



**WHAT'S COOKING**

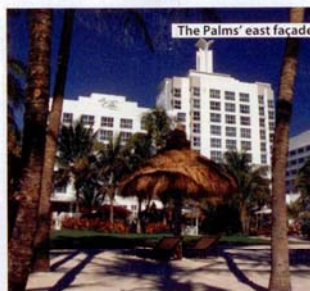
**LOCAL LURE**

*How the newly renovated Palms Hotel & Spa plans to pack them in*

BY REBECCA KLEINMAN



An outdoor terrace at Essensia restaurant



The Palms' east façade

**"The dining experience focuses on the essence of each fine ingredient and engages all the senses."**

—KATJA JANZON

**S**urprisingly enough, The Palms Hotel & Spa has operated under the radar for decades. The Art Deco property's Mid Beach address, family ownership and plantation décor more in line with Key West have given it an opposite-of-South Beach slant. But that's about to change. This year has brought a flourish of renovation, resulting in designation from Florida's Green Lodging Program. And aside from Aveda's first hotel/spa partnership, the new organic direction carries over into other amenities that should also pique locals, especially the restaurant Essensia.

"Like the name implies, the dining experience focuses on the essence of each fine ingredient and engages all the senses, from color to texture to playing around with tongue teasers such as savory and sweet," says VP and co-owner Katja Janzon, who tapped restaurant and hotel veterans Frank Jeannetti as executive chef and Wayne Malagon as food and beverage director. "Both immediately understood our concept."

Indeed, they're approaching the challenge with the fury and complexity of an ongoing season of *Top Chef*. Malagon, who has designed wine programs for Starwood and Loews, compiled 120 varieties that are organic, sustainable or biodynamic.

"Our wine reps tell me it's the only list of its kind in the city," he says. "For example, there's a superb

bottle of Burgundy, a Domaine de la Romanée-Conti Échézeaux, which wine drinkers will recognize as an incredible value at \$499."

The ability to offer such good deals comes from treating the restaurant as a destination in its own right versus a hospitality afterthought with inflated prices. The hope is to attract a diverse crowd that seeks something unusual: That may be a respite on the colonial-style veranda intertwined with a lush tropical garden, an unusually affordable Sunday brunch piled high with delicacies such as sashimi and rice "martinis" and stone crabs, or a health-minded, epicurean tasting. "But just because we're organic doesn't mean we sacrifice flavor; there's salt, but it's sea salt in moderation, or pizza with whole-wheat crust," says Jeannetti, whose two dozen years in the business included stints at Nemo, Pacific Time and the Biltmore, to name a few.

A stickler for sourcing, there's no getting frozen fish or common basil past him. Jeannetti is using ingredients like heirloom tomatoes and African blue basil from South Dade, line-caught mahi and first-pressed, organic olive oil from Spain. He has also set up a personal Silk Road for Asian specialty items through contacts from his days traveling and studying all over the region.

"It's these little touches that add up to an exceptional meal," Jeannetti says. **oo**



Katja Janzon