

the life

DINING. ENTERTAINING.
AND GETTING OUT IN THE 305.

{DISH}

ITALY IN MIAMI

We sent our correspondent to Italy with the Florentine founder of La Centrale to get a taste of Brickell City Centre's upcoming Italian food hall.

It's our last night in Tuscany, and Jacopo Giustiniani leans toward me to translate a quote on a restaurant menu by Italian journalist Indro

Montanelli, dated 1980. We're dining at the rustic Antica Locanda di Sesto, nestled at a bend in the River Serchio in the shadow of the Apennine and Alpi Apuane Mountains — or, as Giustiniani puts it, “the middle of nowhere.”

Tuscan summer days are boiling hot beneath clear blue skies, but by dusk, the heat subsides — stirring the appetite — and night-blooming jasmine and iris flowers perfume the air. The horizon turns pink, casting a chalky, gray glow on the vast pastoral landscape. The effect is a little magical, like something from an old movie or a daydream.

A native of Florence, Giustiniani, 37, grew up summering here, in Lucca, at his family's villas and their Fattoria Sardi winery. He spent the past decade in New York as restaurateur of upscale Italian destinations Felice and Sant Ambroeus (the latter also has a location in Palm Beach). In December he will unveil his ambitious La Centrale Food Hall, a three-story, 38,000-square-foot homage to Italian cuisine and culture, inside Miami's Brickell City Centre.

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Renderings of La Centrale's ground-floor Mercato, right, and second-floor Stagionale restaurant, bottom, show a few of the grab-and-go and sit-down options that will be available when the 38,000-square-foot space opens in December at Brickell City Centre. Fresh-baked bread, farm-grown tomatoes, craft gelato and homemade pasta are among the inspiration for La Centrale's Italian flavors.



ALL THE SENSES

"The Italians are a country of cooks," Giustiniani recites from the leather-bound menu in his softly lilting Italian accent. He bears a slight resemblance to a young, slender Al Pacino, only far less brooding, easier to smile and crack a joke. He says that Italian chefs initially took offense to this comment, but Montanelli defended his statement by explaining "that every Italian, in our DNA, we're cooks," thanks to the country's rich ingredients.

After spending a week eating my way through Tuscany and the seaside region of Liguria guided by Giustiniani and his La Centrale creative team, I understand why this quote strikes a chord with him. On my plate, the evening's antipasti is a thickly sliced, juicy, jewel-red heirloom tomato topped with a round of mozzarella di bufala and basil, a simple fried zucchini blossom and Angus beef carpaccio with arugula and Parmigiano Reggiano— all doused in the not-so-secret Tuscan ingredient, olive oil.



It was a week of bests, starting with our first meal in Florence on the sidewalk terrace of Caffè Cibreo beneath pink silk-shaded string lights. Over four hours, a million tiny plates crossed our table — pate, ricotta flan, salty prosciutto Toscana, an outrageously acidic beef tartare seared to a caramelized char — along with countless bottles of rosé, white, red, then a procession of delicate little desserts, and not one of us growing antsy.


The swoon-worthy highlights continued at Ristorante All'Olivo inside the medieval walled city of Lucca, where Giustiniani said he would choose the spaghetti with baby clams as his last meal. In true Italian fashion, he then prepared a version of his favorite snack for me to try: a single, briny sardine with a thick smear of butter atop crusty ciabatta. Yes, Italy has a way of romancing all of your senses.

IMPORTING TO MIAMI

So how will the experience of being in Italy translate into La Centrale, Miami's first Italian food hall? For starters, Giustiniani enlisted Giancarlo Pietri, partner at South Beach's Urban Robot architecture and design studio, to create spaces inside La Centrale that conjure different Italian regions.

"We never wanted to re-create or thematize," Pietri said. "We want something to remind you of the place. It's much more suggestive than literal, much more subtle. We also want it to be fresh, hip and cool."

La Centrale will transport diners to Tuscany, Liguria, Sardinia, Sicily, Lombardy and Puglia beneath a single roof. The first floor is home to a caffè, mercato, pizza and pasta bar. On the second floor, you'll find three restaurants (Carne, Pesce and Stagionale), as well as a central aperitivo bar and Italy's own Venchi gelateria — complete with chocolate faucets. The third floor holds a wine shop and enoteca with 4,000 wines, mostly from Italy.

 Dimitri Panciera of Veneto holds the record for the most number of gelato scoops on a cone: 121.





A tile-maker from Tuscany, left, oversees production of the terra cotta designs that will feature prominently in La Centrale. Jacopo Giustiniani, below in pink, toasts with Giancarlo Pietri and Leslie Chimelis of South Beach's Urban Robot design firm during a scouting meal for La Centrale at Caffè Cibreo in Florence.



Buongiorno!
There are at least 34 different languages spoken in Italy, including regional-specific variants like Sicilian and Neapolitan.



About an hour's drive south of Florence, we visited Manetti, Gusmano & Figli, eighth-generation terra cotta tile producers whose work figures prominently into the design of Carne, as well as the wine shop and bar. Pietri and Giustiniani derived inspiration for Carne's vaulted tiled ceiling after dining beneath Florence's classic Trattoria Cammillo's. Carne's walls will be treated with white-glazed terra cotta tiles and a red racing stripe accent — "the signature of any important butcher shop in Italy," Pietri said.

Throughout La Centrale, Pietri utilized pietra di Trani marble imported from Puglia, smoked white oak and brass in sleek, mid-century lines, and typography inspired by Italian architecture from that era. "It says we're here to stay," Pietri said. Of course, the harmony of authentic Italian flavors and warm hospitality is what will solidify La Centrale's success, and Giustiniani is determined for that to be the case.

QUALITY COMES FIRST

Going back to that Montanelli quote, Giustiniani explained that Miami's access to high-quality ingredients will allow La Centrale's Italian cooking to shine. "It doesn't mean the ingredients have to be Italian. You have amazing tomatoes in Florida. Pasta brands, you can find whatever you want in America. Fish, you have excellent fish.

"It's just the way you cook it," he continued. "Do you want to cook the fish with a lot of garlic and kill the flavor of the fish, or do

you just want to put it in the oven with a touch of rosemary and olive oil or lemon?"

Trust me — you'll want the fish cooked by an Italian with a touch of rosemary, olive oil and lemon. Afterward, you'll also probably want to stroll to Venchi on La Centrale's second floor for two scoops of gelato before an afternoon of shopping at Brickell City Centre.

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lacentralemiami.com.



COMING SOON

Following La Centrale, a smattering of similar projects is heading to Miami:

THE CITADEL

With Taquiza, Myumi, Cake Thai, River Oyster Bar and Stanzone 87 already signed on as tenants, the 60,000-square-foot Citadel in Little River is part food hall, part marketplace and part workspace. thecitadelmiami.com.

ST. ROCH MARKET

New Orleans' St. Roch Market is opening in the Design District's Palm Court with 10 distinct dining options, as well as a cocktail bar, raw bar and coffee shop. strochmarket.com/miami.

TIME OUT MARKET

Time Out magazine is looking at South Beach to replicate the success of its Market Lisbon in Portugal. The goal: a collection of Miami's top restaurants and bars under one roof. timeout.com/market.

LINCOLN EATERY

Coming to Lincoln Road, Lincoln Eatery will host many fast and affordable dining options inside a 5,000-square-foot space with plenty of seating. facebook.com/lincolneatery.

TREATS FOOD HALL

Aventura Mall is upping the ante on the food court concept by introducing Treats, a curated group of dining concepts on the third floor of the mall's newly expanded east wing. aventuramall.com.