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Taste of the Town

In Good Hands

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Get to Know Oliveto's New Chef, Jonah Rhodehamel

Recent emigres to the East Bay might find it hard to believe that there was a time not long ago when even adventurous diners could only name a few local chefs. Sure, anyone who had ever eaten at Lo Coco's on Piedmont had probably been charmed by owner, chef and server Maria LoCoco, and anyone fond of a good, cheap breakfast had favorite Korean-American diner owners, or at least fond memories of Ozzie's Soda Fountain.

But the era of Oakland dining establishments helmed by A-list chefs is a relatively recent phenomenon. Consequently, it owes a debt to a handful of pioneering restaurants and chefs, with Oliveto perhaps foremost among those establishments. Under the steadily evolving leadership of chefs Michael Tusk, Paul Bertolli and Paul Canales — all of whom attained a level of name recognition previously rare in Oakland — Oliveto has acquired a national reputation as a purveyor of regional Italian cuisine. Over the past decade, it also has distinguished itself as my personal favorite East Bay dining experience.

Now, as the restaurant celebrates its first quarter-century in business, the kitchen is still fresh from a changing of the guard. Last December, Canales was replaced as executive chef by 28-year-old Jonah Rhodehamel, a veteran of the San Francisco restaurants La Folie, Quince, Zinnia and Americano. And unlike the prior transitions between chefs Tusk, Bertolli and Canales — whose tenures overlapped — Rhodehamel arrived as an outsider, albeit one who worked under Tusk during his brief time at Quince.

Happily, recent visits to the upstairs restaurant and downstairs cafe found Oliveto squarely committed to the culinary values that have distinguished the 25-year reign of owners Maggie and Bob Klein. And during a brief interview, Rhodehamel himself promised evolution but not revolution, from the restaurant's annual Whole Hog, Beef and Tomato Dinners to what the new chef called a renewed emphasis on regional Italian traditions. "The Kleins found me, and this was a dream come true," he says. "It was exactly the kind of restaurant opportunity I was looking for."

Diners not already aware of the new regime could search long and hard without finding evidence of such a change. For instance, Oliveto's 22nd-annual Tomato Dinner provided continuity, from the packed house right down to the Maggie Klein watercolors on the menu — both yearly traditions.

Yet close inspection of the Aug. 23–26 menu revealed a profusion of changes from tomato dinners past, although some were an obvious response to the oddities of the cool 2011 growing season. This year, Oliveto was forced to break its tomato dinners into two separate series, one for the early-season crop, and another for the later-ripening varieties.

One excellent new dish was the Black Prince tomato tart with ricotta and Parmesan cheeses (\$13). The crunchy tart dough was filled

with a housemade sheeps' milk ricotta and tomatoes roasted for 12 hours at 200 degrees. It was luscious. Another standout appetizer was the stuffed Monterey Bay squid (\$13.50), four plump cephalopods filled with onions, celery, carrots, tarragon, parsley, olive oil and toasted bread, served atop spicy Principe Borghese tomato sauce and chewy farro.

The vellutata of Early Girl tomatoes (\$10.50) was a velvety blended soup with a deep, rich consistency that came with a special bonus bite: a tiny Cabot Clothbound cheddar panino served on a laughably huge plate. Our other soup, a brodetto of tomato (\$13.50), was less successful. A simple Italian seafood stew in which the tomatoes were strained through cheesecloth until distilled into a clear broth, it didn't quite coalesce with the accompanying Sun Gold tomatoes, lemon verbena and barely poached white shrimp. And like the playful panino, the brodetto was ridiculously dwarfed by the giant bowl in which it came.

The only dish we ordered that had appeared in some variation at the 2010 or 2009 tomato dinners was the spit-roasted rabbit with fried Cetriolo tomatoes (\$28). The pancetta-wrapped rabbit loins and belly flaps were tender and juicy, and I would eat shoe leather wrapped in crispy pancetta. But the flavor of the breaded stuffing was too subtle to stand out. On the other hand, the tomato-braised beef short ribs (\$29) were tender and succulent and paired well with creamy Red Flint corn polenta, Roma tomato jam and beef sugo. And I enjoyed the Pappardelle rosse (\$17.50), wide flat noodles with a red tint acquired from a conserva of sundried tomatoes, garlic, red onions and olive oil, and served with San Marzano tomato-braised beef shoulder, hot pepper and oregano. Best of all was Judy's involtini of eggplant (\$25). A quarter-inch-thick slice of eggplant rolled into a cylinder around fresh Mozzarella and basil, its salty tang nicely complemented by the accompanying arugula salad and Brandywine and Cherokee Purple tomatoes.

Tomatoes also were used to splendid effect in both of our desserts. The moist Bittersweet Valrhona chocolate and Brandywine tomato-caramel tart (\$9) made a compelling argument for the routine inclusion of tomatoes in chocolate tarts and cakes; the acid of the tomatoes synchronized perfectly with the dark chocolate. And the subtle, grassy essence of the tomato leaf panna cotta (\$8) was shown off by the accompanying candy-coated Sun Gold tomatoes and a thin tomato caramel made from the brodetto. This dessert deserves a regular place alongside flan as an everyday offering.

We subsequently visited the informal downstairs cafe during the middle of a busy Friday lunch, scoring the sole free table. Naturally, lunch began with a salumi platter (\$12), consisting of five slices each of dry cured felino, nostrano, vasca and Milano. It was a satisfying starter, although I cannot really explain the different cuts' virtues. Cleiton's housemade cannelloni (\$15) was cooked just right; the pasta's ever-so-slight crust yielded a smooth and creamy filling consisting of soft chunks of leeks and cauliflower braised in white wine. And the thin, whole-grain pizza napoletana (\$15) was bubbly and slightly crisp in places, with the anchovies, oregano and Parmesan seasoned by a joyously random dose of hot peppers. It was enough to make me reconsider my general antipathy toward pizza.

Can a new chef scarcely older than one of Oakland's most venerable restaurants parachute in from San Francisco and pay homage to its worthy traditions while placing his own stamp upon the menu? Yes, he can.

Get to know his name.

Oliveto Restaurant & Cafe. Italian. 5655 College Ave., Oakland, (510) 547-5356.

Cafe serves breakfast, lunch and dinner Mon.–Sun. Restaurant serves lunch Mon.–Fri., dinner Mon.–Sun. www.oliveto.com