

Newsday
Explore Long Island

By ERICA MARCUS
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Eric Lomando: All-Star Chef of 2 Kitchens

Eric Lomando cooks like a well-traveled old-timer. The refined but restrained Mediterranean dishes served at his Kitchen A Bistro in St. James bespeak a mature palate that has eaten its way around Europe and cooked at one or two classic French brasseries. Up the road at Kitchen A Trattoria, Lomando's other venture, it's clear that he also must have lived in Italy, perhaps splitting his time between neighborhood trattorias and the home kitchens of Italian nonnas.

How can it be that the 32-year-old Stony Brook-born chef has never traveled abroad and has never cooked in a restaurant west of Huntington? If there's such a thing as a natural-born chef, it's Eric Lomando.

Not that he considers himself any kind of a culinary savant. "I just cook what I like," he says, "and I hope that other people want to eat that way."

So where did he learn to cook?

Lomando sums up his culinary education like this: "A combination of working in bad restaurants and eating in good ones."

At 14, Lomando started bussing tables at Rana's in Stony Brook, at 15, working in the kitchen. "In my family," he said, "if you wanted to have money to buy things, you got a job." He worked all through his teens at a series of "bad restaurants, where I learned what not to do." He got a scholarship to study computer science at Stony Brook but, after three years, he could no longer pretend there was any other career for him but cooking, and he left school.

"The energy of the kitchen, the camaraderie of the team -- I realized that even though it would require working twice as many hours, it was fun. And it's not really work if it's fun."

Lomando enrolled in the culinary program at NYIT in Central Islip and, to supplement his course work, he began buying cookbooks in earnest. (He's still in thrall to this costly habit; among his favorites are Eric Ripert's "A Return to Cooking," Thomas Keller's "French Laundry Cookbook," and Judy Roger's "Zuni Café Cookbook.")

In 1999, Lomando and a friend went into Manhattan to dine at Daniel, the culinary temple presided over by Daniel Boulud. Lomando was blown away by how the food tasted but was confounded by the elaborate platings, the formal etiquette and the knowledge required by diners to enjoy their meals. "The meal was awesome," he conceded, "but we were just embarrassed because there was so much we just didn't know." He remembers looking around the sumptuous dining room and thinking, "I don't understand why people are so enthralled by this kind of restaurant."

What did he do then?

While he was getting his associate's degree from NYIT, Lomando began cooking at a 20-seat St. James restaurant, Kitchen A Bistro (since moved to a new, larger space a little farther south). The original eatery had been established in 1988 by Robert Dixon, whose eclectic, French-inflected menu was highly personal; his cooking highly accomplished. Dixon, a former chef de cuisine at Mirabelle in St. James, was, according to Lomando, the first (and only) good chef he ever worked for. Once he graduated from NYIT, he came aboard full-time.

Less than two years later, when Dixon moved to California, he sold the restaurant to Lomando. (Because he had been socking away money since he was 14, the 23-year-old had actually saved up enough to buy it outright.) Now that he had the reins, Lomando set about fine-tuning Kitchen A Bistro to become exactly the type of restaurant he liked to eat in. Although the location has since changed, the formula hasn't.

The menu changes daily, depending on the season, the market and the chef's whims.

Service is extremely informal: Servers wear blue jeans and shirts in the blue-black-gray range.

The decor is simple and functional -- no candles, no flowers -- although stemware and dinnerware are of excellent quality.

Diners are encouraged to bring their own wine; there's no corkage fee.

Prices are well below the level of the "big deal" restaurant (currently, main courses are \$26; appetizers are \$12; a five-course tasting menu is \$60).

But what most distinguishes Kitchen A Bistro from other ambitious New American Long Island restaurants is what's on the plate. Taste is paramount; looks secondary. Most dishes have a maximum of three elements, three dominant flavors. Lomando has a horror of extraneous garnishes. "Everything on the plate should be there for a reason. I get aggravated when people put a sprig of rosemary in everything." (Nor do Kitchen A Bistro's desserts go out with those mindless sprigs of mint.)

Over the years, the cooking has gotten, if anything, simpler and more focused on the Mediterranean.

One Kitchen becomes two

At the original Kitchen A Bistro, space was so tight that customers often would wait in their cars to gain entrance. The kitchen was open to the dining room, which occasioned a few set-tos between the chef and diners. Once, a diner insisted the "scallops" had been punched out of a skate wing. Lomando strode into the dining room armed with samples of both and demonstrated the fallacy of this position.

After an unsuccessful search for a larger space, Lomando reluctantly signed another 10-year lease. Then in summer 2008, he was approached by Guy Reuge, chef-owner of Mirabelle, which had occupied a free-standing building about a mile south of Kitchen A Bistro since 1988. Reuge was moving Mirabelle to the Three Village Inn in Stony Brook. Was Lomando interested in the space? Absolutely.

Lomando's first impulse was to leave Bistro where it was and open a "high-end Italian" in the new space. But with the economy tanking, he reasoned that his new restaurant should be less expensive than the old one. Ultimately, he moved Bistro to the new 55-seat space. Prices rose by a dollar or two and, for the first time, customers who didn't bring their own wine could avail themselves of a well-priced wine list. There was still no corkage fee.

The kitchen seemed vast to Lomando and his team. "All of a sudden we had the room and the equipment to cook everything we wanted." At the old Kitchen, he recalled, "all the fish dishes on a given night might come with the same room-temperature couscous because we just didn't have the stove space to make separate accompaniments."

Trattoria and beyond

Meanwhile, Lomando used the original Bistro's vacated premises to realize a longtime dream: "I was tired of having to go into the city to get a properly cooked bowl of pasta," he said. "I was always looking for a place like Trattoria to eat dinner."

Of course, the Bistro menu had always featured -- and continues to feature -- pasta, but at Kitchen A Trattoria, pasta and home-style Italian dishes would be the focus. Prices would rival those at Long Island's scores of pizzeria-restaurants: appetizers, \$9; mains, \$19; pastas, \$12 for a half order, \$20 for generous full. The three-course fixed-price dinner is a steal at \$32.

Lomando splits his time between the two restaurants. The arrangement works because of his dedicated crew -- many of whom have been with him since the beginning. With two restaurants and two children, he has his hands full. But that hasn't stopped him from fantasizing. Long Island, he thinks, could really use a seafood restaurant, where top-quality ingredients are cooked with utter simplicity. "The problem is that good chefs usually want to cook fancy food," he said. "I think about doing a place with fried clams, lobster rolls, fresh fish. Nothing fancy."

Kitchen A Clam Shack? Long Island should be so lucky.

A PEEK AT THE MENUS

The menus change daily at Eric Lomando's two restaurants. Here are some highlights:

KITCHEN A BISTRO

Appetizers: cavatelli with ragù bianco (a "white" meat sauce); sake-marinated white tuna with baby radish salad; seared scallops with cauliflower puree and walnut pesto.

Mains: pork "porterhouse" with lambic-braised red cabbage and Dijon spaetzle; striped bass with sunchoke puree and mushroom broth; lamb two ways with broccoli-basil puree.

Location: 404 North Country Rd., St. James, 631-862-0151, Cash only

KITCHEN A TRATTORIA

Appetizers: crisp chicken thighs in a sweet-and-sour sauce; crostini with pistachio pesto, mortadella and a farm egg.

Pastas and mains: spaghetti all'Amatriciana; butternut squash ravioli with brown butter and sage; quail stuffed with wild mushrooms and leeks; classic lasagna Bolognese; crisp polenta with Brussels sprouts and farm eggs.

Location: 532 North Country Rd., St. James, 631-862-0151, Cash only