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THE CULINARY WONDERS OF LONG ISLAND

by Jeff Heilman



With a farming heritage reaching back centuries and harvest ranging from apples to zucchini, Long Island is among New York's most fertile regions. Add its bountiful waters, world-class wines, artisan producers, specialty purveyors, and, most critically, the right talent to bring these ingredients to life, and Long Island is confidently asserting its own culinary identity.

At the vanguard of this success was Guy Reuge. Following early training in his native France, the much decorated chef, enchanted by America, moved to New York City in 1973. Following a decade at hotspots including Maxwell's Plum, La Tulipe, and Tavern on the Green, Reuge and wife Maria (editor of *Gourmet*) in 1975 opened their acclaimed Mirabelle restaurant in St. James on the North Fork of the island.

"We were pioneers in leaving Manhattan for Long Island," says Reuge, likening the region to a culinary "Siberia" in 1983. "There was no decent bread, and we were the first to introduce mesclun salad to the menu." An immediate hit, Mirabelle remained hot until 2008, when Reuge closed up to focus on his family. The break was short-lived. When venerable Long Island food-service company Lessing's approached him about reviving the name at the landmark Three Village Inn in nearby Stony Brook, Reuge said yes.

"We opened in 2009 as a dual concept, pairing fine dining **Restaurant Mirabelle** (150 Main Street, Stony Brook, Tel: 631-751-0555. www.lessings.com) with the more casual bistro-style Mirabelle Tavern," says Reuge, who also serves as corporate chef de cuisine for Lessing's portfolio, including luxe newcomer **Sandbar** (55 Main Street, Tel: 631-498-6188. www.lessings.com) in Cold Spring Harbor. "I've seen and contributed to tremendous change," adds Reuge. "Long Island no longer has to feel jealous of New York City at the table."

Other than truffles and olive oil from Europe, Reuge stays local and regional for his ingredients, including herbs and baby greens from Mirabelle's garden. Classic menu choices, with custom-designed nine-course tasting menus available for private groups, include panisses (chick pea fries with spicy mayo), Duck Mirabelle, and Reuge's legendary ginger almond tart.

The bread on Long Island has improved, too. With four Suffolk County locations, **Blue Duck Bakery** (30 Hampton Road, Southampton, Tel: 631-204-1701. www.blueduckbakerycafe.com) is among North America's top-ranked bakeries. Also supplying restaurants and stores across the wider region, co-owners Keith and Nancy Kouris are emblematic of the diverse artisanal producers who have helped to enhance Long Island's food and beverage story.

"Farm- and sea-to-table are naturals for Long Island," says Rosa Ross, chef-owner of **Scrimshaw** (102 Main Street, Preston's Wharf, Tel: 631-477-8882. www.scrimshawrestaurant.com) in Greenport. "As those movements became popular, Long Island experienced a concurrent mini-boom of boutique and organic farms, especially for livestock. Together, these trends helped shape the menu we offer today."

Born in Hong Kong to one of Macau's founding families, Ross herself has enriched the island's epicurean vocabulary. Raised in a food-centric culture, her subsequent global travels only expanded her culinary perspective.

Learning from an all-star parade of chefs along the way, among them Marcella Hazan, Jacques Pepin, Daniel Boulud, and James Beard (cooking alongside the master himself at his Manhattan townhouse), Ross, ironically, had no designs on being a chef.

That changed in the late 70s, when Ross, then a Manhattan advertis-

ing executive, began teaching cooking classes. Starting with in-home tutorials, she added catering, followed by two decades teaching at Peter Kump's New York Cooking School (now the Institute of Culinary Education). In 2004, with three best-selling cookbooks to her name, Ross and her late husband took the plunge and opened Scrimshaw.

"As a mostly seasonal dining destination, properly provisioning the menu had long challenged Long Island chefs, limiting creativity while perpetuating the competitive disadvantage with New York," says Ross. "With the emergence of those artisanal producers and small farms, however, we could directly access suppliers and hand select our ingredients," she continues. "That gave us more control over our menus, creating more uniqueness and diversity on the plate."

Commanding an unbeatable perch on a historic wharf in Greenport Harbor, Scrimshaw, with its nautical décor, enchants in several ways. Sipping cocktails outside with Shelter Island in the distance is a popular prelude to the dining. At heart, the cuisine is "Asian-influenced modern American with French accents," but Ross is a chef without limits. Like a well-stamped passport, menu items include locally sourced salads of heirloom tomato, beets, and baby greens; Mongolian lamb potstickers; Hong Kong bouillabaisse; Korean tuna tartare; and Long Island sea bass and Peconic Bay oysters.

Enjoying a close relationship with Crescent duck in Aquebogue, Long Island's last remaining major duck producer, Ross has her duck confit spring rolls, duck breast, and Peking duck all in a row.

Custom events are another forte, weddings included. "Especially for gay and lesbian couples," says Ross. "Many of my most loyal, and food savvy, regulars come from Greenport's gay and lesbian community. Her latest venture is a food truck. "I am outfitting a 1963 Chevy truck for serving dumplings and possibly barbecue skewers at area wineries, parties, and events," explains Ross, whose hand-made pork, chicken, vegetarian, and other dumplings are divine.

Before attracting culinary talent, the East End of the island drew New York's creative set, including Andy Warhol as early as 1949, but if this wave had a patriarch, it was John Steinbeck. In 1955, he and wife Elaine made then rough-and-tumble Sag Harbor their home. Their watering holes included Baron Cove's Inn, the hotel-restaurant which became party headquarters for famed writers, actors,



Guy Reuge Duck Sandbar



Chef Guy Reuge

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and musicians through the 70s. Its subsequent decline from dream to dump saw the property undergo several identity changes including Rocco's, a nightclub loathed by locals for its rowdy clientele.

Enter New Jersey hotelier Curtis Bashaw. Specializing in adaptive re-use projects, including the chic transformation of several landmark hotels in Cape May, N.J., Bashaw, who is gay, first frequented the Hamptons in the late 80s. "Red Bar had just opened in Southampton, creating buzz as a major step forward for the local scene," recalls Bashaw of the enduring hotspot. Needless to say, the Hamptons are very different today, including once sleepy Sag Harbor, where Bashaw faced challenges in reviving Baron's Cove.

"Rocco's upset many people, and in a small resort destination, you have to manage the differing expectations of local stakeholders," he says. "The key is to tread lightly, understanding that heritage properties do not exist in a vacuum, but in the context of their legacy," continues Bashaw. "That means finding the right balance between past and present, keeping it timeless and classic and not too 'of the moment,' while also meeting customer preferences of today."

Following a comprehensive two-year overhaul, the new Baron's Cove was unveiled last Memorial Day. With interior decorating from Bashaw's sister Colleen, the fetching property features 67 updated rooms, new lobby bar, and second-level restaurant with outdoor terrace, where, like Steinbeck, Truman Capote and other stars before them, guests can bask in the harbor

sunsets. "The property has been warmly received by both locals and regulars from long ago," reports Bashaw. "It's gratifying to have successfully channeled the venue's vibe as a convivial gathering spot."

The bar and restaurant, naturally, are focal areas. "Think of classic New England lobster shack meets yacht club," says Executive Chef Matty Boudreau. "Like the original Baron's Cove, this is a place for everybody, from lovers to families."

The Boston native, who began his culinary career as a kid selling hot dogs outside Fenway Park, keeps breezy on the plate. "Our seafood-driven menu is all about local sourcing and close supplier relationships," says Boudreau, with fish stew, buffalo oysters, and duck breast among his signature items. "My relationships include Crescent Duck and Montauk Pearls—real East Enders, who pull oysters from the ocean in all weathers."

For produce, it's Satur Farms in Cutchogue, where the owner, along with wife Paulette, is Eberhard Müller, former executive chef at Manhattan temples Le Bernardin, Lutece and Bayard's. "Having a chef-minded purveyor literally in the field is a major advantage," says Boudreau, whose background includes working with Le Bernardin's current chef, Eric Ripert, at the Standard Hotel in Miami.

Baron's Cove's literary light is also back on—author, oenophile, and regular customer Jay McInerney, of *Bright Lights, Big City* fame, created the wine list.

OHEKA CASTLE



Photo: Stefen Turner Photography

Among the top swingers of Gilded Age Long Island was German-born banker and arts patron Otto Herman Kahn, whose 127-room Oheka Castle, originally set on 443 acres, ruled the “Gold Coast.”

Completed in 1919 and later featured in *Citizen Kane*, Oheka (America’s second-largest privately owned residence ever, behind North Carolina’s Biltmore) was party central during the Roaring 20s. Legend has Kahn, whose follies included hunts for golden Easter eggs containing thousand dollar bills, as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s inspiration for Jay Gatsby.

Following the 1929 Wall Street crash and Kahn’s passing in 1934, Oheka successively housed sanitation workers, merchant marines, and military cadets before vandals and the elements invaded.

In 1984, Long Island developer Gary Melius acquired the property, and has since invested millions in its painstaking restoration. With the

work functionally complete, Kahn’s Xanadu lives on as **Oheka Castle Hotel & Estate** (135 West Gate Drive, Huntington, Tel: 631-659-1400. www.oheka.com).

Offering 32 sumptuous suites, Oheka’s renaissance as a place of entertainment includes movie and video shoots, 200-plus straight and gay weddings each year (including one featuring live elephants), and the annual Garden Party in June (period costumes encouraged).

I am happy to report that Melius’ attention to detail included the restaurant. Following a fist-sized scotch in the lively bar, I headed into the adjacent main dining room, settled into a window seat overlooking Oheka’s cobblestone courtyard, and embarked on a confidently guided three-hour meal.

The Tuscan-inspired space, with its exposed brick, faux-wood painted ceiling and warm lighting, set a tastefully subdued stage for Executive Chef Frank Monahan’s European-inspired “upscale comfort” fare.

Opening with bread dipped in gorgonzola fondue, burrata mozzarella, and roasted beet salad, the journey proceeded with pistachio-crusted lamb chops and New York strip with bourbon sauce and port wine shallots. From a handsome wine list, it was an exceptional “Little Giant” Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa. For dessert, chocolate almond cake and affogato (espresso and Amaretto shots poured over vanilla ice cream). Solidly satisfying from start to finish, the experience exceeded all expectations.

With the bar in between, Chaplin’s private dining room offers additional dining space amid walls covered in photos and posters of Charlie Chaplin, a regular back in the day. In the superbly restored living room, Kahn’s portrait beams above the fireplace. Their spirits seem happy that the party is back on. Count me in too.

—Jeff Heilman



Photo: Courtesy of Garden City Hotel

Polo Steakhouse Dining Room

Boudreau and his crew have spent most of the last 15 years on the East End, joining Baron’s Cove after five years at Long Island’s crown jewel **Vine Street Café** (41 South Ferry Road, Garden City, Tel: 631-749-3210. www.vinestreetcafe.com) on Shelter Island.

Another chef on the move is Ari Nieminen. With a Manhattan fine dining résumé that includes Café des Artistes, Water’s Edge, the restaurant at the five-star Four Seasons Hotel, and four years with Guy Reuge at Mirabelle, the Finnish native and CIA graduate is the new Executive Chef at the Garden City Hotel’s **Polo Steakhouse** (45 Seventh Street, New York, Tel: 516-747-3000. www.gardencityhotel.com)

Opened in 1874, the hotel, a Preferred Pride member, was once Long Island’s premier venue for galas and major events. Guests have included Charles Lindbergh, who stayed here before making his trans-Atlantic flight in 1927. Now in its fourth incarnation, Long Island’s only full-service luxury property, with a \$30 million upgrade in 2014,



Scrimshaw Fish Soup



Baron's Cove Scallops



Rosa Ross



Baron's Cove Chef Matty Boudreau

opened Polo Steakhouse in 2013.

Just 15 minutes from Manhattan by train (steps from the hotel), this handsome, clubby restaurant features hand-laid mahogany herringbone floors, deep-cabernet textiles, Ferrari-red chairs, and private wine room. The USDA prime beef, dry-aged for 28 days, sizzles in signature plates like the porterhouse for two and bone-in rib eye.

For Nieminen, accustomed to “going outside of the mold while sticking to the classics” in his time with Reuge and other appointments, putting his brand on Polo is about “honoring steak techniques” with different ingredients. When we spoke, he had just prepared a roasted grouper with brown butter, thyme, and garlic. “My focus is on enhancing the menu with intelligently selected seafood, as pristine as our beef, while tweaking the cooking and presentation,” Nieminen says.

From Stony Brook-native Eric Lomando's celebrated French Mediterranean menu at **Kitchen A Bistro** in St. James (404 North Country Road, Tel: 631-862-0151. www.kitchenabistro.com) to the restaurant and speakeasy at the beguiling **Jedediah Hawkins Inn** (400 South Jamesport Avenue, Tel: 631-722-2900. www.jedediahhawkinsinn.com) in Jamesport, Long Island's culinary map extends in all directions.

Hamptonites flock to **Nick & Toni's** (136 North Main Street, East Hampton, Tel: 631-324-3550. www.nickandtonis.com), where CIA-trained Executive Chef Joseph Realmuto, another champion of local sourcing, harvests from the restaurant's one-acre organic garden for his winning Italian menu. Realmuto also launched three casual Hamptons' spots: **Rowdy Hall**, a French bistro and pub; Mexican takeout-joint **La Fondita**; and Texas-style **Townline BBQ**.

As Guy Reuge noted, Long Island's days of envying New York City are over. The recognition is there: native Long Islander Noah Schwartz has earned “Best Chefs America” honors the last four consecutive years for the seafood-inspired small plates at his celebrated year-round restaurant **Noah's** (136 Front Street, Tel: 631-477-6720. www.chefnoahs.com) in Greenport.

Yet, Long Island chefs are still without a culinary Oscar: the James Beard award. The late Gerry Hayden of Southold's **North Fork Table & Inn** (57225 Main Road, Southold, Tel: 631-765-0177. www.nofoti.com) came close as a three-time finalist. The next hope is three-time semifinalist Reuge himself, who is a 2016 semifinalist for Best Chef, Northeast. Whatever the results, Long Island has definitely arrived as a culinary destination. ■