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LONG ISLAND DINING | HUNTINGTON

## A Hot Spot That Serves Italian and Innovation

By JOANNE STARKEY

**P**ORTO VIVO — lively port in Italian — lives up to half its name. It is about a mile from Huntington Harbor, but it is definitely lively. Ever since Serena Williams was spotted dining there shortly after its opening in August, celebrities and regular folks like have flocked to the restaurant, turning it into Huntington's latest hot spot. It doesn't hurt that Steven Lecchi, the executive chef, used to be the chef at Jennifer Lopez and Marc Anthony.

Porto Vivo deserves its popularity. It strikingly beautiful and serves memorable food at reasonable prices.

The building that houses the restaurant has good bones: brick walls and soaring-to-ceiling windows. In the middle of the main dining room are four leather booths with their backs to one another, rising from the center of the foursome a massive arrangement of branches, palm fronds and exotic blooms.

Up a half story is an appealing lounge with a leather couch and chairs, a handful of high tables, a black marble bar and a small patio for smokers' convenience. On the third level is another dining room, with a gas fire, that is a bit quieter than the downstairs room.

The menu is a mix of largely Italian import food and innovative fare, along with a roster of certified Angus steaks. Mr. Lecchi, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, worked at Lespasse and Christen's in Manhattan, was executive chef at Basilio in Southampton and spent six years cooking at various Northern Italian restaurants. The best dish we tried was the appe-



tizer of grilled Spanish octopus. The shards of snowy white, fork-tender seafood were tossed in a salad of frisée, onion, capers and chopped tomatoes.

Vying for top honors was an opener of polenta, creamy with fontina cheese and laced with strips of portobello mushrooms. A salad of tomato and mozzarella opened our eyes to the potential of this usually boring offering. The tomatoes were wedges of deep red heirlooms alternating with fresh mozzarella, made daily in the restaurant.

Skate, one of my favorite entrees, is one of the choices on the three-course prix fixe meal (\$25) offered on Mondays. The flesh of the sautéed fish, as flaky and white as cod, sat atop a very fresh-tasting sauce of grape tomatoes, capers and pancetta and was accompanied by airy spinach gnocchi. A moist braised chicken paired with three super-light veal meatballs was another good choice from that menu.

We were less impressed with the bucatini (fat spaghetti) in an amatriciana sauce of tomatoes, prosciutto and pancetta. It didn't pack the flavor punch

tions as high as \$850, but there is also a list of 17 bottles under \$30, plus a dozen by the glass (\$9 to \$14).

**THE BILL** Sunday brunch entrees, \$13 to \$44. Dinner entrees, \$14 to \$44. Three-course prix fixe on Mondays, \$25. American Express, Visa, MasterCard and Discover are accepted.

**WHAT WE LIKED** Grilled octopus, polenta, mozzarella and tomatoes, sautéed skate, braised chicken and veal meatballs, grilled branzino, rib-eye steak, osso buco, all desserts.

**IF YOU GO** Sunday brunch, 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Dinner: 5:30 to 11 p.m. Sunday to Thursday, till midnight Friday and Saturday. Reservations are a must (at least a week in advance for weekends).

### Porto Vivo

7 Gerard Street  
Huntington  
(631) 383-8486  
porto-vivo.com

#### VERY GOOD

**THE SCENE** Striking multistory space. The dining room on the first floor is where the action is; the one on the third floor is much quieter. Wheelchair access.

**THE CROWD** Spirited couples and small groups; few children. Servers are affable.

**THE BAR** A separate room of the restaurant, on its own level, with high tables, a lovely circular bar and leather chairs and couch. Voluminous wine list with selec-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAXINE HICKS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

**IT'S COOKING** The main dining room at Porto Vivo. The creamy tiramisu, far left, is among the excellent dessert

this dish usually delivers. Better selections were the grilled branzino under a lemon-sparked arugula salad, a special of tender osso buco with creamy risotto Milanese, and a beautifully marinated rib-eye steak (\$29) with a chimichurri sauce on the side. Unlike most entrees, steaks here are not served with vegetables, but an à la carte selection of roasted brussels sprouts with pancetta, onions and apple (\$7) was a splendid accompaniment.

It's possible to pay as much as \$44 for an entree here (strip steak), but diners don't have to be that extravagant. There are pasta entrees as low as \$14. Many meat and fish dishes are also reasonably priced: chicken dishes \$17 to \$19, wild salmon \$21, and veal Milanese \$21.

Desserts are impressive. We loved the zeppole with creamy orange-scented ricotta centers, which arrived with a strawberry dipping sauce. Also worthy were the creamy tiramisu topped with chocolate shavings; a plate of assorted tangy sorbets and sabayon-glazed fruits; and the cheesecake garnished with figs in port wine sauce. The restaurant's signature dessert is a very good chocolate soufflé, which takes 15 to 20 minutes to prepare. It would have been nice if someone had mentioned the dessert early in the evening so that we didn't have to wait.

Service was friendly but slow on both visits; the staff was also lax about refilling water glasses. Porto Vivo is well on its way to a rating of excellent. Tightening the service would take it there.