

## SIMPLY THE BEST?

Unless you can correct me to the contrary the best in Bucharest means the best in the country. In the competitive jungle of Italian bistros, restaurants and diners, the new Basilicum (not to be confused with the first Basilicum in Aviatorilor) stands head and shoulders above its competitors.

You readers, the well-traveled bon-viveurs of Bucharest know full well that good food is only one of the elements of a great meal. It should be an event encompassing ambiance, service, the glow of good company and décor. And boy, does this place excel in good taste décor. Professionally made over by the renowned designer Erna Moise, her work is nothing less than sensational. Upon entering you are instantly removed from the grime of this filthy city into a new world. Into which country is open to debate. Suffice it to say, it is cool, pastel and dare I say it, - expensive. The artiste's eye has not missed one centimeter of this huge villa in her modern-European conversion, which would not be out of place in any of Europe's capitals.

Six cosy rooms (two are non-smoking) support some 6-7 tables each. If first impressions count, they hit the right cord at the start. You are presented with a labeled bottle of olive oil and similarly, a branded bottle of balsamic vinegar no less. We ordered dishes with Parmesan and Gorgonzola. No apologies, these were my traps which they sidestepped by producing the real thing! Steak or pasta 'Gorgonzola' is commonplace in Bucharest save for the fact that the costly imported Gorgonzola has become a generic name for cheap local blue cheese. Not here. Similarly in Bucharest, Parmesan is largely replaced with powdered woodchip. Again not in Basilicum, as both are genuine and fresh.

The menu will not surprise, as is international Italian bistro. To be fair, it has to be as the alternative is Italian regional cooking, and that is too much to expect. Surprises abound. The cartofi prajiti are English chips, thick and filling,

**BASILICUM NEW PUB**

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not the limp weedy USA junk fries so prevalent here, and only here! Beef salsa Parmesan was excellent, tender but surprisingly in batter. Thankfully a creamy cheese sauce balanced the dry batter. I asked for cartofi pure, not on the menu but produced without a complaint. Three pastas based on cannelloni filling followed which were first rate. The pork in mushroom sauce was tough, but the sauce excellent. Chef, - rest the meat before serving to tenderise it!

My criticisms are few. Europeans like to have garlic and seasoning ground into every beef dish before cooking, and have it liberally sprinkled with fresh basil before serving as benefits the restaurant's name. Fresh oregano would also not intrude in nearly all other dishes.

If you want to look this place over without dining, go to the bar on the second floor. But I warn you if you do so, you will need iron willpower to resist the temptation of finding out if the food is as good as the place looks.

*Michael Barclay*