

# Out on her own

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By Todd Lyon

Once again I find myself writing about an excellent restaurant in Milford, and what a revelation it is: bin 100, an alluring new eatery where the wines of owner Elena Fusco meet the cuisine of Chef Roldao Carvalho.

You probably know them both: Elena Fusco is a member of the Iannaccone family, sister of both Chef Gerry, who owns Goodfella's and Tenderloin, and Chef Ralph, who owns Ristorante Luce in Hamden. Born into a food family, she grew up in Wooster Square among a loving tribe that included six brothers, a sister and a large extended family within walking distance.

"My uncle would get the bread delivery for the whole neighborhood," recalls Elena, "and we'd go pick up 10 loaves every day, just to feed our family. On Sunday, it was more."

Elena's restaurant odyssey began when, while a student at SCSU, she took a part-time job as a coat-check girl at Topper's, a restaurant/nightclub in Hamden co-owned by her brother Ralph.

"It was great," she recalls. "I made tons of money, and everybody bought me drinks." When she started waitressing and pulling down \$1,000 a week, Elena was hooked on the fast-paced lifestyle. Though she tried other careers over the years - retail clerk, X-ray tech, she always returned to the restaurant world, and throughout the '80s and '90s worked at such eateries as Annie's Firehouse Soup Kitchen, Adriana's, Gennaro's Ristorante D'Amalfi and, finally in 1992, Raffaello's, brother Ralph's Hamden restaurant.

Although she'd managed wine lists before, it was at Raffaello's that Elena started exploring wines in a profound way. "I was a long way from sipping Sutter Home White Zinfandel at Topper's," she laughs.

In 1994, Raffaello's won its first of many Wine Spectator Awards; in 1998, with a list of more than 1,000 bottles, the cellar was upgraded to a Best of Award of Excellence. "To this day, there are only about 700 of those handed out worldwide," notes Elena.

Though she stayed on at Raffaello's, which was eventually remodeled and renamed Ristorante Luce, Elena designed and managed wine lists for brother Gerry at Tenderloin and nephew Paul at Assaggio's, both in Branford.

"I'd been dreaming of having my own business for a long time," recalls Elena, "but it was really hard to leave my brother Ralph." However, as a single mom, she needed to make a stable life for her son and daughter, and so on April 12 of 2006, she took a ride. "I wanted to find something in Orange or Milford," she recalls, "and this place jumped out at me. I knew it was right."

The place was a yoga studio in a strip mall on Route 1 in Milford, near the Devon section. "This was where I wanted to be," she says, and so the long, long process began. She signed a lease in July of '06; finally got a building permit in April '07; hired and lost a chef who couldn't wait any longer; then, happily, crossed paths with Chef Roldao Carvalho, a culinary star in his own right.

Roldao grew up in Bridgeport with Portuguese parents who had come to this country in 1977. Though he had a boyhood interest in cooking, he never thought he'd do it professionally; in fact, he enrolled at Sacred Heart University for its soccer program. "I couldn't see myself going pro," he recalls, and so he began a search for "something that was there all along."

He spent years as a UPS driver, and started cooking at home. "I watched 'The Galloping Gourmet' on TV, and it really opened my eyes, I can do this!"

Roldao started exploring culinary schools, and happened to be visiting the French Culinary Institute in New York City on the very day that they had a cancellation for the upcoming semester. "Two weeks later, I was in," he recalls.

The intense, six-month program (he was second in his class) led to a whirlwind of professional, learn-on-the-job experiences that brought him to La Colline Verte in Greenwich, Picholine in Manhattan (working with Terrance Brennan), Pika Tapas and Pacifico in New Haven, Il Palio in Shelton and many other colorful, highly rated eateries where the chef learned techniques of Spain, Italy, China, South America and more. He also traveled, notably to a villa in Italy, where he lived and worked with the cook of the house for three weeks.

When Roldao met with Elena, the time was right for him to flex his multicultural muscles. The two got together, and he presented her with three adaptations of a single dish - a Spanish version, an Asian version and a mainstream version - then choose the best of all worlds.

Thus, Bin 100's menu is a feast of earthly delights, and includes such magical dishes as Lamb Carpaccio with potato foam; Rabbit Fabada with butter beans, chorizo and blood sausage; a Winter Caprese Salad with roasted tomatoes; Seven-Hour Beef Short Ribs with mascarpone polenta; and Crispy King Salmon with sweet potato risotto, arugula and prosciutto.

It's an amazing array of flavors, served in a wonderful setting with curved walls and soft lighting, warm wood and splashes of rich fabric.

The food works, the wine works, the interior works, the service is impeccable, and clearly, the collaboration between Elena Fusco and Roldao Carvalho is meant to be. Bin 100 has absolutely expanded my culinary mind, and I can't wait to visit there again.