



WHOA

Mike Easton Pauses Bar Bacetto for New Role at Abeja

And now, some big dining news out of wine country.

By Allecia Vermillion • June 26, 2024



Mike Easton with Abeja's Dan Wampfler and Amy Alvarez-Wampfler. Just doing some RSD, all casual-like.

MIKE EASTON IS putting [Bar Bacetto](#) on a “permanent hiatus” to take a job as executive chef at Abeja, the well-regarded [Walla Walla winery](#). Specifically at the Kitchen at Abeja, the restaurant space within the winery’s idyllic farmstead, which also includes a boutique inn.

“I wouldn’t have made this decision for any old job,” says Easton about this unexpected move. And while he obviously processed a lot of feelings to get there, “I feel great about it.”

In his new role, he will oversee five- and seven-course prix fixe menus at the Kitchen, doing more formal and technique-driven cuisine than what you might find on any given night at Bar Bacetto, or at its Seattle predecessors Il Corvo or [Il Nido](#) for that matter. “I love that stuff,” Easton says. Rest assured, though, pasta will still absolutely be in the mix.

This news comes less than two years after Easton and his wife, Erin, opened Bar Bacetto. The tiny restaurant in downtown Waitsburg quickly became a destination. It also comes less than a month after the Eastons traveled to Chicago as [James Beard Award finalists](#) for Best New Restaurant.

Their [planned pizza bar](#), Bacetto's Detroit Style, will still move forward—it's currently on the cusp of opening. This takeout-friendly spot was always planned to operate without Easton in the kitchen, he says. But he's still figuring out what to do with the Bar Bacetto space. "People have called it a passion project," he says of the restaurant. "It definitely was successful in many ways. But financial longevity wasn't one of them." Best case scenario, he says, was a future of breaking even—a sobering reminder of the precarious economics of restaurants.

The chef says he's a longtime fan of both Abeja and winemakers Amy Alvarez-Wampfler and Dan Wampfler. And he likes the challenge of making food to pair with wines, rather than the other way around. If his sensibility about wine and food is half as refined as his opinions about which sauces pair with various pasta shapes, diners are in for some serious meals.

Easton sure [isn't a guy I'd describe as corporate](#), but tapping him was a savvy move on behalf of Columbia Hospitality, which has managed the Inn at Abeja since 2018. The property has a setting and lodging that rival wine country destinations in California, but the dining hasn't kept pace. And since Kinglet closed at the end of last year, Walla Walla has felt light on destination-level restaurants. This news surely comes as a surprise, and I'll certainly mourn Bar Bacetto. But seeing what such a talented chef can do with more resources behind him could be...exciting?

Easton starts his new role in July. But some things remain the same. "I'm still not wearing a chef coat," he says.