

FORK IN THE ROAD

Savoring South Beach

A tide of change has swamped the Miami area's food scene

By **STEVE DOLINSKY**
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MIAMI BEACH, Fla. — My dad wasn't what you'd call a big shot. He and mom occasionally would splurge, taking my two older siblings and me to Florida for a break from winter. Yet one of the most indelible memories I have from those vacations in the 1970s was how he deftly managed to avoid the epic wait at the legendary Joe's Stone Crab and get us a table.

For most guys his age, the gesture of slipping \$20 into the maitre d's hand was (and, sadly, still is) an unspoken act, offering entrance to a restricted culinary club, where a little grease paved the way to fresh stone crabs, hash browns and ethereal coleslaw. But like the Rat Pack sightings of a bygone era, greasing palms no longer is required to find great food in South Beach. In fact, with Joe's branches in Chicago and Las Vegas, the only-in-Miami patina has slowly worn off, at least to eaters of my generation.

Perhaps nowhere has the transformation of Miami Beach been as obvious than at the 59-year-old Fontainebleau Hotel, which underwent a \$1 billion renovation a few years ago. If you haven't made your way to 44th and Collins since Ronald Reagan was president, you're in for a shock.

On a weekend night, the main lobby pulses like the Cosmopolitan in Vegas, while a handful of high-end imports are ready to take your reservations: London's Hakkasan (modern Chinese), New York's Gotham (steak) and Scarpetta (Italian) as well as a swanky poolside retreat called La Cote, which seemed better suited for people watching and ocean gazing.

The celebrity chef culture also has infiltrated Miami in recent years. Jean-Georges Vongerichten and Daniel Boulud have descended from New York, while local girl Michelle Bernstein is influenced by local farmers at Michy's, which still produces inventive, modern American with Latin and Asian accents.

Andrew Carmellini has had success in New York with Locanda Verde, but the Miami offshoot of The Dutch — an American-inspired Kennedy-compound-meets-Martha-Stewart roadhouse inside the W Hotel — is as good a reason as any to indulge in mammoth seafood platters and delicate pappardelle pasta with silky sheep's milk ricotta and fresh mint; I would go back just for the custardy banana cream pie. Jose Andres also opened a second Bazaar here, in the SLS Hotel, where whimsy and Spanish-influenced



ROBERT SULLIVAN/GETTY-AFP PHOTO 2005

The Miami area has become a varied dining destination in recent years, with travelers looking for a taste of the town's growing celebrity chef culture.



PHOTO BY STEVE DOLINSKY

Sam Gorenstein prepares whatever his fish guy brings him each day at My Ceviche.

modernist cuisine reign like a matador at high noon. But be sure to bring your wallet (better yet, someone else's).

Perhaps the best-known "name" chef here, though, is Michael Schwartz. Every chef, writer and food fanatic I consulted with implored me to make the trip to Michael's Genuine Food & Drink. Tucked among high-end clothing shops and furniture galleries in the Design District, just a few miles west of the beach, the meal I had there was both sophisticated and yet simply delicious.

Snacks ranged from mustardy deviled eggs to rich, chicken liver mousse smeared on crostini; a

sweet-and-spicy pucker of pork belly was parked next to a small mound of bracing kimchi, that spicy Korean fermented cabbage that I saw in nearly every new restaurant. Linguine, embedded with sausage, fennel, roasted capellini onions and bits of Swiss chard was a paean both to local produce and artisan foodways.

For lunch the next day, I checked out Yardbird, a relative newcomer in South Beach. A serious bourbon list puts you in a Southern frame of mind, but when the shallow bowl of Florida shrimp and South Carolina grits arrives in a deep, dark pool of veal stock fortified with beer, garlic and red

wine, you know immediately where the chef's heart lies. That, and the fact his ultracrispy, impossibly moist fried chicken with a sidecar of spicy Tabasco honey will render your knees weak. Fresh biscuits, fried green tomato BLTs and chili-spiked watermelon offer additional Southern-tinged diversions.

The other restaurant I had heard a lot about was Pubblelly. Imagine the love child of Japanese and Korean ingredients, informed by one of the owner's Puerto Rican roots. Nearly every dish features pork belly, either as a fork-tender block swimming in an umami-rich bowl of ramen

If you go

- Michael's Genuine Food & Drink, 130 NE 40th St., Miami; 305-573-5550; michaelsgenuine.com
- Pubblelly, 1418 20th St., Miami Beach; 305-532-7555; pubblelly.com
- Yardbird, 1600 Lennox Ave., Miami Beach; 305-538-5220; runchickenrun.com
- My Ceviche, 235 Washington Ave., Miami Beach; 305-397-8710; myceviche.com
- Michy's, 6927 Biscayne Blvd., Miami; 305-759-2001; michysmiami.com
- The Dutch, 2201 Collins Ave., Miami Beach (at the W Hotel); 305-938-3111; thedutchmiami.com
- Bazaar by Jose Andres at the SLS Hotel, 1701 Collins Ave., Miami Beach; 305-455-2999; thebazaar.com/south-beach-the-bazaar
- The Fontainebleau Hilton Hotel, 4441 Collins Ave., Miami Beach; 305-538-2000; fontainebleau.com

or embedded into kimchi fried rice; it even shows up in a side of mofongo, the Puerto Rican snack of fried and mashed green plantains.

Just a few blocks from Joe's, equidistant from the testosterone-fueled (and slightly overrated) beef palace known as Prime 112, Sam Gorenstein had had enough of local chefs ignoring the water's bounty.

"I just became obsessed with ceviche," he told me outside of his 240-square-foot takeout joint, My Ceviche. In a cramped space that doesn't allow for a refrigerator or freezer, Gorenstein relies on whatever his fish guy brings him each day. In fact, the day I was there, an order of triggerfish and cobia was being dropped off. The staff can turn them into burritos or fantastic tacos, but I would suggest getting a few ceviches and taking them down

to South Pointe Park for an impromptu picnic.

Your choice of seafood is cut to order, then bathed in a fresh citrus bath (which cooks the fish) and tossed with thin, red onions, large wedges of cooked, soft sweet potato and tiny discs of yellow corn. In a nod to South America, the ceviches are served with yellow popcorn, not the large, Peruvian purple variety. "I'm from Colombia," Gorenstein said proudly. "I don't want people to think this is a Peruvian restaurant, so my ceviches are influenced by several countries."

It's probably a tad too ethnic (and exotic) for my dad, but if my friends like it half as much as my adventurous teenagers did, then isn't that what the new Miami is all about? Even better, none of these meals cost me a picture of Andrew Jackson to get in.

A taste for the Cuban classics in Little Havana

By **STEVE DOLINSKY**
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MIAMI — With more than 1.5 million Cuban-Americans living in the Miami area, I couldn't very well ignore an opportunity to check out a few local favorites. Cubans have many dishes they call their own — vaca frita, congri, lechon — but few engender as much spirited debate as the Cubano sandwich, a Cuban coffee and a plate of ropa vieja. I visited roughly eight places on my recent trip to Miami; here are my top three in each category.

Cubano: This sandwich was born more than a century ago as workers from sugar plantations and the tobacco industry sought something simple to eat for lunch. It most likely started in the Ybor City section of Tampa, but after the revolution in 1959, the wave of immigrants in the decades that followed brought the

tradition to Miami.

Because Cubans love pork — oftentimes marinated or cooked with a garlicky mojo containing sour oranges — there always are slices of roast pork as well as lightly smoked ham. Swiss cheese is sandwiched between them, as are tart pickles. Each half of the sturdy, white Cuban bread gets a squeeze of yellow mustard and mayo, and the entire package is pressed between the super-hot sides of a giant panini press.

"It's the crunch of the bread that makes it unique," said Andres Clavero, a Cuban-American from Miami who recently moved to Chicago. At El Palacio de los Jugos (literally, the Juice Palace), there are as many sandwiches as there are tropical fruit drinks. But the Cubano is still listed first, and for a \$5 investment, it's hard to beat. I noticed the sandwich-maker would first grill the open-faced ham, then add



STEVE DOLINSKY/PHOTO FOR TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

Ropa vieja, a shredded beef dish, at Las Culebrinas.

the cheese and grill that; finally, he would top off the sandwich with bread from the Miami Bakery that had been kissed with melted butter before getting a final press, forming that crisp exterior.

El Palacio de los Jugos (there are several locations; this is the original), 5721 W. Flagler St., 305-262-0070

Coffee: Everyone in Little Havana knows how to make coffee. You can ask for a cortadito, which is similar to a latte, featuring steamed milk, or better yet, ask for a cafe Cubano, which is simply an espresso shot given a last-minute infusion of sweetness, thanks to a process where-by the barista combines a

bit of the dark coffee (usually Bustelo brand) with granulated sugar, giving it a vigorous stir before adding it back to the espresso shot.

Though it's hard to pick one, the versions I had at Versailles, on the famed Calle Ocho (Eighth Street), were notable for their bracing sweetness as well as the crowd they attracted. Local men in double-pocketed cotton shirts hang out near the legendary restaurant's bakery all day, ordering coffee, talking politics and nibbling on pasteles, tiny flaky pastries filled with guava paste. It's a scene as important to Cuban culture as what's inside the cup.

Versailles, 3555 SW Eighth St., 305-444-0240, versaillesrestaurant.com

Ropa vieja: Literally translated as "old clothes," this beefy main dish is produced after slowly braising flank steak for hours in a sofrito of onions, tomatoes and peppers. The meat is

shredded by hand (or fork) served in those juices, along with a side of white rice and soft, fried plantains, called maduros.

"Without the rice, it's a sloppy Joe," Clavero said. "The rice should turn orange; you want the juices to explode. The juicier it is, the longer it's been roasting."

The "juicy standard" was set at Las Culebrinas. The meat was, indeed, juicy, embedded with slowly cooked onions and peppers, while the tomato, pepper and chili-infused broth turned the fluffy white rice a vibrant orange, just as Clavero predicted. But after gobbling down yet another plate of Cuban comfort, he provided me with a declaration I heard frequently from my Cuban-American friends there: "My dad's mom's is still the best."

Las Culebrinas (multiple locations, but this is the one I visited), 4700 W. Flagler St., 305-445-2337