



BLAKE IS BACK

Renowned executive chef **Blake Malatesta** at MIA Kitchen & Bar plans to turn the rustic, dining and drinking sanctuary into a destination for art, cinema and music lovers.

BY **KERRY SHORR**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **LORI GRIFFITH**

Most executive chefs aren't known for their collaboration skills, but Blake Malatesta has the art down in spades. After months of opening-day speculation and live video tours around the space, he and his partner, restaurateur Joey LoGrasso, opened MIA Kitchen & Bar in Delray Beach this past summer. Inside the swanky eatery, they feature environmentally responsible practices and the convivial and unpretentious cuisine the Louisiana native is famous for.

Here, exclamatory expressions like "genius!" and "I can die now!" are common. While some chefs in training might buckle beneath the pressures of constant one-upmanship, Malatesta impresses by practicing MIA's acronym, Modern Inventive Authentic. Besides, if you can't stand the heat, as Harry S. Truman once quipped, get out of the kitchen. But

with an open concept, it would be hard to. "It also allows me to look out and see how people are responding," he says. "If there are any issues, I can react immediately."

Malatesta credits MIA's industrial-chic vibe to his wife and the general manager, Ana, who wanted a rustic-imbued backdrop to complement her husband's sophisticated fare. She hired interior designer Adolfo Galvez who left the ceiling's steel and cement infrastructure exposed and floated iron chandeliers with Edison light bulbs above a mixture of reclaimed wood and brick paneling, dark burgundy leather banquettes and a polished, stained concrete floor.

The menu also pops with noteworthy dishes that offer a portal to the chef's Italian-Ukrainian upbringing, including a pierogi-inspired ravioli stuffed with smoked potato and melted ricotta cheese, served with crispy prosciutto, caramelized onions, bean sprouts, brown butter and warmed bacon-cider vinaigrette. There are also specials from his kitchen crew.

"Our pastry chef Beatrice is from South Africa, and she's making chai-spiced blondies and lavender ice cream," he says. "With my junior sous chef Sarah we came up with a shepherd's pie we tweaked to be a bit more contemporary."

For guests with allergies, he makes faux mozzarella and gluten-free pasta and pizza, and, for his Jewish patrons, he puts a spin on chicken scarpariello by swapping pork with chicken sausage.

Nearly every ingredient is hyper-local from farms like Swank Specialty Produce and Whitworth Farms, or it's sourced within the state. The kitchen also follows a zero-waste policy, so practically everything gets repurposed. Chicken innards turn into pâtés, pork belly fats whip into pig butter, and vegetable skins pulse into powder.

Plans are already in motion to turn the property into a destination hub for art and culture. Silent movies will be cast against the walls, local bands will perform on the patio and graffiti artists have been hired to paint the walls.

Set approximately 15 minutes west of Delray's bustling Atlantic Avenue, the extra drive to MIA is time well spent. Malatesta says customers often come from North Palm Beach County or drive up from Miami to check it out.

"I have people right here in Tuscany and The Valencia communities who love it because it's in their backyards," he says. "They're like, 'Oh, great. We don't have to drive east.'" ■