THE MIDDLETOWN PRESS

IF YOU GO

The shop is open six days a week, from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday and from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday. The Web site is lapiastra.com.

Food shop offers gourmet dishes to 'reheat and eat'

By JEFF MILL
PRESS STAFF

Brenda De Los Santos | The Middletown Press

Owner and chef Lauren DeLisa poses at LaPiastra, which she opened six months ago in Cromwell.

CROMWELL — In an increasingly hectic world, many people only have time to eat and run. Lauren DeLisa has an idea to help make that process a little less hectic: it's called "Reheat and Eat."

That's the motto of LaPiastra, a "gourmet to-go and catering" operation, at 25 Shunpike Road, at the rear of Mortenson's Ice Cream shop.

DeLisa, a West Hartford native, is the owner and executive chef. LaPiastra, which occupies the former home of Cromwell Kitchen, offers a broad array, 50 items, of "pre-packaged meals in oven- and microwave-safe containers."

The wide-ranging, Italian-based menu offers soups, salads, pasta dishes, side orders and dinner plates, including pork medallions with brandied apples and onions and salmon over orzo, as well as five monthly specials.

The food is prepared daily on site, with the work split among DeLisa and two prep chefs who come in each day.

Stopping in at the cozy site enables a visitor to meet the best thing that's not on the menu: DeLisa herself. She couples a warm, winning smile and a quick wit with an easy personal style that served her well during several years on television in Connecticut and Florida.

"I've done quite a few things" en route from children's television on Channel 20 in Waterbury to creating a ready-to-go apricot chicken salad and eggplant rollatini at LaPiastra.

The name means "plate" or "large stone platter," which gave rise to the store's motto, "The PLATE is all you need."

Cooking came easily to DeLisa.

"I grew up in an Italian family," she said, so eating and cooking are in her DNA. The spirit of her grandmother — her "Nana" — hovers over everything she does.

And while her mother wasn't Italian, "she entertained all the time" when she was married to DeLisa's father, Bob.

With his three brothers, Bob DeLisa owned several bars and restaurants in the 1970s, including the Knickerbocker Pub and Fast Eddie's.

"I always had the bug to be an entrepreneur," DeLisa said. "My dad was an entrepreneur and my uncles were a bunch of entertainers, and food is part of our culture."

En route, there was the TV career, followed by TV sales, working for her father's management consultant and job recruiting business and a stint as executive director of the Connecticut Tooling and Machining Association.

During the stints with her father and while she was at the CTMA, DeLisa was "doing catering on the side."

She felt the tug of cooking, though, and when she asked her father for his advice, it was succinct: "Do what you want to do — and get paid for it."

She began focusing on cooking, and she made an arrangement with the owner of Manchester grocery store to carry her food.

"I did that for two years so I could make my mistakes," she said.

Then a friend who owns The Wild Raspberry gourmet market in the Crossroads Shopping Plaza alerted her Cromwell Kitchen was thinking of moving. "I went into this with this fabulous business plan!" DeLisa recalled.

Fabulous business plan meet looming banking crisis.

"I had to get creative" in a hurry, she acknowledged. She survived that test, and is now happily ensconced in her shop. And she already has a second outlet for her food at the Gourmet Connection in Westbrook.

What's popular? In these uncertain times, DeLisa said, "People really like comfort food." In particular, she said, "I make a 'Not Your Mother's Meatloaf.' We can't keep it on the shelf!"

For information, see www.lapiastra.com.