



Basta Delivers More than Pizza

When I interviewed Ben Parsons for the story in this month's Sip column (see page 36), we met at Pizzeria Basta in Boulder, owned by Chef Kelly Whitaker. Chef Whitaker is a familiar face at Infinite Monkey Theorem's wine and pizza street parties in Santa Fe. He makes wood-fired pizzas at the events. But to say that Chef Whitaker is just a pizza maker is like saying Parsons is just a guy who makes wine. Both men are set on making good food and wine more approachable for Coloradans.

Basta looks like just another wood fire pizza joint—it's friendly, inviting and casual. Don't let the name pizzeria and the low-key décor fool you; the food at Basta is seriously good. The tasting menu that Chef Whitaker presented was indeed Italian, but with a sophistication not seen in any other



Pizzeria Basta | 3601 Arapahoe Ave., Boulder | 303.997.8775 | pizzeriabasta.com





local pizzeria that I've been to in Boulder or Denver.

The starter, Puget Sound oysters nestled in a deep shell with IMT Muscat drizzled over the top, were beautifully sweet and delicate. The next course had me concerned: baby octopus with a polenta cake, cipollini onion and chard. Few Colorado chefs have mastered the art of octopus, and sadly it's often just a mess of chewy tentacles and rubbery bands by the time it is served. Not so at Basta. The wood-fired baby octopus was tender, flavorful and smoky. The polenta was over-the-top amazing. Rather than a pool of corn grits, it was cooked ever so slowly in a warm sous-vide bath and finished off in a wood-fired oven for a crunchy

exterior. The soup course was a micro-bowl of Kabocha squash soup that I wished was ten times its size.

The salad course, a wood-fired vegetable salad with wood-fired vinaigrette caught my interest not only for the flavor, but also for the method. Wood-fired vegetables I understand, but wood-fired vinaigrette? Chef Whitaker imparts a smoky flavor to the olive oil by infusing it with smoked wood, and filtering out the remnants. The details as to exactly how this is done escaped me, but the smoked flavor was subtle and not overdone.


After a few bites into Parsons' favorite pizza, the Daisy Pizza, Chef Whitaker's version of the Neapolitan classic Pizza Margherita,

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I knew he learned his craft somewhere other than the Flatirons. It just so happens that Chef Whitaker worked as a chef near Naples, where he learned firsthand the ins and outs of wood-fired Italian cuisine. The tender octopus gave away his culinary start, but the pizza solidified my hunch that Chef Whitaker learned to cook in and among the Italian locals. In fact, he lived not far from this food editor's former Italian home in Gaeta, Italy.

Basta recently added pasta to the menu. On that night, the choices included a chitarra with perigord truffles, butter and a Wisconsin-made manchego cheese; wood-fired market vegetable lasagna with carrots, chippolini onions and béchamel sauce; and gnocchi with Colorado lamb ragu. The lasagna was beautifully layered with flavor and would have made the pickiest of vegetarians happy. The truffle and manchego pasta was good, but not as creamy as I hoped. Parsons and I both agreed that the gnocchi stood out as the winner of the three. As I looked around at other diners, they too agreed with our choice. Many tables included a bowl of both gnocchi and ragu, and a pizza for sharing.

As a finishing touch, dessert included Weiser farm fingerling potato and goat's milk ricotta doughnuts, with oak-ash vanilla ice cream. Yes, oak-ash vanilla ice cream. Just as the olive oil was infused with a light, smoked flavor, so too was the cream in the ice cream. These delicate flavors married well with the vanilla.

What was supposed to be just a wine interview was a surprisingly incredible meal; one that took me back to the Campania region's trattorias and pizzerias that line the Western Italian coast. Since a plane ticket to Italy isn't in my future any time soon, I will definitely return to Basta to renew my Italian food memories and to see what smoky goodness Chef Whitaker will conjure up. Since my visit there, I've heard that many Boulder and Denver chefs also like his take on Italian cuisine and can be found eating at Basta after-hours. 

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