

# The Miami Herald

## TROPICAL LIFE

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CARL JUSTE/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

**WALL OF GLASS:** Bartender Brian Browning checks a bottle of wine at Pacific Time, Jonathan Eismann's restaurant, which moved from Lincoln Road.

## cooking up a neighborhood

Can three food guys who helped ignite South Beach work the same magic in the Design District?

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A little more than a year ago, chef Michael Schwartz, smarting from some of the lows inherent in the roller-coaster restaurant business, took an all-or-nothing gamble on a sparsely populated Miami neighborhood where other restaurateurs had flopped, sparking a bigger fire than even he intended when he opened Michael's Genuine Food & Drink on Northeast 40th Street.

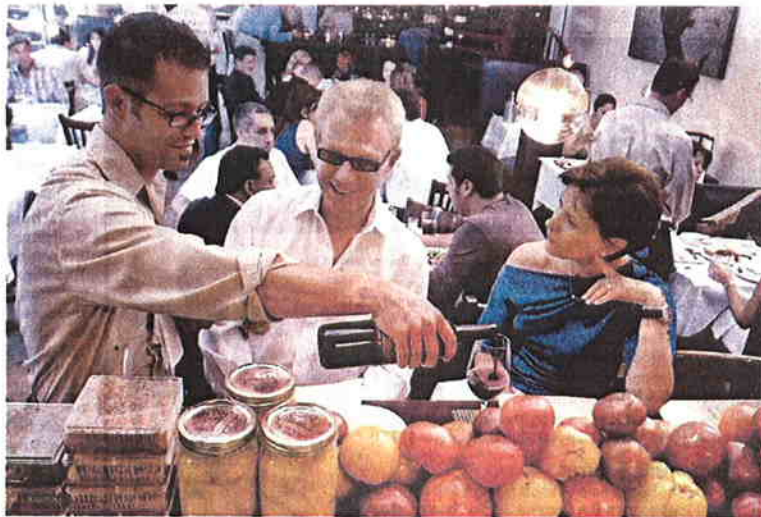
A member of the trio that in the early 1990s had jump started an upscale food scene in just-stirring South Beach, Schwartz has just welcomed the other two pioneers to the next outpost of hip, the Design District.

Call it gentrification *déjà vu*: Schwartz, who lured smart crowds to Nemo when there was

not much reason to venture south of Fifth Street on the Beach, now cooks within a couple of blocks of Ken Lyon, who opened Lyon Freres et Compagnie on a tumbleweedy Lincoln Road in 1992, and Jonathan Eismann, who followed in 1993 with the acclaimed Pacific Time, a Lincoln Road rarity that survived eye-popping rent spikes for 15 years until finally throwing in the towel in 2007.

The foodie community is cheering — and watching carefully to see what happens next in the artsy, upscale pocket many say can't help but emerge as "Miami's SoHo."

"I remember when we opened Nemo [First and Collins] in 1994, you could shoot a cannon down



RONNA GRADUS / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

**DINING IN THE DISTRICT:** Server Scott Fuller pours wine for Rhonda and Richie Mautner from Aventura at Michael's Genuine Food & Drink.

# Three chefs jump start the Design District

the street and not hit anybody," says Schwartz, who left six years later and struggled in failed kitchen after failed kitchen before convincing investors to get behind the Michael's concept. "Same thing here in the Design District. There have been a lot of nights where we have been packed, but you go up one block, and it's dead. Now that's changing."

Michael's has been a high-energy oasis in a historic, spiffed-up neighborhood featuring top-name design showrooms and art galleries — but not a lot of action, especially after dark and on weekends. By March, when The New York Times anointed the unpretentious eatery focused on regional and seasonal ingredients one of the top 10 restaurants outside of New York City and famed British chef Jamie Oliver declared it one of his five U.S. faves, the celebs were already finding their way, and the city's players were one-stop schmoozing while hostesses hustled to handle spillover crowds.

Now Michael's is joined by Eismann's new, less-pricey version of Pacific Time at 35 NE 40th St. in the old Piccadilly space, and Fratelli Lyon, 4141 Second Ave., in the glassed-in entry to the edgy, Italy-based Driade furniture and design store. The District's new restaurant scene, which also includes the sleek, month-old Domo Japones and Brosia, is expected to attract more retail and other businesses — and finally deliver foot traffic.

"Michael Schwartz changed the Design District," says Craig Robins, the neighborhood's main developer and one of the leading players in South Beach's rebirth. "It really did become a destination because of him. Now to have him, Kenny Lyon and Jonathan Eismann, three of the most important contributors

to the creation of South Beach, really broadens things in the neighborhood."

All three chefs are older now. Better schooled about the ups and downs of the business. More polished. So is Miami, as the cultural scene deepens and the visual arts bask in the international spotlight thanks to Art Basel Miami Beach and a growing roster of major galleries and collection spaces.

A lot of that affluent art scene is centered on the District and adjacent Wynwood, and that fact bodes well for the enclave's future as the sort of sophisticated destination that the Beach flirted with being before tipping toward mainstream and commercial, several area merchants say. "There is a similar excitement in the District that existed in the early days on the Beach, where you had a creative community that knew it was in on making something special happen," says Lyon, who will continue operating his 10-year-old Lyon & Lyon catering company. "But this time it's more high end. What we didn't manage to do on the Beach might come to fruition here. There was a big letdown when the Beach turned into Victoria Secret and The Gap and lost its unique identity."

## CLIMBING RENT

Eismann, whose rent and related expenses at the South Beach Pacific Time climbed from \$6,800 a month when he opened in 1993 to more than \$40,000 a month when he closed a year ago this month, also grew disenchanted.

"With fair exception, Lincoln Road has become a pizza/ice cream/liquor crowd," Eismann says. "That's not what we're about. Victoria Secret and The Gap next door didn't do me any favors. I had been planning to open a new restaurant in the District for a while, but I have to give credit to Michael. He flipped the



PHOTOS BY CARL JUSTE/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

**FINISHING TOUCH:** Ken Lyon puts the final garnish on a plate at his place, Fratelli Lyon, housed in the entry to the Driade furniture and design store.

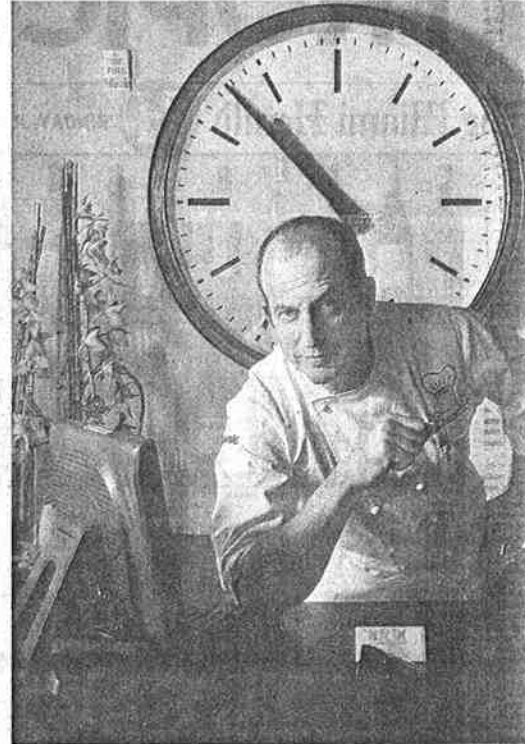


**THRIVING:** Michael Schwartz lured other restaurateurs and businesses to the Design District when he opened his restaurant.

switch."

There are no plans for a Gap-style chain in the District — yet. But construction

recently began on a modern, three-story building on 41st Street that will house the Rosa and Carlos de la Cruz contemporary art collection. Robins plans to build a space on 39th Street to house his own collection. And, accord-



**TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE:** Jonathan Eismann opened a more casual Pacific Time in the District after rents climbed sky high in his Lincoln Road location.

ing to an insider at Dacra, Robins' real-estate development company, another major Miami collector and one of the bigger galleries in Wynwood are actively looking for space to share.

Other additions: The designer clothing boutique En Avance, another Lincoln Road mainstay for 15 years, is abandoning the Beach because the rent was about to triple and opening at 161 NE 40th St.

"The amount of people that will walk through my door in the Design District won't be what I get on Lincoln Road by any stretch. But I'd rather have one solid customer that is really going to buy what I have to sell than 100 people coming in and being shocked by the price of a dress that's \$400," says Karen Quinones, owner of the boutique. She plans to open Monday.

## BRINGING IN OTHERS

Owners of Lincoln Road's Brownes & Co. Apothecary also are zeroing in on a District outpost. "We have our eye on a certain space," says Gary Feinberg. "Having Michael's, and now these other restaurants there is vital. It's a nice little core. The scale of it is great. In a way it seems more friendly than the Beach. You can walk around easily. It'll be interesting to see how it expands."

The big question: How will these restaurants, and the District in general, fare in a downturn economy? A couple of residential projects that were slated to go up in the neighborhood (and offer a small but needed customer base to the retail the District is trying to lure) have been scrapped.

But heads of some of the area's high-end design showrooms, which rely less on foot traffic, say they are relatively unscathed by the economy.

"We are fine so far," says Thais Fontenelle, manager of Coverings, Etc., which has sold upscale kitchen counters, flooring and wall surfaces in the neighborhood for a decade. "Even though prices are higher because of the euro, to the clientele that buys from us it doesn't really matter."

Kimberly Perazzo, manager of the Holly Hunt showroom, open since 2002, says a busier District can only bring more design-savvy customers.

"In all honesty, we're sort of unfazed by the economy. And with the new restaurants, the District is growing before our eyes. Not that long ago, at 5:01 you wouldn't see another person on the street. Now there's a nice atmosphere with a great, creative bent."

But there is no guarantee that the District's new restaurants will succeed.

"This is a penny business," says Eismann, who sold investment properties he owned in the District and Wynwood to be able to afford opening the more casual "Pac Time," (as regulars have always called it) without partners. "In order to succeed in this business you have to have a lot of experience and watch everything very carefully."

## HARD TIMES

Eismann, Lyon and Schwartz have learned the hard way. In 1996, soon after the success of the original Pacific Time, Eismann and partners opened Pacific Heights in Coral Gables. There were creative differences. The place tanked. So did the Westside Diner, which Eismann opened on Alton Road in 2000.

"I had to spend nearly a million dollars to get the partners out. That's not money you make back quickly. That trailed me for a long time," says Eismann, who expects a fighting chance this time because rent in the District is a third of what it was on Lincoln Road, which means his prices can be lower.

"By about half," he says.

Lyon was originally approached by Driade to serve as a consultant for a limited-offerings cafe inside the company's new store. He ended up in partnership with Driade and opening a full-menu Italian restaurant, although he had been gun shy about restaurants for years. Which is why after working as a chef in New York, and later at the Colony Hotel on South Beach, he opened Lyon Freres, an upscale market he thought would be easier to handle.

"As much as people remember Lyon Freres as a success, it was a failed business. We grew fast, but we couldn't catch up," says Lyon, who opened the market with his brother Jeffrey, who died of AIDS in 1996.

"We had the classic problems from the beginning. A partner who wanted out. Paying him back was crippling us. The rent kept going up. We didn't have the controls we needed."

But this time around, Lyon says he's standing on firmer ground.

"I just know a lot more about the business. I'm nervous about the economy in the big picture but not about the restaurant. We're moderately priced."

So far, the crowds at the 140-seat Michael's have been bigger than Schwartz envisioned.

"Right after we opened we were doing 50, 60, 80 dinners. And we were happy," he says. "Then Art Basel came. When we did 200 dinners for the first time, I remember thinking, 'That's it, we can't do any more than that.' I never projected 400 dinners, but on the weekends we're between the high 300s and 400."

Schwartz, father of three young children, doesn't complain about 16-hour days spent overheating in front of the wood-burning oven in his open kitchen, given that not long ago he was struggling to find a decent gig.

## FLOUNDERED AROUND

After leaving Nemo (he had differences with major partner Myles Chefetz, who wanted to keep expanding when Schwartz didn't), he worked as chef in several other kitchens, including the Beach House, Boca Raton's Zemi and South Beach's Afterglow.

"I didn't make enough of a plan. I just thought things would happen, and they didn't. I kind of floundered for a while," Schwartz says. He went into debt trying to keep his family afloat.

"I've had an amazing year with Michael's. I haven't dug out of the hole that I made yet, but now I feel like I have more options," he says.

Schwartz knows better than anyone that one day you're hot, and the next, maybe, you're not. Michael's has received envious national attention, including its recent elevation to Conde Nast's annual Hot List. But Schwartz won't be blinded by the hype.

"Every day I worry about how long things are going to stay this way. I'm a worrier. But I just focus on quality," says Schwartz, who insists on working with only the highest-quality ingredients he can buy, down to the just-laid eggs from South Dade and the "beautiful Pulgra butter" he cooks with and sends out with bread.

"The margins in this business are really small. And there are a million ways to cut corners. But in the end, people know when they're getting something special. The secret to good food is good food."