## FROM DISHWASHER TO RESTAURATEUR

Celebrating 15 years:
It's all been a dream,
the American Dream,

for La Luna owner 12/21/12

By Lisa Reisman Special to the Times

EXECUTIVE CHEF of La Luna
Ristorante in Branford, Edgar
Ortiz was trudging through
Kennedy Airport on a December
evening in 1986 with a suitcase,
a handful of change, and roughly
50 words of English. A student of
architecture in Morona Santiago,
a province in southeastern
Ecuador, he had left behind his
family farm, his parents, and 11
brothers and sisters. He was 20.

His plan: to make enough money to go back and finish college and then become an architect or teacher, he recalled during a busy lunch last week at La Luna, which will celebrate its 15th anniversary this Saturday with a free glass of champagne for its patrons.

At first, young Ortiz worked at a sewing factory in New York, staying with an uncle. Then he cleaned apartment houses in New Jersey. The next stop: a New York, employment agency which placed him at an East Windsor Chinese restaurant, washing dishes.

A year later, he heard from a friend of an opening for a dishwasher at Twin Pines Diner in East Haven. After a few months, his boss told him what Ortiz had been sensing all along, what had kept him in the U.S. far longer



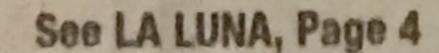
Peter Casolino/Register photos

Owner Edgar Ortiz, left, with his brother, manager Diego Ortiz, have seen their business, La Luna Ristorante, grow into a success during the past 15 years. Below, the lunch crowd enjoys a meal at the Branford restaurant.

than he had intended: that he was too smart to be washing dishes, or cleaning houses, for that matter.

If he learned the menu, the boss would train him to be a line cook. "Men don't cook," was Ortiz's reply. Then he thought better of it.

With a few years of experience, he found himself a commodity. He did a stint at a diner in Hamden before Parthenon Diner hired him away. Gradually, he made his way up the ladder





## La Luna: Celebrating 15 years of the American dream

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to head chef. Meanwhile, at night he toiled as a chef at Lucciano's in Branford, which has since closed, and Quattro's in Guilford, often pulling 18-hour work days.

my family was taken make sure my family was taken care of," said Ortiz, who became an American citizen 12 years ago. But there's another reason for his steely work ethic, one that's at once rooted

in his years growing up on a farm and explains his good-humored calm in the frenetic life of a restaurant owner and executive chef: an understanding that you can only control the effort you expend, not the result.

"That's what it's all about," said Ortiz, his voice still bearing a slight accent, as a waiter bustled by, leaving in his wake a rich, garlicky aroma. "Work hard. Show

up every day, whatever your condition. Nobody is going to do it for you. And then whatever happens happens."

It's that philosophy
that had Parthenon Diner
owner John Sousoulas in
early 1997 discussing with
Ortiz the idea of opening
up a new upscale Italian
restaurant — a rarity on
the shoreline back then —
and not long after, asking
him to partner with him
and businessman Jerry

Nero on the enterprise.

And so it was that on Dec. 22, 1997, La Luna Ristorante opened, and to rave reviews. In 1998, the New Haven Advocate named La Luna as Greater New Haven's Best New Restaurant, extolling its freshly made pastas and sauces and its 230-seat capacity affording little to no wait, adding, however. that "word of mouth has been so glowing from day one that the new restaurant has occasionally been overwhelmed."

Since 1999, when Ortiz assumed full ownership. he's introduced Karaoke Night and twice-weekly Happy Hours, in addition to live entertainment on Friday and Saturday nights featuring some of the area's most popular bands. La Luna also produces its own original brand of wine in Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio, and Merlot, among other

varieties.

The signature innovation of Onliz, through, has been the Sunday bullet. brumch in Brantond. "No one used to do brunch in town," be said with an imposts grim. "So i dist." At the beginning, it was a challenge, with preponstions for the 200 to 300 perervations each Sunday. often beginning in the early mounting hours.

It paid off. Both Connecticut Magazzine

and the New Haven Advocate Readers' Poll have named La Luna Ristorante Best Brunch in New Haven County every year since 2007, the Advocate noting in 2011 the "smorgasbord of latebreakfast and early-lunch foods that make it worth waking up on Sunday." Combine that with a second place ranking in the Advocate's Italian Restaurant category last year, in which Ortiz takes particular pride, given the number of Italian restaurants now in the area.

No wonder Bill Miller's Castle, the celebrated Branford venue for banquets, fundraisers, and weddings, hired La Luna to be its main caterer in 2009. Or that this past September, a new La Luna opened in Mystic.

The chef at Mystic? Ortiz's younger brother Gennaro. The manager? Another younger brother, Vinicio. He brought them to Connecticut, along with brother Diego, who manages the Branford La Luna. His sister Kathy runs Olympia Diner in New Haven; Ortiz bought it for her. Another sister, Yvonne, was working at Dunkin' Donuts when Ortiz urged her to go to school, any school. She now owns Red Scissors Hair Salon in East Haven.

As for his other brothers, they weren't available. Among them: a doctor in Ecuador and a pilot in Florida

"This wasn't exactly my plan," said Ortiz as his army of wait staff cleared away dishes, adding that he hopes his son forges his own path, as a doctor, maybe, or a lawyer or a teacher. "But it's okay. I think it turned out pretty well."

La Luna Ristorante, 168 North Main St., Branford 203-483-9995. www.lalunact.com.