



Miami offers ultimate in fusion cuisine

Chefs celebrate the city's global melting pot with seafood from all over the world

By Lisa Duchene

A Miami tourist in search of the trendiest new fish prepared by the city's hottest chefs can choose from dishes inspired by many different cultures.

Thanks to air freight and Miami's silt tire as a major U.S. entry point for imported fresh seafood, chefs like Cindy Hutson at Ortanique, Pascal Oudin at Pascal's in Coral Gables and E. Michael Reidr at

vest off the coast of northern Australia.

Reidt, Hutson and Oudin are among a group of Miami chefs embracing barramundi, a farm-raised fish that's a cross between wild striped bass and snook. These chefs typify the latest development on Miami's culinary seafood scene, which blends ethnic flavors from all corners of the world.

Miami's identity as an international



Cargo from a Polar Air cargo 747, including Chilean salmon fillets from Santiago, is unloaded and sent on its way almost as quickly as it arrives.

Wish in South Beach can have barramundi in their kitchens within 36 hours of its har-

melting pot, tourist destination and key departure point for the cruise-line indus-



Miami's many faces

Air hub: Miami handled \$549 million, or 59 percent, of the air-freighted imports that entered the United States in 2001. By volume, 65 percent, or 290 million pounds, of air-freighted imports entered the country via Miami in 2001.

Tourist haven: 10.5 million tourists visited Miami in 2001, and 3 million people took a

cruise from the Port of Miami in 2001.

Home of seafood icon: Joe's Stone Crab cracked 491.692 pounds and shipped more than 11 ,000 orders of stone crabs in 2001.

Culinary gateway: Florida restaurant seafood sales are about \$1 billion annually.

Seafood supplier: South Florida produced more than 16 million pounds of seafood valued at more than \$40 million in 2001.

try gives the city a huge appetite for seafood. And that demand is readily met, since Miami's proximity to Central and South America makes it a key seafood distribution hub.

But Latin America is by no means the sole source of supply for Miami's importers, who search the world to bring chefs unique fish like barramundi and Tasmanian sea trout from Australia.

Reidt serves barramundi with roasted pumpkin, chanterelles, sweet corn, lobster and a coconut broth for \$28.

Hutson serves it Asian-style, with an orange-ginger glaze in an orange broth with edamame (Japanese soybeans) for \$30 to \$32. And Oudin wraps it in pastry, bakes it and serves it with candied tomato and Mediterranean condiments for \$23.95.

A respected local supplier of exotic specs is Triar Seafood. In the six months since the company began to import barramundi, sales climbed to nearly \$1 million, says Peter Jarvis, president of the Hollywood, Fla., company. Whole H&C barramundi



wholesales for \$5 to \$8 a pound.

Miami no longer bases its cuisine on one cultural influence, like Nuevo Latino, the decade-old movement of "new" Latin food that originated in Miami and sparked a national trend, but on a global melting pot of flavors says Jarvis.

In 2001, about 10.5 million tourists visited Miami and an additional 3 million people boarded cruise ships at the Port of Miami.

Walking around the city, you'll hear many languages and accents spoken by European tourists or "transplants" from the Caribbean islands, or Central or South America.

Miami's culinary scene reflects the city's diversity. Asian, South American, Caribbean,

Mediterranean and North American flavors all enhance Hutson's menu at Ortanique. One early November night, Hutson Featured her signature West Indian bouillabaisse of Florida lobster tail, Mediterranean mussels, Key West shrimp, diver scallops and mahimahi in a curried coconut broth

served over aromatic jasmine rice.

Hutson's professional cooking career began at a tiny Jamaican restaurant called Norma's on the Reach in Miami's South Beach, which she opened in 1994 with her partner, Delius Shirley. His mother, Norma



Executive Chef E. Michael Reidt hand picks seafood for the menu at Wish in trendy South Beach.

Shirley, is a Jamaican chef dubbed the "Julia Child of Jamaica" by Food and Wine magazine.

Hutson learned how to judge a fish's freshness during her many years working as captain of a sport-fishing charter boat, and at Ortanique she accepts only the freshest fish.

When Hutson and Shirley opened Ortanique in Coral Gables in 1999, Hutson stepped away from purely Jamaican food and began calling her cooking "Cuisine of the Sea." a description she feels allows her freedom to prepare seasonal,

regional or imported fish with a full array of ethnic ingredients.

"I am just very intent on the best quality," says Hutson. "To me, as a culinary artist, I'm having a fantastic time. I love going into my kitchen every day. I love the diversity of fish."

Eighty percent of the seafood on the menu is local species like stone crab, snapper,

grouper, spiny lobster, Key West shrimp and pompano. The remainder is seafood products Hutson has discovered in her travels, including Mediterranean mussels and species her supplier brings to her attention, like barramundi. That Australian species will be the next big fish to hit the U.S. market, predicts Hutson. Ortanique's menu is growing increasingly diverse, as Hutson is now a guest chef aboard the Radisson Hotels' 10-day culinary cruises to the Caribbean and Mediterranean Seas.

In the heart of the

trendy South Beach strip, Reidt, executive chef of Wish, a Mobil four-star restaurant at The Hotel, made a name for himself with his French-Brazilian cooking, a label he's trying to shake. It is more important to work with good ideas and techniques than to worry about rules that come with cultural influences, he says.

I don't think a particular cultural idea should have guidelines," say's Reidt. "I was never one to color inside the lines."

Local species like snapper, grouper and pompano play a minor role on Reidt's menu, which is 60 percent seafood. Instead, Reidt creates dishes around Japanese octopus, sea scallops and New England monkfish, skate and oysters.

Reidt spent three years cooking in Hawaii before returning in 1998 to his hometown of Boston to work for two years at Zinc. When the restaurant in Boston's Back Bay closed, he opened Bomboa, then left the partnership in mid-2001 for sunny Miami to become executive chef at Wish, where he hand-picks seafood for his



menu, mostly from New England and Florida.

Pascal Oudin, owner of Pascal's on Ponce in Coral Gables, also brings in a lot of fish from northern waters, like Dover sole, turbot, loup de mer, dorade, cod and halibut.

He says that except for Triar, he's had trouble finding high-quality seafood from big Florida suppliers, says Oudin. He has been cooking in Miami for 20 years.

As the executive

chef of the Grand Bay Hotel in Coconut Grove, Oudin explored Caribbean/French food, but is now going back to classical French cooking.

"French people - we have a limitation on how crazy we can get with food," says Oudin.

He recently cooked barramundi covered with chopped artichokes, eggplant and zucchini for 700 people at an event

promoting seafood from around the world at Disney's Epcot Center in Orlando.

"In my new book, [barramundi] is one of the top fish on the market," says Oudin.

The barramundi imported into Miami is a mere fraction of the millions of pounds of seafood shipped from South and Central America into the city and then moved by truck and air throughout the rest of the country.

Most of the fresh fish flown into the United States arrives at Miami International Airport. MIA Delius Shirley and Cindy Hutson call Ortanique's cooking "Cuisine of the Sea."

handled 59 percent (or \$549 million) of the total value and 65 percent (more than 290 million pounds) of the total volume of U.S. air imports in 2001.

LanChile transports the most seafood into Miami International Airport, both in freighter planes dedicated to cargo and within the cargo holds of passenger planes, says Bunny Schreiber, an aviation marketing specialist with MIA.



Miami is the home port for many cruise ship companies, which pamper guests with seafood such as smoked salmon, shrimp and Maine lobster.

But American Airlines by far has the most flights - about 200 daily - in and out of Miami, although all carry both passengers and cargo.

MIA has the infrastructure to move fresh seafood, fruits, vegetables and flowers fast, as perishables make up 73 percent of its incoming cargo. On an early November Monday afternoon, for example, a Polar Air Cargo had just unloaded pallet after pallet of packed, iced Chilean salmon fillets from Santiago via Sao Paulo, Brazil. Cargo is unloaded and sent on its way almost as fast as it comes in, says Schreiber.

MIA is expanding cargo capacity with a \$500 million cargo development program that will add 15 new cargo buildings and double the warehouse space from 1.4 million square feet to 3 million square feet. The improvement will help MIA keep up

with an average 15 percent annual growth in trade between Miami and Latin America.

The increase in U.S. imports of Chilean salmon is part of that growth.

Chilean salmon makes up about half the volume of the seafood handled by Boston distributor Slade Gorton's Miami facility. Since all of the seafood moving through the plant (about a half million pounds weekly) is fresh, turnaround time is quick.

Tuna, snappers mahimahi, wahoo and swordfish also are trucked in from the airport, inspected for quality control, broken down into Slade Gorton's orders for other distributors/wholesalers or retail chains and either trucked or flown to customers throughout the country.

The operation began as a distribution point for salmon but





is now a sales office and profit center in its own right, says Nicholas DeSantis, seafood coordinator.

The cruise-line trade

The cruise-ship industry does not release the annual number of cruises from the Port of Miami, but most of the 13 cruise lines in Florida, representing 100 vessels, have a strong Miami presence.

For a two-week trip, the average

cruise ship takes on about 4,000 pounds of sushi, smoked salmon and high-end fish fillets like grouper and snapper, 2,000 pounds of shrimp and 2,000 pounds of spiny lobster and Maine lobster, according to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services,

For frozen seafood, many cruise lines turn to Excel, a division of Cargill Foods Co. in Minneapolis. From its 60,000-square-foot cold storage ware-

house and offices just outside Miami in Medley, Fla., Excel procures center-of-the-plate proteins for the cruise-ship industry and delivers product to ports worldwide. Up to 70 percent of Excel's total sales of \$125 million represents products delivered directly to cruise ships in Miami. Seafood makes up about 25 of it's total sales, says B. Kevin Waters, Excel's general manager.

The cruise lines plan their purchases a

year at a time and give Excel lists of what they will need from one October to the next. Products include scallops, mahimahi, swordfish, lobster tails, king crab, shrimp and salmon.

Whether eating at the city's hottest restaurants or aboard a Caribbean cruise, Miami's tourists and natives alike have a world of seafood to savor.