

Dining Out

A Love Story In Its Name

By Raymond Palma

Passersby who are unfamiliar with Cantusa restaurant in Speonk might be excused for thinking it's an Italian or Spanish restaurant because of its name.

In point of fact, the name of the restaurant is derived from what the owners, Craig and Isabelle Cohen, a husband and wife team, call their love story. He's from Merrick, a former accountant who grew up summers in Westhampton Beach running his family's business on Main Street, Transitions, from the time when he was 16. She's a Canadian who worked in various positions in the food service industry, as a waitress and bartender. They met while he was on vacation in Canada. The couple translates the name of the restaurant, Cantusa, as a joining together of Canada and the USA—"It's our love story," says Isabelle.

There have been a number of restaurants on the site in recent years: Seasons, Aegean and, most recently, the Millstone Grill. The Cohens, who have been operating their restaurant since March, said in an interview last week that they hope to attract a "new, fun crowd" to their 72-seat restaurant with their slogan, "dine, quench, thrill and chill."

In an effort to enhance that hoped-for sense of fun in Cantusa's atmosphere, the couple brought in their own décor with green and pink walls in contrast with white linen tablecloths. In the bar room, they had local artists Brian Gutman and Kathy Warno paint huge arches depicting an outside garden and pastoral scene. A pond has been installed outdoors that can be viewed from both the bar and the cigar lounge, which is currently being renovated—it used to be a pizzeria.

The cigar lounge will also accommodate dancing for diners who want to kick up their heels. Currently, live music on Friday consists of a solo guitar player, while on Saturday a duo performs songs from Patsy Cline to Lenny Kravitz to original music.

Regarding the diverse menu, best described as American cuisine, "It's eclectic; we didn't want it to be a specific style," says Isabelle. Cantusa is currently open for dinner only.

The chef, Vincent Barbuto, formerly of Big Daddy's in Massapequa, is from Ronkonkoma.

The dining experience at Cantusa



Isabelle and Craig Cohen, the husband and wife team in charge of Cantusa restaurant in Speonk, seated in front of a mural they commissioned for the space. —Ray Palma

begins with appetizers such as pulled pork with sweet vinegar slaw (\$6) or pistachio battered shrimp with lemon, garlic, and basil vinegar (\$8), both favorites of the restaurateurs. A more offbeat appetizer is the beer chili with veal and wheat berries (\$6).

For those in the mood for some lighter fare, Cantusa offers a separate bar menu. Included are such items as a half-pound seasoned chopped steak burger served on an English muffin with parsnip fries, homemade pickle and ancho chili catsup (\$7) or the half-pound seasoned pork pull with homemade fresh mozzarella and banana served wrapped in a chili tortilla with parsnip fries, homemade pickle and ancho chili catsup (\$8). On Fridays from 5 to 7 p.m., diners can take advantage of a free bar menu.

Entrées run from \$16 to \$27, or sometimes higher depending on specials. One of the most frequently ordered dishes is the braised salmon filet with black sesame crust in ginger garlic soy broth with scallion and watercress cake (\$18). Another favorite is the pecan crusted catfish with lemon honey jalapeno tartar sauce served with wild rice and salad (\$16).

On Mondays and Thursdays, there is a fixed price special: For \$22, diners can enjoy a three-course dinner consisting of soup or salad, an entrée, and dessert.

On Sunday, Cantusa offers a buffet for \$22, with the dishes to choose from changed each week. Last Sunday, the buffet items consisted of a "cannibal soup" loaded with pork, veal and beef, fresh fruit and mesclun salad, honey spare ribs, swordfish kabobs, pork and apple stew and sautéed vegetables, to name a few choices.

The dessert menu includes such offerings as "chocolate slug," a flourless fudge-like chocolate cake (\$8) and an apple brown betty served hot over ice cream (\$6).

Take-out is available from the same menu at the same prices. Private parties and catering are also available.

Two patrons sitting at the bar last weekend couldn't say enough good things about Cantusa: "We're Manhattanites, we're boaters. Sometimes on bad weather days we just come out here by boat from Manhattan to East-

Cantusa

- 190 Montauk Highway, Speonk
- Open Thursday to Monday, 5 to 11 p.m.
- Reservations recommended for 6 or more people.
- Most major credit cards.
- Handicapped accessible.
- 325-9024

port because we enjoy this place. We've been here every weekend." The two patrons went on to offer an example of what a friendly place Cantusa is, recalling how on one particular weekend when they had had too much to drink, another patron who had a limousine graciously drove them home.

Chef Bernard Brulé Available for Private Functions

After 20 years of culinary experience in Europe with such clients as Christina Onassis and Baroness Guy de Rothschild, France's chef Bernard Brulé is available for private events and functions on the East End.

Mr. Brulé has experience in Moroccan, Indian, Italian and other ethnic cuisine and will tailor his menus to fit clients' personal tastes. Interested parties may contact Mr. Brulé at 329-6921.

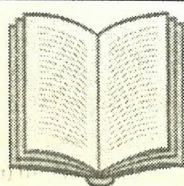
Play on Film

(Continued from Page B1)

as the producer, Mr. Wiesinger as the writer, Jane Lowe as the lead actress, and Ms. Ridgeway as the ingenue. Movie-goers will recognize Mr. O'Halloran from his work in Kevin Smith films like "Clerks" and "Chasing Amy." The actor worked with Ms. Ridgeway at the New Jersey Repertory theatre company. "He's a really funny guy," said Mr. Wiesinger. "We thought he'd make a perfect movie producer."

Rob Barron will direct the play. A Yale graduate and member of the Actors Studio, Mr. Barron worked with Mr. Wiesinger in 1995 and again in 1996 on a production of "Around the World in 80 Days."

Director, actors and crew have been



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