

Newsday

Long Island Restaurants

La Bottega

147 Nassau Blvd.
Garden City South, NY
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Five years ago, when Guiseppe and Marisa Ruta opened La Bottega in Garden City South, the place was a basic panini and salad takeout shop with a few tables in the rear. Dinner was offered some nights, but a full-fledged restaurant it was not.

Today, with a mini-empire of little cafes in five [Nassau County](#) towns, the Rutas recently expanded their original venue to a full-service restaurant. Sicilian-born Giuseppe Ruta developed all the recipes, drawing on his experience as a manager at Lupa in [Manhattan](#), under chef Mario Batali. The weekly changing dinner menu, driven by what's fresh and seasonal, is a long way from the typical suburban red sauce repertoire.

Dinner one night began with a trio of crostini topped with a savory mix of pork sausage, onion, fennel and Parmigiano Reggiano. An appetizer of pan-seared swordfish with blood orange, lime zest and fennel was a pastiche of vivid colors and flavors that managed to taste tropical and modern-Italian.

From the blackboard roster of soups, I sampled a resonantly flavorsome pasta e fagiole, most of the beans (but not the pasta) puréed into the soup. The sweet potato-sage and butternut squash soups were rich and intense.

Roasted beets imparted a crimson hue to the risotto con cappessane e zucca, Arborio rice cooked with sea scallops, butternut squash, peas and Parmigiano Reggiano, a lovely confluence. I was impressed, as well, with a bowl of orecchiette (ear-shaped pasta) in a meaty rag- of cured pork, veal and beef, even if the ricotta salata listed on the menu as an ingredient was not to be found. A successful take on chicken scallopini - a surprisingly thick and juicy boneless breast - was topped with prosciutto and shredded mozzarella and plated with mashed potatoes and bright snow peas. The same accompaniments shared the plate with pan-seared salmon blanketed with a shrimp, cherry tomato and scallion sauce. The combination worked.

What didn't make it was the too-salty "vegetariano" panino ordered at lunch. A shame, since the grilled eggplant, tomatoes, zucchini and fresh mozzarella looked so appealing. And while the "Savona" panino (described as grilled chicken breast with fresh mozzarella, tomatillo sauce and tomato) added up to a nice sandwich, the ignition factor - tomatillo sauce - had been left out. But the "Ascoli" (slow-roasted chunks of suckling pig, fresh mozzarella, broccoli rabe and spicy red peppers on a rustic round bread) was an all-out firecracker hit. And the "Zola" salad (baby arugula, mushrooms, red onion, corn and bacon in a balsamic vinaigrette) was rife with texture and taste.

Anyone would have a hard time deciding which of the house-made desserts was best - the moist chocolate cake layered with fresh strawberries and whipped cream, the creamy, wobbly flan, or the lush tiramisu.

It's worth a trip to Garden City South to figure that one out for yourself.

Reviewed by Joan Reminick, 3/18/08.

HOURS

Monday to Thursday, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., Friday and Saturday, 9 a.m. to 10 p.m., Sunday, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.

ASSESSMENT

Rustic Italian

CUISINE

Italian

PRICE RANGE

Moderate (\$15-\$25)

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS

Accessible

