

Like Fast Food, Just Better and Slower



Kathy Kmonicek for The New York Times

QUICK AND FRESH

Julio Cesar at La Bottega
Italian Gourmet.

By SUSAN M. NOVICK
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AT [La Bottega Italian Gourmet](#), customers who order panini, as Michael Parente, of Lynbrook, did recently, can expect to wait for it. Mr. Parente watched a cook behind the rustic take-out counter slice speck, a type of Italian ham, layer it on ciabatta with fontina cheese and arugula, and place it in the panini press until the cheese melted and the bread crisped.

“I anticipate the 10-minute wait. That’s why they have a bench here,” Mr. Parente said. “They slice the ingredients fresh. The sandwich isn’t just sitting there all day.”

The food may be faster (and cheaper) at traditional fast-food spots. La Bottega, along with other Long Island mini-chains like Green Cactus Mexican Grill and Wild Fig Mediterranean Grill, is doing something different: serving made-to-order meals composed of fresh, high-quality ingredients at reasonable prices.

Though all have places for eating on the spot (La Bottega and Wild Fig have table service), they also have dedicated take-out counters.

In recent years, the chains have been expanding at a rate that belies the sluggish economy.

“I have to say, the economy helped us,” said Giuseppe Ruta, of Garden City, who opened the original La Bottega in Garden City South in 2003 with his wife, Marisa. (The couple, who came to Long Island from Sicily 16 years ago, also own the adjacent Caffè Barocco, which serves Italian tapas and crepes.)

Since then, Mr. Ruta has ushered the franchise into 11 locations across Long Island; he expects five more to open in the next five months.

More than 65 panini, 9 kinds of bruschette and 25 [salads](#) join a rotating selection of house-made soups on the menu. Mr. Ruta uses organic eggs, imported prosciutto di Parma, Gaeta olives and roasted portobello mushrooms, and includes gluten-free menu options at many La Bottega locations. “People are health-conscious now and they want to know what they are eating,” he said.

A Sampling

These local chains serve (relatively) quick, casual fare made with quality ingredients:

LA BOTTEGA ITALIAN GOURMET

147 Nassau Boulevard, Garden City South; labottegagourmet.com. (516) 486-0935.

Franchise locations in Carle Place, Merrick, Rockville Centre, Oceanside, Massapequa Park, Floral Park, Roosevelt Field Mall, Huntington, Long Beach and Roslyn.

Panini, \$6.50 to \$12.25; [salads](#), \$6.50 to \$12; soups, \$4.50 for 16 ounces; bruschette, \$6, choice of three.