



ōkta restaurant hosted an 11-course dinner, showcasing razor clam, geoduck and black cod, all sourced from the Oregon coast



MILA Omakase is a 10-seat chef's counter that serves just 40 guests over two nights in Miami

CULINARY GENIUS

Collaborative pop-ups are a growing trend among the world's top chefs, enticing diners to flock to intimate culinary scenes that promise creativity and delicious experimentation

Noma started it with pop-ups in Tokyo, Tulum and, most recently, Kyoto, creating an ephemeral fine dining experience as well as a sense of urgency in inspiring new destinations. Post-pandemic, collaboration dinners bringing together the world's top chefs seem to be more popular than ever, attracting jet-setting diners from around the globe.

Miami's trendy Riviera Dining Group (RDG) regularly hosts world-renowned chefs like Dominique Crenn and Manu Buffara at MILA Omakase, its 10-seat chef's counter that serves just 40 guests over two nights. These are the most coveted reservations in a city with a newly booming culinary scene.

For RDG's Head of Culinary and Partner, Michaël Michaelidis, who was previously culinary director of Joël Robuchon Group in Tokyo, hosting chefs from around the world sparks his creativity.

"There's an exchange between chefs," he said. "You learn new techniques, and it's important for a chef to have a growing mind and not stay in your routine

but be open to new ideas." For example, Buffara brought sour mango, Brazil nut gremolata and tucupi sauce from Brazil which are all new ingredients for Michaelidis. He was inspired by Brazil's national drink, the caipirinha, to create a refreshing dessert with caça-granita, coconut panna cotta and lime mousse.

Cooking in an unfamiliar kitchen also presents very real challenges. There may be unexpected variables with equipment or ingredient availability that necessitate last-minute improvisation. "Collabs are always complicated because you're in a different environment," said Aitor Zabala, who is getting ready to reopen his restaurant Somni in Los Angeles. He was one of four visiting chefs, including Christopher Kostow, Aisha Ibrahim and Leandro Carreira, cooking at ōkta in Oregon's Willamette Valley for a one-night-only summer solstice dinner. "Right now is an incubation time waiting to open, so it's good for me to stay active at events like this."

Hosting Chef Matthew Lightner wanted the visiting chefs to be able to explore McMinnville and the

WORDS Amber Gibson, IMAGES left page ©Teo Crider, right page ©MILA Omakase

Willamette Valley, so he planned a second “Solstice in the Field” event the following day at òkta’s regenerative farm, where all of the guest chefs could enjoy food and wine by local chefs and producers.

“We don’t want it to be too stressful,” Lightner said. “We’re bringing these chefs here to engage with the community, and the idea was to give everyone a day to enjoy the local food.” With five chefs in the kitchen, it would be easy to run into a too-many-cooks-type situation, but the 11-course dinner at òkta went off without a hitch. The menu flowed nicely, showing off local seafood like razor clam, geoduck and black cod from the Oregon coast, with a few local ingredients like kohlrabi and hazelnuts interpreted in a couple different ways throughout, creating a sense of cohesion without feeling redundant.

With just one seating for 36, the chefs were able to interact with diners, presenting some of their own dishes and sharing their personal stories. This kind of high-touch dining experience is what diners crave and expect at exclusive events with high price tags.

At Fairmont Pacific Rim in Vancouver, Chef Hector Laguna and the team at Botanist host visiting chefs and mixologists from around the world several times a year, including Chef James Kent of SAGA in New York and Chef David Barzelay of Lazy Bear in San Francisco this past year. The guest chefs certainly enjoy some time relaxing at the city’s most luxurious and modern hotel, and these dinners have become a big draw for sophisticated Vancouver locals who relish the opportunity to experience world-class international restaurants without leaving town.

“It’s vital to establish some level of a working relationship before the visiting chef or bartender arrives in Vancouver,” Laguna explained. “We love to discuss ideas and menu concepts and which ingredients are in season in the Pacific Northwest a few months in advance, which sets the tone for how we’ll collaborate together in the kitchen. We always make a point to ensure the visiting team has time in Vancouver before or after the collaboration, and we love to act as tour guides for our beautiful city—it really builds on our bond.”



Opposite: At Fairmont Pacific Rim in Vancouver, Botanist hosts chefs and mixologists from around the world, including Lazy Bear’s Chef, David Barzelay

Top: Chefs Aitor Zabala, Christopher Kostow, Aisha Ibrahim and Leandro Carreira, cooking at òkta in Oregon’s Willamette Valley

Below (left): Visiting chefs at òkta restaurant collaborate to learn new techniques and create new culinary offerings

Below (right): Held at òkta restaurant, the Guest Chef Dinner brought together four visiting chefs a one-night-only summer solstice dinner



EMBRAER TIP

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2024 EVENTS FOR YOUR CALENDAR

Cayman Cookout – January 10-15

Eric Ripert invites several chef friends to join him at The Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman each January for an epic week of feasting culminating in a multi-course gala dinner. This year, spearfish for lionfish with José Andrés and play pétanque while enjoying bites from chefs like Kristen Kish and Enrique Olvera. caymancookout.com

l’abeille x La Clairière – February 13-14

Chefs Mitsunobu Nagae and Hideyuki Shibata share a reverence for Japanese ingredients and classical French culinary techniques. For this collaboration, Tokyo’s Shibata joins Nagae at his Tribeca restaurant l’abeille for a brilliant showcase of sashimi-grade winter fish from Japan, truffles, root vegetables and more, all prepared with subtle, sophisticated Japanese tastes. labeille.nyc

A Forbes Five Star Feast – March 8

Charleston Wine + Food’s most exclusive event is a Southern celebration bringing together two renowned North and South Carolina Forbes five-star restaurants. Chefs Steven Greene from The Umstead and Steven Brooks of The Ocean Room at Kiawah Island Golf Resort serve heirloom vegetables, poached oysters and more, paired with exclusive bottles from Kiawah’s wine library. charlestonwineandfood.com

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Barzelay debuted a new dessert during the Botanist collaboration that he’d served numerous times at small dinners in private homes but never during a restaurant service. His figs foster dessert was inspired by bananas foster—à la minute flambé, but with figs and served with fig leaf cream. Botanist’s Pastry Chef, Kate Siegel, suggested incorporating goat’s cheese into the ice cream, which added a contrasting tangy flavor to the sweet, juicy figs.

“This kind of collaboration is about forging connections, seeing what other chefs are doing, and making friends,” Barzelay said. “It also creates opportunities for your cooks to learn and also to exchange stages.” Staging is the restaurant industry term for when cooks work for short stints at other restaurants to learn and grow in their culinary careers—like an internship or apprenticeship.

The experimental nature of these chef collaborations creates a natural spontaneity and a win-win experience for diners and chefs alike. All of this strengthens the relationships among chefs and gives diners a truly once-in-a-lifetime glimpse into culinary genius. ←

