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Managing Chef Andrew Hansen (left) and Chef/Owner of Cafe Miranda, Kerry Altiero

Cafe Miranda, which opened in 1993, set the standard for Rockland's benchmark of culinary excellence for year-to come, and was one of the first open kitchens around. Miranda was also the first restaurant in the state to have a wood fired brick oven in the kitchen. Kerry Altiero won't tell you these facts right away, because his focus is more on his philosophical and emotional connection to his food and all that it represents.

Plus, he'd rather tell you what Elvis is doing taking up residence in his restaurant's bathroom, where all those different and kitschy salt and pepper shakers which add character to his dining tables come from, what's up with all the pink flamingoes, or how the magic of Cafe Miranda is that it operates on 'heart and soul.'

Rockland's Owl Benevolent and Fraternal Club was once a place where sailors and locals came to gamble, and tables were bolted down to the floor. Kerry Altiero purchased and completely transformed this rundown building, turning it into Cafe Miranda, named after the memory of his beloved pet dog. Miranda's bowl, collar, and ashes are

given a shrine in the restaurant. And the Owl Club's former honor roll now makes an interesting conversation piece hanging above the bar.

In fact, everywhere you turn in Cafe Miranda there are little shrines and tributes to the important connections in Kerry's life.

Hotshots Auntie Fluffie and Nana Connie are smiling proudly on Kerry from a wall of fame, and can be ordered up as menu item titles. They were a big influence on Kerry's start in the art of cooking.

"Nana Connie, of Italian-American heritage, made these huge dinners on a big wooden table in the basement. In those days, there was a formal kitchen to eat in, and a separate workshop room where the noodle production for the week happened." Kerry says his Miranda kitchen is laid out to operate at full throttle, which increases the frenetic fun. And similar to Nana's noodle production and his parent's work in the garment industry, his mind runs naturally in production mode. Kerry recalls his grandmother making pasta, and the pasta maker she used is the one he still uses in his home today. It's one of his talismans, his little nod of thanks to her.

"She'd have a juice glass of wine she'd sip on while pasta and gravy making, saying 'wine makes the cook happy and so the macaroni and the gravy (sauce) are happy.' I remember being so little that I couldn't even reach the table, and she'd say 'Reach up and touch the flour, Kerry.' It was the magic of food at my fingertips. I come from a background where real food was made by real people with heart and soul. Christmas eve dinners were always all about seafood, where my earliest memories are of tendrils of squid poking out of a bowl of red sauce-great fun for a child."

, , Think outside of the box? There's a box?? What box???"

Kerry says he ran away from home and the looming idea of Jesuit College at age 17, instead taking the money he'd received upon parochial school graduation to race motocross bikes. He eventually ended up living in Allentown, PA, selling motorcycles. But winters when racing slowed, Kerry worked as a dishwasher and line cook at Bob and Dick Billinsky's Hotel and Restaurant, which was a breakthrough into the kind of pace in the food world Kerry came to admire and thrive in.



During that time, Kerry became a vegetarian and bought his first set of cookware from S&H Green Stamps. "I kept explaining to my Nana that I was a vegetarian, and she said, 'No meat? Not even fish?' She soon got the idea and taught Kerry all the great Italian-American dishes which contained no meat. Pastas with lentils, artichokes, antipasto, brined zucchini, salts and olive oils, cauliflower and lemon. These were what Kerry now refers to as "stealth vegetarian dishes," subversive because whoever consumed them never missed the meat.

"Food changed my life. The art of food saved my life. My next job came with a valuable mentor, Antonio Miguel Casasanto and his partner, Barry Marron. They ran a place called The Swallows. It was a New Age '80s restaurant in Cape May, NJ, and these men were artists in every sense of the word. My life at the time was so removed from the art world; it was a language I didn't understand. These men opened the door for me into living a life filled with a sensitivity to flavor, shape, color, beauty, art, wine, food, music, flowers." It was this education that Kerry carried forth with him into the world.

"I am not 'trained,' so I am unencumbered by actual knowledge or experience. What I do here at Miranda is every style of cooking I can comprehend. It is really a blend of multiculturalism." Kerry's extremely lengthy and widely varied menu causes him to joke that he runs the 'diner from hell.' When asked how and why he does the extensive menu he does, Kerry smiles and chuckles a sardonic laugh before stating, "Because we can. We are not serious about ourselves, but we are serious about food. And this food is peasant food, well thought out and executed with heart and soul.

"Our flavors are bold, we serve generous portions, and as the sign says, 'We do not serve the food of cowards.'"

A kitchen fire in September of 2007 would have destroyed Cafe Miranda, were it not for the quick response of Rockland's Fire Department. Kerry is eternally grateful. Away in Nevada at the time with son, Evan, Kerry gets emotional recalling the events and the expert response from local fire and police

THE SOUL OF THE DISH CAFE MIRANDA



Above: Some of the seafood dishes prepared during the Cafe Miranda cooking classes this year.

photography by Jim Bazin © 2010

departments. "I felt helpless being thousands of miles away," Kerry recounts. "But the love this area showed for us, oh!" Kerry says as he tears up remembering the overwhelming support. Community outpouring followed, showing the love and pride of a devoted Midcoast Maine. And Kerry's response was to pay it forward.

With the help of the community, Kerry was able to reopen within a few weeks. "We were able to donate a sizable check to the Rockland Kiwanis for local children's organizations and scholarships. We donated all our proceeds the week we reopened to worthy causes. I'll never forget what this amazing community did for us," he states.

Recently honored by the DEP as an Environmental Leader, Cafe Miranda is certified Green. Strong supporters of the local community, they do fundraisers in support of the local humane society, Trekkers, and are innovators in the next and newest part of a more environmentally aware Rockland. They recycle, compost, and source locally from their own Headacre Farm in Owl's Head and from other local farms. They are proud of their refining procedures which have lead to significant reductions in power and water usage.

Cafe Miranda's food items such as their brick oven breads, cheeses, noodles, dips, salsas, hummus, olivada and spreads are sold at select retailers from Mt. Desert to Falmouth, and used by other restaurants. They do catering and give cooking classes such as Brick Oven Cooking, Pasta Making, Miranda Classics, and Maine Seafood. They even make their own ice cream and are working on their menu to accommodate those with allergies like gluten. With all that going on and more, Kerry and "Crue" are up for the challenge.

"The more skilled you become at something, the more difficulty you crave in your craft. With us, it's ingredients, procedure, and the technical aspects of food preparation and presentation. Keeping fresh at our craft creates an evolving excitement in what we do here. It's a combination of balance by wretched and super healthy excess. There is no ego on a plate, just soul. With the advent of the Food Network, suddenly chefs have been elevated from kitchen slaves to rock stars."

Kerry gets misty eyed when talking about the people he's mentored over the years, and how they've written back to him, sent momentos of appreciation, and told him what a difference he's made in getting them somewhere in life. "I was lucky enough to have been mentored by some great people in my life. If you expect greatness of people, you give them the opportunity to be great. I like making investments in people. You are doubly rewarded."

Cafe Miranda's Managing Chef Andrew Hansen, a CIA trained chef and native of Rockland and Owl's Head, said when he started working at Miranda, all his classical training went out the window. "Everything I knew was useless, it was like starting over and learning a new language ...Kerry's language. The standard here is extremely high. Kerry wants us to think outside the box."

Kerry chimes in, "Think outside of the box? There's a box?? What box??? I encourage conceptualizing of the soul of each dish, its style, its delivery to the customer. For example, ingredients in a dish may be the same, but nothing here ever goes out the same way twice." This playfulness is a key part of their winning game.

"Three people at a table may order the exact same pasta dish on the menu, and there will be 3 totally different presentations. One may get linguini, one fettuccine, the other papardelle. We told you that you'd get pasta, we just didn't tell you what kind. We love the looks going back and forth at the table and the questions aroused. "

Unconventional and unadorned, Cafe Miranda is a place where, according to Kerry, fusion equals confusion. "There is no fusion here. My menu is driven by locally sourced and seasonally available ingredients, technique, equipment, inspiration, and a deep well of memory."

Cafe Miranda, 15 Middle Street, Rockland 207.594.2034
cafemiranda.com

Dinner: Seven Days a Week from 5pm. Summer 'till 9:30.

Winter 'till 8pm weekdays & 9pm Friday & Saturday