

Long Island Pulse Magazine

Long Island Food Reviews By Richard Jay Scholem

LA BOTTEGA
Garden City South
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RATING EXPLANATION	
King of the mountain	★ ★ ★ ★
Wow	★ ★ ★
Mighty fine	★ ★
Ho Hum	★

LA BOTTEGA, in Garden City South, is the Italian restaurant thousands of diners have in their minds' eyes. The spirit of Italy lives in this cute, cozy, candle-lit storefront that serves breakfast, lunch and dinner at gentle prices and does a brisk, up-front, take-out business.

This former Italian gourmet food store, owned by Giuseppe and Marisa Ruta, that has spawned branches in Rockville Centre and Carle Place with another coming in Merrick, is a tiny, cramped, jeans and sneakers kind of place. It's a warm, friendly spot with wine bottles on a shelf just below the ceiling, knick-knacks everywhere, mirrors and pictures of old Italian food scenes on the walls, and staff members wearing "I Love Panini" tee shirts.



Pay attention to that message, because paninis are the big boppers here. There are 40 or 50 of them—all large, warm, crisp, crusty affairs that fill plates and stomachs alike. With prices that start at only \$5 and top out at \$9.50 (most are in the \$6 to \$8 category), it's simple to order one along with a drink and leave with change from a ten-dollar bill.

These multi-ingredient, pressed Italian sandwiches come on ciabatta, krispina, rustic hero and round breads. We ordered four of them: A vegetariano with a generous sprinkling of fresh eggplant, zucchini and tomato resting on a base of Mozzarella; a prosciutto featuring authentic aged Parma ham; a udine with a balanced blend of chicken breast, roasted red onions, Mozzarella and tomato on ciabatta bread; and a Roma that headlined roasted suckling pig, but was dominated by scorching hot peppers. Watch it, when La Bottega lists hot peppers, they mean hot as in incendiary.

Second in number, only to the paninis, are the 17 salads. The two we picked were an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink arugula, mushroom, red onion, corn, bacon, Gorgonzola crumble, and a bruschetta and Gorgonzola sporting endive, roasted pecans and arugula as well as Gorgonzola. Both were dressed with a good balsamic.

One of the other two starters was disappointing: Pan fried pumpkin raviolis with an unwelcome sweetish cream sauce.



Three bruschettas—a soothing ham and cheese, a mellow Portobello and walnut with goat cheese, and roasted shrimp and tomato with those hot peppers that obliterated all the other flavors—batted .667.

The non-panini entrées sampled were not unusual, but were tasty: Cannelloni and tender, medium sized scallops gratin with a powerful red pepper risotto.

Meals begin with warm, thin slices of Italian bread accompanied by noteworthy olive oil and end with an interesting Italian cheese selection (three for \$10, five for \$15) and traditional sweets like a respectable tiramisu, a rich chocolate cake and a too heavy, firm flan.

When full, service at La Bottega is, well, leisurely. The largely Italian wine list is diverse and impressive, but don't expect knowing wine service or forks with desserts (spoons are standard). Remember, La Bottega is friendly, not formal, rustic, not refined.