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MIAMI-DADE REVIEW

## Elegant Essensia serves exceptional, healthful food

BY VICTORIA PESCE ELLIOTT  
Special to The Miami Herald

Life gets so busy it's hard to keep up on the little wonders that brighten it, like wild flowers in a concrete parking lot.

I say this by way of explaining how I very nearly missed my



JEANNETTI

14th wedding anniversary. You see, it falls just days before Thanksgiving when work, family, parties, visitors and cooking cause time to blur.

It's also how I nearly missed Essensia.

After all, no splashy PR blast found its way to me. And it is stashed away in The Palms Hotel & Spa, a Miami Beach property with one of those generic tropical names.

But when a girlfriend suggested I call for a room to celebrate making it past the seven-year itch times two, I looked into it.

Not only did I discover a gem of a family-owned hotel, I unearthed a phenomenal restaurant where the talented Frank Jeannetti, former chef at top spots Pacific Time, Nemo and Pearl, runs the show.

After a decadent two-hour couples massage in the Aveda Spa, my husband and I wandered into the dining room, where I was immediately impressed by Jeannetti's sprightly, modern menu with artfully sourced ingredients and a healthful bent.

The elegant setting is straight out of a Caribbean plantation, with a wide curved veranda that serves as the larger part of the dining room. Generously spaced tables are set with unfussy china, streamlined silver and a champagne-colored marble candle bowl with cozy upholstered wicker chairs. Chocolate brown paddle fans spin overhead, while a cadre of nattily dressed waiters

checked on us as often as a first-time mom checks the sleeping baby.

The inside dining room is equally stunning, with its delicate lighting cast from a cluster of flowering bud chandeliers and well-spaced tables dressed in white.

While the international staffers are exceedingly nice, they are also about as green as the lush garden that surrounds the property.

The Palms does a brisk business in weddings. So, while you might consider this a spot for a quiet evening for two, you could just as easily be swept up into the euphoria of *Single Ladies* and *Cha Cha Slide*.

Meals begin with an exceptional breadbasket that includes sesame-laden flatbreads perfect for dipping in the trio of house-made toppers. My favorite is the creamy eggplant with a good zing of spice.

Amuse bouche might include a tiny chilled fingerling boat with peppery crème fraîche and a smattering of black Tobiko caviar eggs or a sliver of fresh fish doused in citrus with a nest of newborn sprouts.

Steamed black Prince Edward Island mussels luxuriate in a harissa-spiked tomato and garlic broth. But not for long. We devoured them in a moment along with a pair of pristine crab cakes that seemed to be mostly nibs of stone crab in a greaseless golden shell. They are complemented by crunchy red cabbage slaw and a velvety lemon caper aioli.

Near perfect is a signature yellowtail snapper with an emerald shoot of bok choy sitting astride a mound of divinely chewy black Thai rice with a shallow pool of red Thai curry and a drizzle of tangy tomato oil that smells and tastes like an island dream.

An equally sensational halibut, sampled another night, is



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SIMON HARE PHOTOGRAPHY

**MIAMI BEACH:** Essensia's signature yellowtail snapper comes with bok choy and a mound of black Thai rice.

brought to sublime by a menagerie of fresh herbs. The moist-as-the-sea fillet rests on slivers of baby golden fingerling potatoes and pinky-thin green beans surrounded with a garland of see-through fennel. Tiny bouquets of peppery radish greens and a few blue wild petunias add freshness and verve.

In addition to sumptuous wild seafood, the kitchen proves adept at pepper-crusted beef tenderloin and sweet caffeine-laced braised beef short ribs over rich mashed potatoes.

I can't recall ever eating a vegetarian pasta dish that thrilled me as much as this dense, salty, slightly spicy orechiette with threads of earthy oyster mushrooms, tidbits of zucchini and eggplant and strips of sundried tomatoes. Crowned with a single orange nasturtium, it comes together into a garlicky dance on

the palate.

Salads so fresh they seem to breathe are a reward for those who love raw greens.

The same care is taken with the completely sustainable, organic or biodynamic wine list, with such fun flights as an anything-but-chardonnay trio of whites or a "mystery voyage" of international reds.

New in the kitchen is pastry chef Gail Goetsch, whose subtly sweet orange-tinged cheesecake delicately laced with hazelnut brittle and a buttery hazelnut crust would wow any connoisseur.

And while life still moves too fast for me to appreciate all its wonders, this is one bright spot I will keep my eye on. Here's hoping this honeymoon will last a long time.

Victoria Pesce Elliott reviews

*Miami-Dade restaurants. E-mail her at [velliott@MiamiHerald.com](mailto:velliott@MiamiHerald.com).*

■ Place: Essensia Restaurant & Lounge

■ Address: The Palms Hotel & Spa, 3025 Collins Ave., Miami Beach

■ Rating: ★★½ (Excellent)

■ Contact: 305-534-0505 or 305-908-5458; [thepalmshotel.com](http://thepalmshotel.com).

■ Hours: 6-10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday and until 11 p.m. on weekends. Also open for breakfast and lunch from 6:30 a.m. daily. Excellent kids' menu and pool bar selections.

■ Prices: Appetizers \$12-\$15, salads \$10-\$16, entrees \$22-\$34, sides \$4, desserts \$8-\$10.

■ FYI: Reservations accepted for breakfast, lunch and dinner, soon available on [opentable.com](http://opentable.com), corkage fee \$35 per bottle, full bar and an abundant selection of organic and biodynamic wines from \$32 to \$250. Valet parking free with validation. AX, DN, MC, VS.

