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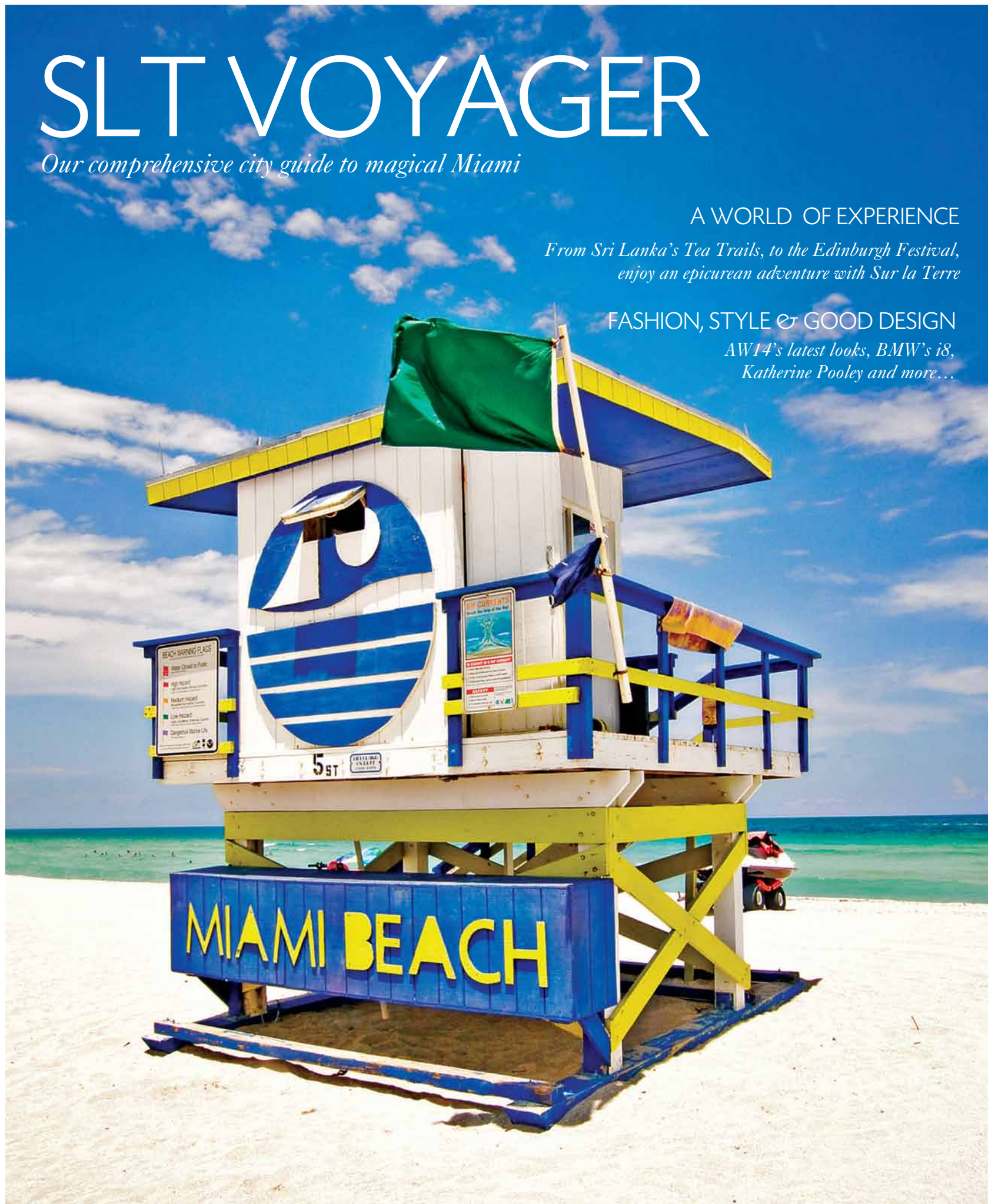
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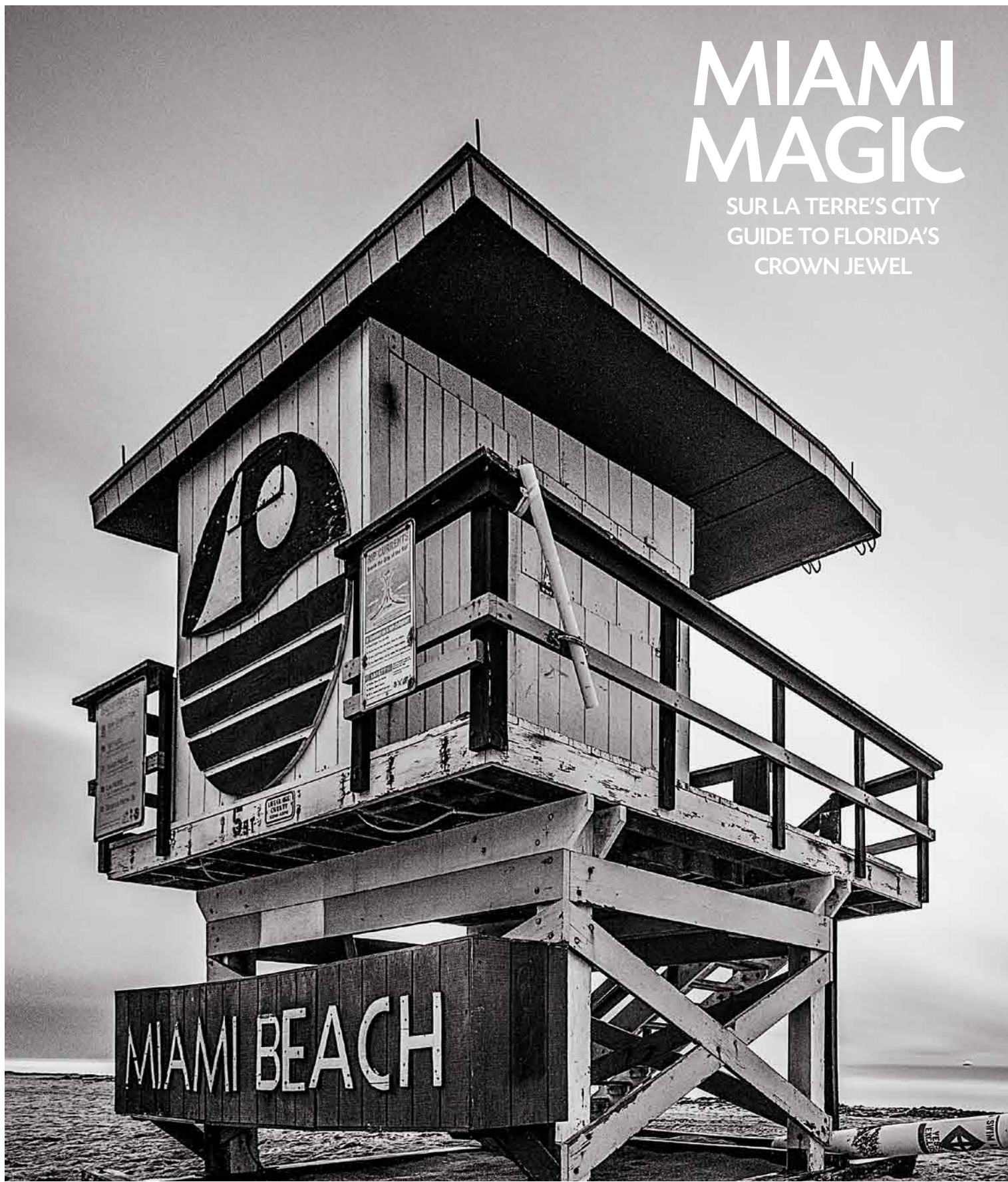


SUR·LA·TERRE

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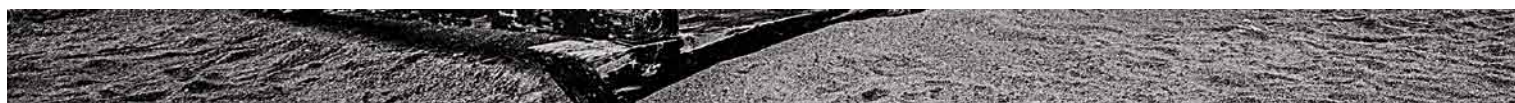
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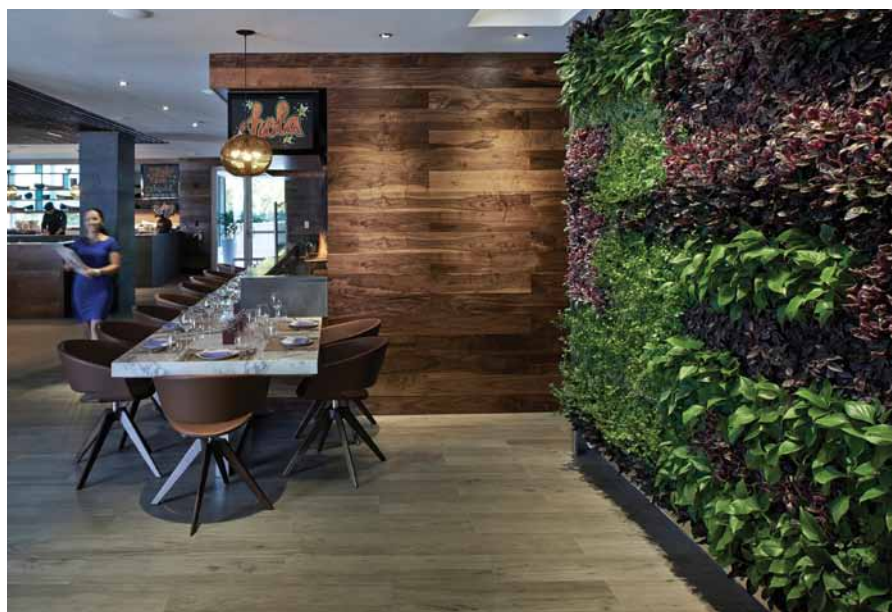
ODE TO THE SEA

ONE OF THE BIGGEST GASTRONOMIC HITS TO OPEN IN MIAMI IN RECENT TIMES IS LA MAR, A SOUTH AMERICAN EPIPUREAN ADVENTURE FOR THE TASTE BUDS.

Words: Harry Tanner
Pictures: Mandarin Oriental, Miami

Over the past few years, South America has become the destination on everyone's lips. This is down to a variety of winning components, including the region's fabulous blend of charisma, culture, a *souçon* of chaos – and, of course, cuisine.

Peruvian food sits particularly well with me; its bold, powerful flavours have no truck with subtle intricacies, delivering a wallop of flavour that builds to a mesmerising crescendo, and lingers lovingly on the palette. Combine that with the culinary finesse of Peruvian-Japanese “Nikkei” cuisine and rare ingredients from the foothills of the Andes and the Amazon Basin, and I'm a quivering wreck before the first dish is served at La Mar by Aston Acurio at Mandarin Oriental Miami.



Gaston Acurio is to Lima what Marco Pierre White was to London or Thomas Keller was to California – nothing less than a culinary revolutionary. He dared to question the norms of Peruvian cuisine and use the skills he'd learned in Paris in the kitchens of acclaimed restaurants including La Tour d'Argent and La Grande Cascade, to refine and update Peruvian classics and create his own twists on traditional dishes, embracing the other gastronomic trends that were sweeping through Lima.

A former punk-rock musician and the son of a prominent politician, Acurio was an unlikely candidate for the role of culinary rebel, but that's exactly what he became when he returned from France with his wife Astrid, borrowed some money and opened Astrid Y Gaston in Lima in 1994, fundamentally changing Peru's culinary landscape forever. What started off as a family-run dining room serving classical French cuisine is now the flagship of a business empire that includes restaurants throughout the Americas, and holds the number 18 position in the World's 50 Best Restaurants – number two in Latin America.

La Mar is a spin-off from the original, with a more casual approach to dining that serves a combination of Asian-Peruvian fusion, ceviche and *anticuchos* (tapas) along with *Nuevo Andino* (New Andean) fare, in a menu that offers a mixture of sharing plates and hearty main dishes.

Today, Lima-born executive chef Diego Oka, who worked with Acurio in Peru before taking up posts at his restaurants in Mexico City, Colombia and San Francisco and then launching La Mar in Miami, has put together a lunch menu highlighting some of his signature items. There are modern twists on familiar dishes like Quinoa Caprese and *Arroz con Mariscos* (rice with seafood); Asian-Peruvian specialties like Cebiche Nikei (a Japanese take on Peru's national dish of marinated raw fish) and a demonstration of New Andean cuisine in the form of *Paiche Chorrillana*; an indigenous Amazonian fish.

The first two appetisers demonstrate how a familiar dish can be transformed with the addition of a few new ingredients. A rustic-looking Quinoa Caprese sounds familiar enough: huge slices of heirloom tomato and hunks of buratta cheese, dusted with red quinoa and basil. But it's the *aji amarillo* vinaigrette that brings it to life, injecting a fiery, tangy flavour that adds oomph to an Italian staple and delight to the faces of my dining companions.

La Mar's *Causa Cangrejo* gives a flamboyant, colourful salute to a traditional Peruvian dish. The crab and potato dumpling has been given a 21st century twist, with light, flavoursome crabmeat served over a pile of creamy avocado on a croquette of potato, dyed bright pink with ▶

EPICURE



beetroot juice. Everything is drizzled with a touch of slightly spicy *huancaína* sauce and there are dainty segments of quail's egg on the side, all presented on a platter that resembles a Spanish galleon. It's a joy to behold, although the sum of so many soft ingredients gives it a rather mushy, indistinct texture. Nevertheless, the flavour is profoundly good, and I'm told by other more experienced *causa* connoisseurs on the table that this is as good as it gets.

But the best of the appetiser trio is yet to come.

Ceviche is the cornerstone of Peruvian cuisine, and good ceviche is worth travelling a long way for. The silky smooth Cebiche Nikei served at La Mar bursts with flavours at once sweet, fresh and brilliantly tart thanks to the excellent *leche de tigre* – fresh lime juice and *aji limo* (another of Peru's most prolific chillies) – spiked with tamarind. Slices of red onion add a crunchy texture to the soft, plump morsel of fresh tuna. The "Nikei" element of this otherwise typically Peruvian dish comes from *daikon* (Japanese radish) and small strips of *nori* (seaweed), which are sufficient to add the dish to the Pantheon of new Asian-Peruvian fare without affecting the essence of the ceviche. I would return to Miami in a heartbeat for another helping of this indulgent incarnation of a dish that is arguably the greatest of Peru's culinary heritage.

During a pause between courses, there's time for a look around. The informal design and layout of La Mar reflects the casual dining menu. The large indoor space has separate ceviche and anticucho bars, both of which open up onto the restaurant, making the chefs part of the dining experience. Even at 3pm on a Thursday afternoon, when the lunchtime rush (a mix of hotel guests and businessmen from the neighbouring Brickell business district) has died down, there is a pleasant buzz in the airy restaurant. Inside, La Mar is decorated in dark woods and aquamarine tiles reminiscent of fish scales, along with other artistic touches like a plant wall, and light fixtures that look like fishing nets. The broad outside terrace overlooking the CBD and Biscayne Bay must be atmospheric at night, but during the day it boasts one of the best views in Miami.

This informal design and the "casual fine dining" menu is perhaps not what you'd expect from a Mandarin Oriental – a brand with a reputation for high-end, Michelin-starred restaurants – but this is Miami, and

everything's a little bit different here; a little bit cooler. By the time main courses arrive, I'm already won over; intoxicated by the bright and brilliant menu. The *Arroz con Mariscos* comprises *aji panca* fried rice with shrimp, mussels, octopus, calamari and criolla sauce. It's traditional Peruvian food done exceptionally well; the kind of thing you might be served in any number of restaurants around Latin America, albeit with slightly more expensive ingredients.

But the essence of New Andean cuisine comes together in the final dish. The eponymous *Paiche chorrillana* is a large, meaty freshwater fish found in the Amazon basin that can grow to more than two metres long. It's fleshy meat separates easily when you take the fork to it, allowing the delighted diner to enjoy huge chunks of surprisingly light meat, flavoured wonderfully with tamarind "*chorrillana*" sauce and piled on a hearty serving of mashed yucca with delicate flakes of smoked bacon. If this is what the Amazon tastes like, sign me up for the next departure.

Desserts, though superfluous by now, are Key Lime Pie – a classic Miami dish enlivened with delicious *chichi morada* (a zingy corn and spice-based purple sauce) – and a Peruvian chocolate-covered popsicle made from *lucuma* (a mango-like fruit from the Andes) sprinkled with cocoa nibs. It is whimsical and wonderful; a final hurrah to Andean ingredients and creative culinary design.

And that is the takeaway message from La Mar: from traditional dishes to Nuevo Andean cuisine, Peru is a garden state with such variety in its fertile lands that there is no excuse for any shortage of flavour. Living proof that casual dining does not mean a casual approach to cooking or ingredients, La Mar delivers a flavoursome flash of Peruvian cuisine to this, the most Latin of US cities. ☺

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