

FROM DISHWASHER TO RESTAURATEUR

Celebrating 15 years:
It's all been a dream,
the American Dream,
for La Luna owner

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By Lisa Reisman
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LONG BEFORE HE WOULD BECOME OWNER AND EXECUTIVE CHEF of La Luna Ristorante in Branford, Edgar Ortiz was trudging through Kennedy Airport on a December evening in 1986 with a suitcase, a handful of change, and roughly 50 words of English. A student of architecture in Morona Santiago, a province in southeastern Ecuador, he had left behind his family farm, his parents, and 11 brothers and sisters. He was 20.

His plan: to make enough money to go back and finish college and then become an architect or teacher, he recalled during a busy lunch last week at La Luna, which will celebrate its 15th anniversary this Saturday with a free glass of champagne for its patrons.

At first, young Ortiz worked at a sewing factory in New York, staying with an uncle. Then he cleaned apartment houses in New Jersey. The next stop: a New York employment agency which placed him at an East Windsor Chinese restaurant, washing dishes.

A year later, he heard from a friend of an opening for a dishwasher at Twin Pines Diner in East Haven. After a few months, his boss told him what Ortiz had been sensing all along, what had kept him in the U.S. far longer



Peter Casolino/Register photos

Owner Edgar Ortiz, left, with his brother, manager Diego Ortiz, have seen their business, La Luna Ristorante, grow into a success during the past 15 years. Below, the lunch crowd enjoys a meal at the Branford restaurant.

than he had intended: that he was too smart to be washing dishes, or cleaning houses, for that matter.

If he learned the menu, the boss would train him to be a line cook. "Men don't cook," was Ortiz's reply. Then he thought better of it.

With a few years of experience, he found himself a commodity. He did a stint at a diner in Hamden before Parthenon Diner hired him away. Gradually, he made his way up the ladder



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to head chef. Meanwhile, at night he toiled as a chef at Lucciano's in Branford, which has since closed, and Quattro's in Guilford, often pulling 18-hour work days.

"I wanted to make sure my family was taken care of," said Ortiz, who became an American citizen 12 years ago. But there's another reason for his steely work ethic, one that's at once rooted

in his years growing up on a farm and explains his good-humored calm in the frenetic life of a restaurant owner and executive chef: an understanding that you can only control the effort you expend, not the result.

"That's what it's all about," said Ortiz, his voice still bearing a slight accent, as a waiter bustled by, leaving in his wake a rich, garlicky aroma. "Work hard. Show

up every day, whatever your condition. Nobody is going to do it for you. And then whatever happens happens."

It's that philosophy that had Parthenon Diner owner John Sousoulas in early 1997 discussing with Ortiz the idea of opening up a new upscale Italian restaurant — a rarity on the shoreline back then — and not long after, asking him to partner with him and businessman Jerry

Nero on the enterprise.

And so it was that on Dec. 22, 1997, La Luna Ristorante opened, and to rave reviews. In 1998, the New Haven Advocate named La Luna as Greater New Haven's Best New Restaurant, extolling its freshly made pastas and sauces and its 230-seat capacity affording little to no wait, adding, however, that "word of mouth has been so glowing from day one that the new res-

taurant has occasionally been overwhelmed."

Since 1999, when Ortiz assumed full ownership, he's introduced Karaoke Night and twice-weekly Happy Hours, in addition to live entertainment on Friday and Saturday nights featuring some of the area's most popular bands. La Luna also produces its own original brand of wine in Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio, and Merlot, among other

varieties.

The signature innovation of Ortiz, though, has been the Sunday buffet brunch in Branford. "No one used to do brunch in town," he said with an impish grin. "So I did." At the beginning, it was a challenge, with preparations for the 200 to 300 reservations each Sunday, often beginning in the early morning hours.

It paid off. Both Connecticut Magazine

and the New Haven Advocate Readers' Poll have named La Luna Ristorante Best Brunch in New Haven County every year since 2007, the Advocate noting in 2011 the "smorgasbord of late-breakfast and early-lunch foods that make it worth waking up on Sunday." Combine that with a second place ranking in the Advocate's Italian Restaurant category last year, in which Ortiz takes particular pride, given the number of Italian restaurants now in the area.

No wonder Bill Miller's Castle, the celebrated Branford venue for banquets, fundraisers, and weddings, hired La Luna to be its main caterer in 2009. Or that this past September, a new La Luna opened in Mystic.

The chef at Mystic? Ortiz's younger brother Gennaro. The manager? Another younger brother, Vinicio. He brought them to Connecticut, along with brother Diego, who manages the Branford La Luna. His sister Kathy runs Olympia Diner in New Haven; Ortiz bought it for her. Another sister, Yvonne, was working at Dunkin' Donuts when Ortiz urged her to go to school, any school. She now owns Red Scissors Hair Salon in East Haven.

As for his other brothers, they weren't available. Among them: a doctor in Ecuador and a pilot in Florida.

“This wasn’t exactly my plan,” said Ortiz as his army of wait staff cleared away dishes, adding that he hopes his son forges his own path, as a doctor, maybe, or a lawyer or a teacher. “But it’s okay. I think it turned out pretty well.”

La Luna Ristorante, 168 North Main St., Branford 203-483-9995. www.lalunact.com.