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# Review: The Root Restaurant in White Lake Township

**Pushing Limits:** The Root Restaurant takes some bold culinary chances, resulting in many tasty results

BY CHRISTOPHER COOK // PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOE VAUGHN



ABOVE: Executive Chef James Rigato (left) is responsible for The Root Restaurant's highly imaginative menu. (Right) Salad cook Stephanie Walkerdine at work in The Root's kitchen.

For years, M-59 in northwest Oakland County has witnessed the classic tussle between disappearing farmland and new housing and

shopping.

Progressing development does bring some happy surprises, however. In one of those more recent little malls at Elizabeth Lake Road and M-59, among several national brand-name stores and in a spot where yet another Panera Bread might have gone, is a new and innovative place called The Root Restaurant.

The Root, which opened last May, is certainly one of the most neatly designed and pleasant newcomers in dining-sparse White Lake Township. It's another in a string of casual contemporary restaurants following the hot trend of pledging themselves to American-style cuisine with locally grown products.

On that score, The Root largely succeeds because of a menu that offers many out-of-the-box ideas with serious culinary thinking.

The Root's sophisticated and urban design (very Birmingham-like) feels somewhat out of place in this area where small lakefront 1950s weekend cottages share lot lines with steroidal manor houses, and where farm tractors dodge six lanes of traffic as they gingerly cross M-59.

At dusk on a leaf-blown late-autumn evening, through the plate-glass front of The Root, the dining room gently twinkles with little candlelight coming from tabletops and festive strings of small, decorative bulbs. The room is backlit by a soft orange glow from lamps. It has a contemporary feel created by a sleek design that includes chest-high, light-oak trimmed dividers between the booths and table areas that give the room a clean angularity.

In one of those dividers, a tall stand of leafless branches form a see-through curtain that separates the room — bar area on one side, dining on the other. From the back wall, the kitchen pass-through emits a band of blue-tinged fluorescent light.

The overall sense of The Root is of joy, warmth, fun, and genuine welcome. It's a restaurant that creates a feeling of excitement and possibility.

Chef James Rigato's dishes are carefully considered with the menu noting his ingredient sources: Spicer Orchard & Cider Mill in Fenton, Guernsey Dairy in Northville, and Michigan growers for farm-raised shrimp, beef, pork, and vegetables.

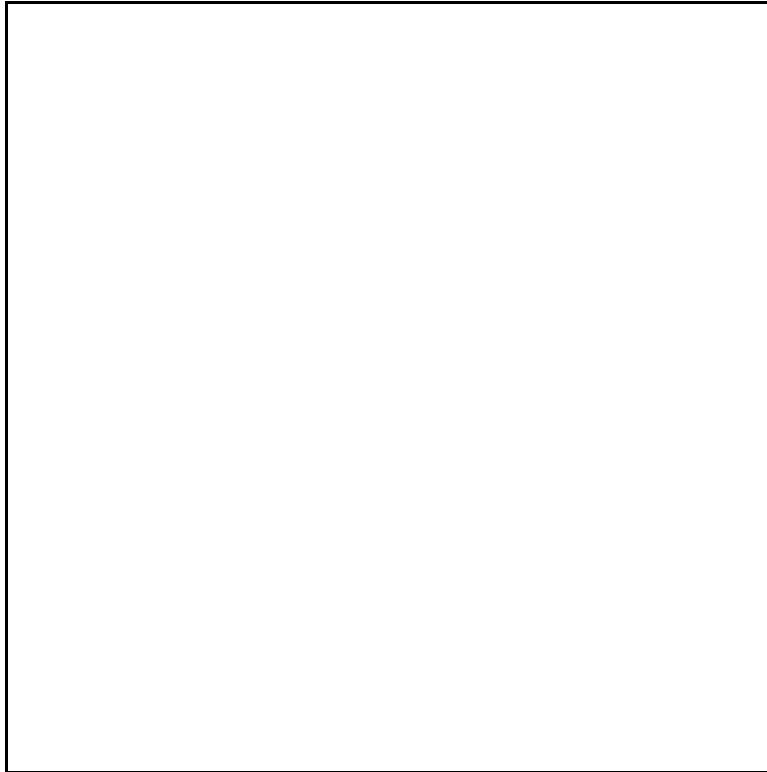
Service at The Root is exceptional. The efficiency, knowledge of the menu, pacing, delivery and the confidence of the dining room staff are impressive.

The quality of the ingredients used by Rigato, the precision of his cooking, the preparation, and how the food is presented, are admirable and show him to be a highly adventurous, daring, and distinct cook.

What makes this restaurant different from others that have staked themselves to new and experimental dining is that The Root is willing to take risks by serving fairly complex combinations with ingredients both new and long forgotten in the current restaurant vocabulary of food.

How often do you see parsnip, kale, and fresh pumpkin, farro, mustard greens, and onion-braised cabbage all on the same menu?





First courses here start out simply enough: crab cakes with an avocado mousse and a mango-poblano salsa; in-house smoked fish rillette served with Vermont crème fraîche, micro greens, and crostini; baked Michigan triple-cream brie in puff pastry; and a salad of arugula, radishes, and green apple with vinaigrette of maple syrup and balsamic vinegar – all fairly common dishes, but with a little twist here and there.

From there, Rigato accelerates to seared foie gras with sherry and onion jam, green-apple butter, and smoked Marcona almond. Then, there's this: paned scallops with brown butter, grapefruit, capers, Brussels sprouts, pistachios, and a white-bean purée.

There was one disappointment among the first courses. In the braised-pork pasties with sweet pork jus, the cooking was perfect, the pasties were small and savory, but the “sweet jus,” which we found to be almost gelatinous and dull, was not at all complementary to the pasties. We squeezed a lemon wedge into the sauce, which greatly improved it.

At The Root, salads are not treated as an afterthought. They're imaginative and quite complex in composition. In one salad, Rigato uses as a centerpiece sliced apples that he poaches in riesling wine and vanilla bean and tosses with red leaf lettuce in a hard-cider

vinaigrette along with Marcona almond bits, Michigan blue cheese, pickled onion, and house-made bacon bits.

Likewise, an arugula salad is vinaigrette-flavored with cranberry and riesling wine and garnished with pear slices roasted in Michigan honey and thyme, as well as pumpkin seeds, feta cheese, and pickled onion.

In main dishes, there's more risk and adventure. The preparation and the pure freshness and vigor of the ingredients in a linguine with tomato sauce, topped with fresh Michigan farm-raised shrimp, could not be better. But the addition of good – but very strongly smoky – bacon bits threw everything out of balance and overpowered the dish, essentially killing the less-strong and wonderfully springy, Michigan shrimp. They just didn't work together.

Likewise, I also bow humbly to the beautiful braising of a Michigan pork shoulder, with its succulent and plump preparation, and the accompanying smoked-cheddar grits, green-apple salsa verde, all topped with micro greens. But here again, from left field came the same sauce that had been on the pork pasties, though it did work better in this dish.

Other main courses include a vegan Michigan pumpkin pot pie with roasted-pumpkin purée, smoked farro, parsnips, potatoes, and kale in pastry crust with an arugula salad.

I highly recommend the half chicken with a risotto of house-made chorizo, Swiss chard, and roasted mushroom in white wine.

Among the interesting side dishes are an excellent creamy macaroni and cheese made with Michigan white cheddar, and a caramelized onion-and-potato gratin with Guernsey's cream.

In desserts, there's a nice assortment of pies that change daily and with seasonal fruits. On our visit, the pie was made with assorted berries. The winner, though, was a lemon-lavender crème brûlée, which is not to be missed.





ABOVE: Fried Bologna Sandwich (left), created with Yale, Mich. -made Signature Bologna, a green-chile mustard, lettuce, and tomato on a house-baked bun. Executive Chef James Rigato uses several regionally made ingredients. Bartender Courtney Oliver makes a Tiger Lily (center), whose ingredients include Lillet Blanc, Grand Traverse Vodka, housemade raspberry syrup, and flamed orange essence. Pan-seared scallops (right) with brown butter, grapefruit, capers, Brussels sprouts, pistachios, and white-bean purée.

Whenever a restaurant begins to tread outside the predictable and expected culinary bounds, trying new things, it takes risks. In the case of The Root, this is courageous and admirable because few others are willing to be so bold.

The bottom line is that The Root has vision and great self-confidence. It's well thought out and has distinction. With a few adjustments, it's going to be here for a long time and on many "best" lists.

Certainly, I'll be going back.

*340 Town Center Blvd., White Lake Township; 248-698-2400, [therootrestaurant.com](http://therootrestaurant.com). L & D Mon.-Sat.*

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