

By Michele Peterson

PHOTO: LESLEY PETERSON



An Epicurean Extravaganza

Miami is a culinary hot spot with plenty to offer foodies and travellers

Mention Miami and most people think trendy urban beaches, celebrity sightings and sizzling party action. But the rhythms of Miami's multicultural communities, abundance of fresh ingredients and spectacular natural setting also make this city one of North America's most memorable food destinations. Explore authentic Cuban cuisine in Little Havana, dine at a celebrity chef restaurant in the Design District or enjoy a wine tasting on a moonlit beach. Plus, where else can you pet — and eat — alligator in the same visit?

Whether you're on a weekend escape or romantic getaway, consider planning your culinary journey by neighbourhood. You're guaranteed to excite your palate and satisfy your sense of adventure.

Art Deco District

Begin your culinary journey in Miami's landmark Art Deco District in South Beach where 1930s era architecture hosts several memorable restaurants. Award-winning Wish, located within the beautifully restored The Hotel of South Beach, continues

(left) An after-dinner stroll through picturesque Coral Gables will take you past the Biltmore Hotel, a designated National Historic Landmark.

to set trends under the direction of Executive Chef Marco Ferraro. Recently named a national Rising Star chef by Restaurant Hospitality, Ferraro trained under several iconic French chefs and on the Cote d'Azur. His Gallic touches and keep-it-simple philosophy are evident in dishes like pan-seared foie gras with blackberry compote, wasabi and white chocolate. Glow-in-the-dark menus and neon-lit cocktails create a magical evening setting in the hotel's garden, so consider dining alfresco under the palms.

Another iconic dining destination, OLA at sleek Sanctuary Hotel, draws food lovers thanks to the culinary prowess of chef-entrepreneur Douglas Rodriguez, a semi-finalist for Best Chef South in the prestigious 2009 James Beard Foundation award competition. Known as the Godfather of Nuevo Latino Cuisine, Rodriguez is especially known for his sultry and incredibly fresh cuisine. Pair a mojito with a refreshing lobster *ceviche*, smoked marlin taco or Rodriguez' signature *puerco asado* and you'll know why area concierges confidently refer their guests to OLA's stylish dining room.

In between dining, make time for a stop at the Art Deco Welcome Center. Learn to differentiate between tropical art deco and streamline modern styles on a self-guided audio tour of this National Register neighbourhood. Another

option is to hop on an air-conditioned South Beach Local bus and travel through the heart of South Beach to South Pointe. From there, it's a short walk to the emerging neighbourhood of South of Fifth (SoFi). Fast growing in reputation due to its stylish yet subdued vibe, it's especially popular with the older crowd.

Ethnic eats

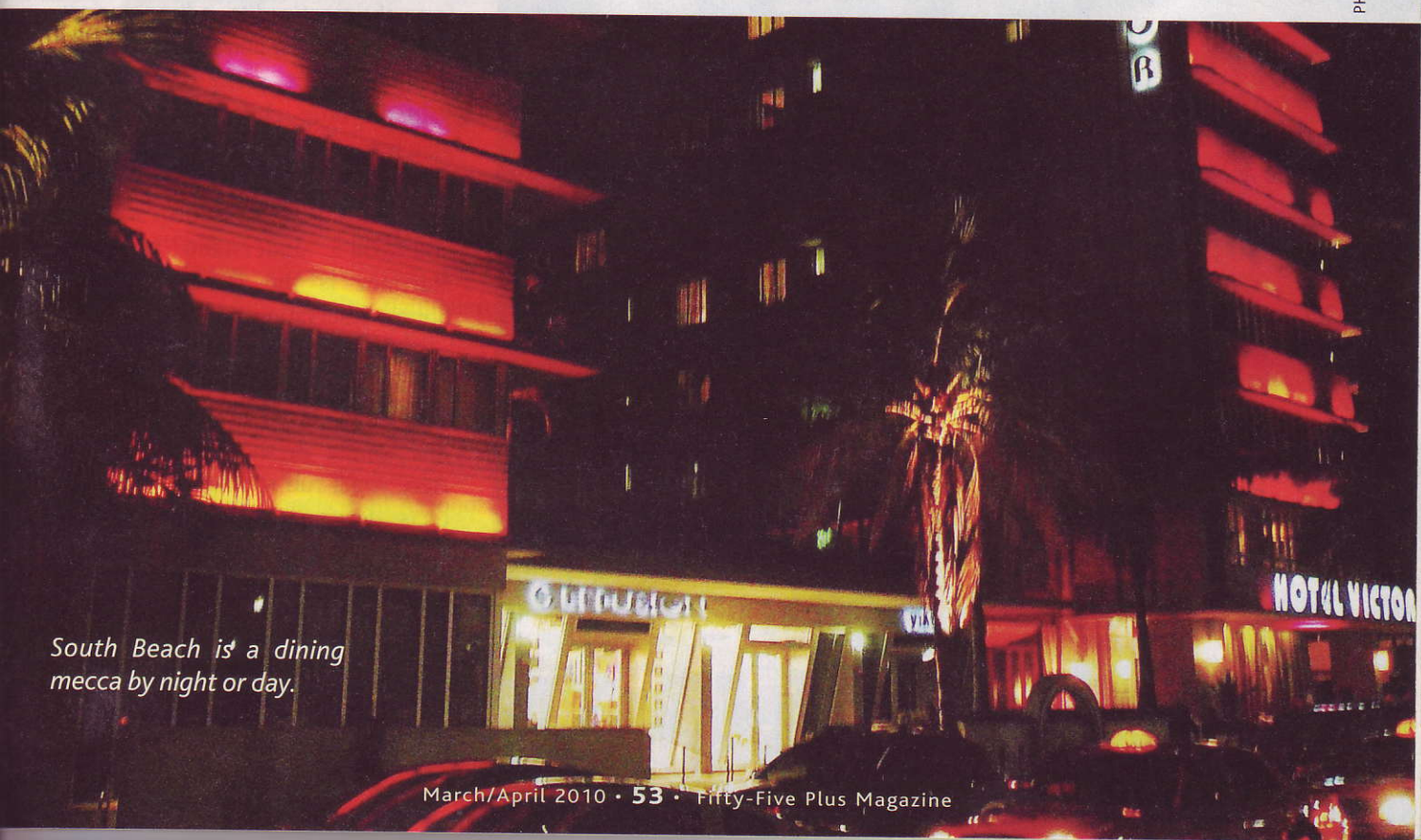
Miami has one of the most culturally diverse populations in the United States, so there's plenty of authentic global cuisine to choose from in neighbourhoods like Little Haiti and Allapattah (Little Dominican Republic). The culture that has done the most to shape Miami's cuisine is Cuban, so it's important to head to the Little Havana neighbourhood for some culinary exploration. Versailles Restaurant & Bakery is not only a dining spot but a cultural symbol and gathering place for Miami's Cuban population. You can order a morning *cafe con leche* or robust espresso with a sweet *guayaba* (guava) pastry, sit back and imagine you're on the streets of Havana. Later in the day, menu highlights include creamy black bean soup and authentic Cuban roast pork.

Afterwards, stroll Little Havana's heart on Calle Ocho (8th Street) and browse for cigars, straw fedoras and typical Cuban dress shirts called *guayaberas*.

Cultured Coral Gables

Swanky Coral Gables might be best known for its art galleries and exclusive shops along the Miracle Mile, but

PHOTO: LESLEY PETERSON



South Beach is a dining mecca by night or day.



it's also worth a splurge on the foodie trail. Cacao, named one of South Florida's Top 10 restaurants by the 2008 Zagat Survey, is owned by internationally acclaimed chef Edgar Leal (and 2009 James Beard Foundation award semi-finalist) who deftly prepares modern Latin cuisine informed by frequent travels abroad. Popular dishes, such as melt-in-your-mouth grilled wild boar tenderloin and luscious pumpkin and tangerine foam soup, are truly memorable. Don't pass on dessert at this romantic bistro — Leal's wife and partner is renowned pastry chef Mariana Montero de Castro.

Distinctive Design District

If you're not redecorating your condo, the sole reason for a pilgrimage to the showroom-lined streets of the Design District is likely to be a meal at Sra. Martinez, the latest restaurant opened by celebrated chef Michelle Bernstein. This dining spot is earning its position on food fans' must-go list thanks to tapas-sized portions of innovative dishes such as delicate shrimp *tiradito*, a lime-marinated cold appetizer and bacon-wrapped medjool dates stuffed with lush Valdeón blue cheese from Spain. Match a selection of these shareable small-plate wonders with a rare Iberian from the all-Spanish wine list and you'll understand why Sra. Martinez is the Design District's hottest reservation.

Just up the street, don't miss Michael's Genuine Food & Drink, the eatery that kicked off the explosion of fine dining in the Design District. Here you'll rub shoulders with architects, designers and celebrities, like *CSI Miami*'s David Caruso, who are drawn to Chef Michael Schwartz's trademark new American cuisine. The courtyard patio is an appealing dining option.

Above: The Tiffany Hotel Miami Beach
Below: Sra. Martinez restaurant offers a stylish dining atmosphere.



PHOTO: LESLEY PETERSON



Tempting desserts are just one of the dining pleasures in Miami.

Meals with a view

Minutes away from downtown Miami, but a world away in atmosphere, is the barrier-island playground of Key Biscayne. Easily accessed from the mainland by the Rickenbacker Causeway, this eight-kilometre long paradise jutting into sparkling Biscayne Bay has a rich history that even includes Ponce de Leon's legendary Fountain of Youth. Bring a lunch and enjoy a palm-shaded picnic by the historic lighthouse in Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park.

If you decide to stay, the elegant Ritz-Carlton Key Biscayne has just launched an Around the World culinary package. Guests can "jet set" to each of the resort's global-inspired restaurants to meet with chefs Ezio Gamba and Andres Parlange, consult the resort's wine and spirits experts, and sample signature dishes by moonlight. The east coast's only *tequilier* (tequila expert) Tiberio Lobo-Navia will also provide a tasting of the three different types of tequila (*blanco*, *resposado* and *anejo*) to complement each course.

Day Trips worth the drive

If you have the appetite for more culinary adventure, the historic Redland Trail — a group of agri-tourism operators between Miami and the Everglades — lies just 40 minutes away. Sample fresh-fruit shakes and exotic fruits like *monstera* (it tastes like a cross between a banana and a pineapple) at Robert is Here, an iconic fruit stand located in Homestead. Or visit Schnebly's, the Miami area's only winery, where you can taste award-winning wines made from tropical fruits. The truly adventurous won't want to miss the Everglades Alligator Attraction, South Florida's oldest working alligator farm where you can learn about these unique reptiles and, if you're brave enough, sample "gator bites" at the snack bar.

Whether you choose an upscale dining experience, a humble eatery, or a unique one-of-a-kind Florida attraction, Miami offers culinary travellers a remarkable range of micro-destinations within one destination. 55