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After three chefs, Básico finally hits its stride

More Than a Taqueria

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On each of my visits, less than half of the tables inside Básico were taken, but the servers were lighting candles and ensuring that silverware was properly rolled inside the white-and-red pinstriped napkins. Perhaps the winter cold was keeping everybody at home, likely eating big bowls of chili while binge-watching *House of Cards* and never really considering heading over to the Mixson Bath and Racquet Club for a bite to eat. Their loss.



• Jonathan Boncek

• *Spicy grapefruit margarita*

On my first trip, within three minutes of walking in the door, I was warming up with a Dark and Stormy made with the Cannonborough Beverage Company's ginger beer and Gosling's black rum (\$8). Five minutes later, I was emptying a bowl of warm queso fundido with chorizo, roasted poblano, corn, and pickled jalapeños with hot tortilla chips (\$4). Soon after that came an enormous wooden bowl filled with Carolina Gold Rice, smoky root vegetables, and a tangy white bean puree that seemed to get more and more appealing with each bite. There were mild pieces of chorizo and, on top, deftly charred tentacles of octopus and shrimp, head and all (\$18).

Then came the brisket enchiladas (\$14), a dish I'd been waiting to try. The plate was filled almost to the rim with

reddish-brown pecan mole sauce with kernels of corn and specks of queso fresca here and there. In the middle of the subtly sweet mole sat a row of four corn tortillas rolled and filled with powerfully flavorful sliced brisket. It was smoky but not overwhelming, and the seasoned crust gave the beef just the right amount of edge. On top was a medley of picked onion and jalapeños and thick slices of radish (\$14). The enchiladas included a side of soft and tangy charred Brussels sprouts with a dark yellow sheen from achiote — a Caribbean spice — and brown butter. I was eating all of this as fast as I could. The more I realized how good it was, the faster I ate.

In fact, I couldn't eat fast enough. Dishes kept coming and the little white table was filled in no time. Of course, some of that was due to the size of the wooden bowls and plates of varying colors and shapes, but the menu is mostly to blame for being appealing enough to make me want to order as if I hadn't had a bite to eat in days. Luckily, the dishes turned out to be as good as described, and then some, causing me to have to continually remind myself to take a breath between bites.

I had been to Básico several times before, but I don't recall tackling an entire table of deliciousness that quickly. In the past, the food had been good, but not great.

There's a lot at Básico that has not changed. The setting, for example, still feels like a hip cafeteria, drinks are delivered in stainless steel cups, and there's a whole lot of turquoise, neon green, and canary yellow supplementing the stark white tables. Like before, the cocktails are quite good, especially the Básico house margarita. There's sangria, Tecate, wine, and even a nice selection of craft beer.



• Jonathan Boncek

• *Fall vegetable salad*

Still present is the pool and racquet club, Mixson Market, and the growing development of luxury apartments. And, as stated on the website, the restaurant still defines itself as "a taqueria specializing in seasonal fare that is locally grown and produced."

But while Básico has always supported local purveyors, what's changed is how the local products are being used. Since opening in 2013, the restaurant has gone through three chefs, before ultimately bringing in Chef Nathan Thurston as a consultant. It was Thurston who landed now Executive Chef Bryan Cates.

Having spent time working with James Beard Award-winner Chris Hastings at Alabama's Hot and Hot Fish Club, as well

as working stints at Opal and Bacco in Mt. Pleasant, Cates came to Básico with a hefty resume and it's starting to show promise.



• Jonathan Boncek

- *brisket enchiladas get a pecan mole sauce with corn and queso fresca at Basico*

Cates has developed several dishes that are an excellent alternative to the bold brisket like the confit of charred octopus nestled in a bowl of forbidden black with oyster mushrooms, scallions, tomatoes, and lime (\$11); a beautiful bowl of smoky fall vegetables including carrots and sunchokes with chimichurri, radishes, and cheese (\$8); and mole chicken enchiladas in a tomatillo cream sauce (\$15).

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Cates' fresh corn tortillas make the tacos (\$15), which arrive in threes and include a side. There's fried chicken with pickled jicama, queso fresco, and just the right amount of ancho chili aioli without over doing it. The pork belly with smoked sauerkraut and mustard crema was sweet but not over the top, and the habanero citrus aioli gave the fish taco a touch of heat and a lingering tanginess.

There are downsides, however, like a tendency for servers to deliver differing, mismatched menus. The Básico burger that seems to always be on the menu wasn't available on my visits (as was the case with the appetizer of beef belly). Shrimp tacos? No, out of season, yet there's shrimp in the paella.



• *Hanger steak*

• Jonathan Boncek

Fortunately, these little issues can be addressed, but, even if they aren't, there's nothing pressing enough to stop diners from trying one of the best hanger steaks in town. Though not as picturesque as some of the other dishes on the menu, the tender beef is draped with a beautiful dark crust and is as flavorful as can be. Cooked perfectly, it's served with potatoes dressed in chimichurri, and arranged on a plate with some Hen of the Woods mushrooms. At \$16, you won't find much better.

Sure, everyone is ready for the weather to take a turn, the pool to open, and frozen cocktails to make a fierce comeback, but with Chef Cates at the helm of Básico, there's really no reason to wait.

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