

Long Island Pulse Magazine
Food Reviews: Orto
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ORTO

Miller Place (631) 473-0014



It all started with Kitchen A Bistro, a small cramped spot in a Saint James mini strip shopping center. Smoke from the kitchen often filtered across the room and people squeezed into the limited standing space inside or sat in their cars outside waiting to be summoned to a table. Despite its limitations, chef/owner Eric Lomando's very modest first venture quickly attracted the attention of diners to this unique, very individualistic, very honest, little restaurant.

Patrons were invited to bring their own wine and were not charged a corkage fee, and prices were modest at his cash-on-the-barrelhead, no-credit-card venture. Most of the food on his ever-changing French-Mediterranean menu was delicious and much of it broke the usual steak-chicken-fish mold so common elsewhere. Some of the best dishes were the simplest, yet others provided unexpected complexity. The word spread and the tiny one-of-a-kind eatery moved to the standalone former Mirabelle quarters down the road in Saint James. The original Kitchen A Bistro became Kitchen A Trattoria, a rustic Italian winner offering robust renderings of Italian comfort food.

In February, Orto (it means "vegetable garden"), Mr. Lomando's third restaurant, opened in Miller Place and was almost immediately embraced by the fans he had made at his previous endeavors. A bit more upscale and sophisticated, this second rustic Italian effort is housed in the charming Daniel Miller House, circa 1824. It retains its historical lineage while offering an array of cutting-edge dishes and ingredients that probably nobody ever heard of in 1824. It's a calm, comfortable place with enough nooks and crannies to make it interesting for small groups of diners, while the main dining room offers a soaring barn-like wooden ceiling with crossed beams, pillars, a tile floor, an old fashioned fireplace with a stove insert and appropriately mellow American songbook-style music.

Among the commendable antipasti was a crostino of farm egg, pistachio, pesto and mortadella (\$13) similar to a layered uptown version of fried egg, bologna and toast. Roasted cauliflower (\$9), with shaved Parmigiano and a bagna cauda vinaigrette that infused the dish with the flavors of olive oil, butter, garlic and anchovies was a rustic

success, as was farro salad (\$9), given a creative mix of taste and textural contrast from its roasted mushrooms, feta and charred onions.

A primi course with dishes available as either appetizers (\$12) or entrées (\$20) offered a rustic, peasantry orecchiette with handfuls of crumbled sausage and kale, garganelli with pork shoulder ragu, a jumble of tubular egg-based pasta and tender, moist, fall-from-the-bone quality pork pieces and roasted butternut squash ravioli—pillowy squares, delicate yet subtly flavorful.

All secondi or entrées cost \$23 and justify the price. The straightforward baked lamb and potato stew is another welcome nod to earthy simplicity while the sautéed trigger fish with cauliflower purée and mushroom broth is a flawless dish of impeccable quality—in fact one of the finest fish dishes I've ever eaten.

All desserts on Orto's non-cliché menu are \$6.50. They batted four for four. The lemon ricotta cheesecake with just a touch of citrus was a light delight. An ethereal flan was surrounded by tiny fruit squares, pear crostata had a buttery crust that would do a gourmet bakery proud, and a chocolate-almond orange cake with a side of hazelnut gelato featured a crunchy brownie-style surface. Add an unobtrusive, well-informed waitstaff, Eric Lomando—a master chef worthy of the title—and his menu of unduplicated creations with their inspired mix of obvious and unusual ingredients, and you have one of the Island's most outstanding restaurants.