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*TOUGH
COOKIE*
TARAJI P. HENSON IS
SEXY, SASSY AND
BUILDING AN EMPIRE
OF HER OWN

SPRING STYLE ISSUE

GET INSPIRED! FASHION'S FOCUS IS BRIGHT

MATCH POINT
LACOSTE & THE MIAMI OPEN'S FAB COLLAB

RETAIL REVELRY
ZEGNA, VALENTINO & DSQUARED2 SET UP SHOP

THE EAT IS ON!
THE SCOOP ON CORSAIR, MATADOR ROOM & VAGABOND

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[FOOD & DRINK]
REVIEW

DELICIOUS DIRECTIONS

AT MATADOR ROOM, CHEF JEAN-GEORGES VONGERICHTEN HAS MANY RULES TO WHICH MIAMI DINERS AREN'T ACCUSTOMED, BUT FOLLOWING THEM ENSURES NOTHING BUT GOOD TASTE.

By Jen Karetnick | Photography by Michael Pisarri



Are you just a wee bit obsessive-compulsive? Like to follow the rules? Annoyed when others—a good many of our time-challenged residents and practically all of the visitors to Miami—don't? Then the hotly anticipated Matador Room, opened this past December in the Ian Schrager-conceived urban resort that is the Miami Beach Edition, should be your favorite new hangout.

I say this because when you make a reservation at Michelin-starred chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten's tapas-style restaurant, you receive a set of edicts in return. These include that you call to reconfirm your reservation 24 hours in advance, or your party "will be transferred to the wait list." Then you may not get to experience that stunning arroz con pollo, where the crackling chicken skin mixed throughout the steaming, lemon-zested and saffron-scented rice is so texturally unexpected, it's like encountering strips of edible parchment.

Nor will incomplete parties be seated. If all of you don't show up within 15 minutes of your reservation, your

potential mushroom pizza—which oozes slippery, long-stemmed mushrooms, generous amounts of garlic-parsley oil, three cheeses melted just so and an organic farm egg in the middle that adds to the sensory overload—is at serious risk.

I, for one, applaud Vongerichten's policies, even though I'm usually running 15 minutes behind. Certainly South Beach has long needed a restaurateur who has no patience for no-shows and latecomers who think 45 minutes late is the new 15.

Individuals who are panicked about the possibility of losing out on consuming the sweet pea guacamole, where the whole legumes lend delightful contrast to the velvety structure and limey flavor of the avocado puree, should make it a point to arrive early and relax at the Matador Bar, where they can sip on custom specialties like The Pineapple, made with Elyx vodka, Gonzalez Byass Palo Cortado sherry, Elemukule bitters, salted caramel syrup, smoked rosemary and a CONTINUED...

Matador Room

Miami Beach Edition
2901 Collins Ave., Miami Beach,
786.257.4600,
matadorroom.com

Dinner: Sun.-Thu., 6-11pm;
Fri.-Sat., 6pm-midnight

Table snacks, \$6-\$18; Light & Bright items, \$12-\$15; Golden & Crispy items, \$7-\$15; pizzas, \$10-\$24; Masa & Tortillas items, \$10-\$12; Grilled & Roasted items, \$16-\$130; rices, \$4-\$18; sides, \$5-\$7; desserts, \$8-\$10



TASTE DEPARTMENT
From top: Matador Room
Executive Chef Jeremy
Ford; the restaurant's
interior rotunda, the
eatery's prime spot.

...CONTINUED whole slice of dried pineapple for garnish. It's like a toast to the agricultural past of Miami Beach.

It's also testimony to the professional staff and the understated but gorgeous decor by Yabu Pushelberg in both the black walnut-paneled bar and the main dining room—black-and-white photos from Lucien Clergue's *Matador* series in the former, and a singular, restored chandelier that reaches out with tentacles like an octopus in the latter, for example—that nerves are almost instantly soothed once everyone has arrived and is seated. The waiter, your own personal matador, carefully goes over the menu, which is divided into categories such as Light & Bright, Masa & Tortillas and Grilled & Roasted; and suggests how many dishes per person it's recommended to order (two to three). If it's your first time dining, he or she may also explain how some of the plates have been tweaked from Matador's mother ship, ABC Kitchen in New York City's Flatiron District, with South Florida's local and seasonal ingredients in mind. Others were designed just for Matador, inspired by the region's Latin-Caribbean heritage. And substitutions, of which there are usually some when ingredients are not available or up to par, are clarified.

For instance, one evening the tilefish with a tamarind glaze and broccoli rabe was replaced with branzino; another time, the broccoli rabe with soffritto (the Italian mirepoix, not the Spanish sofrito) and lime, was subbed by baby bok choy. The raw, shaved Florida red snapper, which is a zesty, tiradito-style display topped with a fermented green pepper dressing and puffed rice, is usually whatever fish is at its freshest that day. And it doesn't really matter because every dish is a masterful counterpoint of flavor and mouth feel, and

Vongerichten's executive chef, Jeremy Ford, knows what he's doing.

Small and large plates—most meant to be shared—arrive at the table via the kitchen's discretion. But you can usually count on the cold selections appearing almost instantaneously. If ravenous upon arrival, start with the meat and cheese board, which comprises a mound of marbled Iberico de Bellota ham, a pile of sliced chorizo and a fan of the tender lomo, or loin. It's accompanied by triangles of manchego and chunks of blue cheese as well as an assortment of pickles.

This snack has the merit of being one of the few compositions that is vibrant without being piquant. Vongerichten is a chef who likes his hot peppers, and he crafts them frequently in recipes for the sauces that accompany the fare. So be forewarned that if you order the peekytoe crab and corn fritters, which are airy and mild thanks to a roll in panko before being fried, the smoked chile tartar sauce is going to add some titillating depth. Same goes for the crispy calamari, the rings and tentacles of which are succulent inside and commendably dry outside, but get a wallop from the chile glaze that accompanies it. Even the crunchy potato nuggets, which are less like the adult version of tater tots and more like home fries, are rendered above-average spicy to the palate with a tangy accompaniment.

Naturally, you can try to choose items without zest.

A grilled New York strip or dry-aged Cargill

Ranch rib-eye for two is simply meat, if

you subtract the chimichurri on the

former and ask the kitchen to go light

on the pepper. Potato puree with

queso fresco is a smooth, light

whip of starch. For vegetarians,

the maitake mushrooms with

goat cheese is a gorgeous frill

of quality hen-of-the-woods

mushrooms and creamy,

pungent cheese.

But then, of course, your

waiter will point out that the

bottle of orange stuff on your

table is homemade habanero

vinegar and meant to be drizzled on

anything that is a bit unctuous. He may

even recommend you pour it on the warm

vanilla fritters, which are more like profiteroles,

perched on a lava flow of Mexican chocolate. I'm kidding, I

think. Because, well, such is the way of the Matador Room.

You're supposed to follow the guidance provided. Going your

own way here will get you exactly nowhere. ☑



Discovery Channel

Arriving at the Miami Beach Edition much earlier than your reservation is worth it. The vibe at the Matador Bar is gregarious and the cocktails to try are numerous. Make it a progressive experience and grab some oysters or a charcuterie platter at Matador Market, the hotel's all-day restaurant (open from 7 a.m. to midnight).

Dress the Part

That so-called lumbersexual look dominates here as of late with hipster diners galore, but smart casual is our overall recommendation. If dining indoors, the modern and elegant design by Yabu Pushelberg should inspire you to dress up.

Arrival Tips

There's a host stand outside the Matador Bar, which precedes the restaurant. That's not the reservations desk, and there's no one there. You'll be waiting a long time unless you actually walk into the venue and see the other host stand with people behind it.