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## BEYOND THE BEACH

Foodie snowbirds might be drawn to Miami's big oceanfront boîtes, but **CHARLIE FRIEDMANN** makes the case for dining indie, inland

**M**iami's beachfront is constantly under construction, with multimillion-dollar hotels anchored by celebrity chef-helmed restaurants eclipsing its art-deco roots. But beyond the flashy new hotspots, expertly enhanced beach bodies and blingy jewellery that the city is known for, there's something humbler and much more delicious happening in its food scene – if you look further inland.

"Whenever anyone sees promotions about Miami, it's always about the beach," says Ani Meinhold, general manager and co-owner of the Vietnamese-Cajun restaurant Phuc Yea. "That's the misconception everyone has. They're like, 'shiny disco balls and boobs, great.' But we have a lot of great independently owned restaurants and businesses here and they tend to be on the actual Miami side, not so much the beach."

Of course, not all the beachside restaurants are bad. Opened in 2018, the Surf Club Restaurant from celebrated chef Thomas Keller is an outrageously decadent and utterly delicious take on continental cuisine. And Joe's Stone Crab, a South Beach institution, is always worth a visit. But the city's crop of chef-owned spots is more brash, exciting and energetic.

The cheekily named Phuc Yea is run by Meinhold and her partner, chef Cesar Zapata. She's half German, half Vietnamese, and he's Colombian but grew up along the Gulf Coast of Texas where he fell in love with Cajun cuisine and Texas barbecue. "Vietnamese Cajun is actually a thing along the Gulf," Meinhold says. "But the way we do it is very much a personal expression of who we are."

Take, for example, an enormous hunk of short rib rubbed in a pho-flavoured spice mix, cooked low and slow, then smoked for

three hours. It's a great piece of barbecue made even better by a fish-sauce caramel glaze and a smattering of Vietnamese herbs. "A restaurant like this, with this name, could only happen in Miami," Meinhold says. "We're still young enough as a food destination that we can kind of do what we want. It's fun but polished – it has its own Miami swagger."

Speaking of Miami swagger, how about a Peruvian-born sushi chef who also dabbles in rap music? That would be Nando Chang, who, along with his sister Valerie and father Fernando, runs the Peruvian-style sushi stand Itamae in a food hall in the Design District. The Changs are Peruvian-Chinese but fell into Japanese cuisine when Fernando took a job as a busser at a sushi bar in Coral Gables. He worked his way up to sushi chef and his kids followed suit, starting by helping their father with catering gigs and then training in professional kitchens.

Just as Vietnamese-Cajun is a thing elsewhere, so, too, is Peruvian-Japanese. Called Nikkei, the cuisine's popularity has exploded thanks to the irresistible pairing of raw fish with bright Peruvian sauces loaded with spice, fat and tons of acid. "As crazy as it sounds, I think at the end we would have found ourselves wanting to make this kind of food," says Chang, reflecting on Nikkei's trendiness. "We knew we could do this better than anyone else in town." The Changs place classic *hamachi* avocado maki in a bowl with bracing *leche de tigre* and fruity olive oil, then top it with a bold olive aioli, thin slices of poached octopus and a mountain of bright *sarza criolla*, a fresh salsa made of diced onions with lime juice and hot pepper.

One of Itamae's biggest fans is Niven Patel, the chef-owner of Ghee Indian Kitchen. "They're really good people and our stories

At Phuc Yea (above left), chef Cesar Zapata and general manager Ani Meinhold (above right) serve up a Vietnamese take on Cajun cuisine. Itamae's Pulpo al Olivo (right) and Ghee's avocado and tuna bhel puri (below) reflect the diverse offerings at Miami restaurants.



are very similar," says Patel. "We didn't have a lot. We just had what we know and our talent." Patel serves remarkable pakoras full of taro leaves and crunchy *calabaza*, bhel puri with creamy avocado and cubes of raw tuna, charred corn with smoked paneer, beef fragrant with fresh curry leaves and more modern Miami takes on Indian cuisine.

"The menu really shifts according to the season," says Patel, who grows about 40 per cent of the produce for Ghee in his garden at home. In the summer, that means plantains that he serves as chaat, a deep-fried snack. "It's really Miami ingredients and Indian flavours," says Patel.

"Diversity is really what makes Miami restaurants," says Nando Chang. "The restaurants succeeding right now are diverse in their menus, their food, their employees – everything." He predicts the next decade of dining out in Miami will see contributions from the city's immigrant communities amplified even more. "The chefs who are putting the stones down now will probably be forgotten by then," he says, "but it's going to work because everything is changing." ■

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