, roasted potatoes and a chimichurri sauce. For those arriving very hungry, the 22 oz. prime bone-in rib-eye beckons. Seafood lovers will be thrilled with the extensive offerings. Dishes include gamberoni oreganata, jumbo shrimp butterflied and topped with seasoned breadcrumbs then baked

in an oreganata sauce. Lobster ravioli is served in a brandy-infused pink sauce with baby shrimp and filetto di salmon padella features salmon sautéed with garlic, white wine, and chopped tomato.

Save room for dessert, there is plenty to choose from. Classic Italian dolci include tiramisù, cannoli, and berry zambione. There's also a varied wine selection and a separate single malt scotch menu and the restaurant recently added both a bourbon and tequila menu. 🍷

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