

# Tales of **JOSÉ** **ANDRÉS**

America's foremost Spanish chef  
is a storyteller at heart

**BY HARVEY STEIMAN**

**W**hen he was a boy, José Andrés would come home from school and follow the heady aromas of melting Manchego cheese and bread fried with garlic wafting from his mother's kitchen. She often cooked cheese-laden scrambled eggs accompanied by *migas*, slices of rough, aromatic country bread. Dropping his books, young José would climb onto a chair and join the ranks of countless Spaniards nurtured on this soulful, rib-sticking dish.



Today, filtered through the churning mind of chef José Andrés, eggs with *migas* becomes something remarkable. At minibar, the six-seat inner sanctum of Café Atlántico in Washington, D.C., where Andrés and his restlessly inventive chefs push the envelope with cuisine, Parmesan Egg With Migas appears simple. A poached egg shares space with razor-thin slices of bread briefly browned in garlic-scented olive oil. But the silky-soft white of the egg has magically taken on the flavor of Parmesan cheese. The yolk, from a quail egg, seeps into the crannies of the lacy toast. Microgreens decorate the food artfully.

To infuse the cheese flavor in the egg white, a Parmesan whey is mixed with egg white powder and jelled around the quail egg's yolk, using techniques Andrés learned when he worked with celebrated chef Ferran Adrià in the kitchen of El Bulli in Spain. The egg is poached at exactly 63° C for 16 minutes, setting the white perfectly and leaving the yolk just runny enough.

Some call this “molecular cuisine.” Andrés hates the term, arguing that everything is molecular, so the term has no meaning, and besides, it sounds ugly. He prefers “Spanish avant-garde.” Either way, he is less interested in the techniques than in what the food can convey. As sophisticated as that egg is, it can still recall the comfort food from Andrés' youth. Even for those of us who did not grow up with the dish, it can make us think about eggs and toast in an entirely new way. It's a story on a plate.

“I can't help it; I am a storyteller,” Andrés shrugs. Theater was his passion when he was young, he says, almost as powerful as cooking. “I create experiences. I want to establish a communication.”

## A Chef on The Move

At 41, Andrés looks youthful and peppy enough to run out onto a soccer field and keep the ball moving, although his somewhat rounded body might prevent him from playing more than a few minutes. His most distinguishing feature is a chiseled aquiline nose. Piercing eyes reflect an irrepressible vitality. That comes through vividly on television, in guest shots with David Letterman, Craig Ferguson or Conan O'Brien, or in his own half-hour PBS series, *Made in Spain*. It debuted in 2008 and ran for 26 episodes, spawning a best-selling companion cookbook that cemented



Andrés' modern interpretation of eggs with *migas* at minibar, the inner sanctum of Café Atlántico in Washington, D.C.



Jill Zimorski recommends a wine at minibar. She oversees the wine program at Andrés' Washington, D.C., restaurants.

his reputation as the face of Spanish cuisine in America.

Most celebrity chefs spin their success at luxury dining into more affordable, more casual offshoots. Andrés built his empire from the bottom up, nine restaurants that stretch from his home in the nation's capital to Beverly Hills and Las Vegas. He began in 1993 with a humble tapas joint called Jaleo, which helped popularized the now-ubiquitous Spanish small plates in America.

"I made my career by feeding the masses," he is quick to point out, "not by feeding the few." Today, his true genius lies in an ability to combine earthy, homey food memories with extreme sophistication.

His four Jaleo locations, three in the D.C. area and one at the new Cosmopolitan Hotel in Las Vegas, focus on Spanish tapas. His other eateries do Nuevo Latino, Mexican, Greek, Spanish and Lebanese dishes. These are ethnic restaurants—not, like minibar, elevated practitioners of ultramodern cuisine. The Bazaar in Beverly Hills, which opened in 2008, best combines Andrés' twin passions for tradition and innovation. Its menu gives equal weight to traditional Spanish tapas and the modernist bites identified as "José's Way." With his next big project, Andrés aims to create a home base that will house an expanded laboratory and showcase an expanded minibar, while welcoming the public.

If that seems contradictory, well, that's José Andrés, for whom boundaries are just something to transcend. Conversation veers off in a different direction every couple of minutes. It's a festival of free association. In the middle of lunch at an oyster bar in Santa Monica, he mentions a sushi bar he just discovered in nearby Culver City, and we're off for an impromptu full *omakase* meal there. His mind never stops ticking. It swings from past meals to a detailed discussion of the chef Escoffier, to the history of canning, to the difference between Italian *bottarga* and Greek *avgotaraho* (both dried mullet roe, the Greek version more pliable) and on to a passionate defense of his beloved avant-garde food. Is it any wonder his company is called ThinkFood Group?

## Inspired by Tradition

Born July 14, 1969, in the coal-mining community of Mieres, Andrés grew up neither poor nor privileged, but surrounded by good food. High in the mountains of Asturias, facing the Bay of Biscay in the far north of Spain, the region is known for the pungent blue cheese Cabrales and more famous for cider than for wine. Restaurants were not plentiful, and both of his parents cooked at home. His mother might greet him with a plate of cheese and almonds after school. His father hunted mushrooms, and on special occasions made paella, Spain's traditional rice dish.

"Probably this is what caught my attention, watching my father make a big paella for 40 or 60 people on Sundays," Andrés recalls. "We would go together to the woods to find branches to build a fire. He always put me [in charge of] taking care of the fire but he never let me put a spoon in the thing. One day I got very upset, and he told me to go away. Later he came to me and said, 'Don't you see,

without the fire I can't cook? You have the most important job.'"

Whether it was the cultural familiarity with good food or frustration over not getting to stir the paella, at 15 Andrés convinced his father to let him enter a new culinary school in Barcelona instead of finishing his academic studies in high school. But he side-stepped the classroom as often as he could. "It was a brand-new school," he shrugs. "I didn't spend a lot of time there." Instead, he got his first job cooking in a restaurant at the convention center, where he turned out such exotic non-Spanish dishes as gravlax,



Jaleo offers many Sherris to pair with tapas, which Andrés helped popularize in the U.S.



The paella station at Jaleo in Washington, D.C. The three Capitol-area locations were joined last year by one in Las Vegas.

Swedish cured salmon. “I can still recite the recipe,” he laughs. “For every 100 grams of sugar, 600 grams of salt, and we used crushed juniper berries, not dill.”

He spent every spare minute seeking information about cooking, especially foreign cuisines. “I would go to the library to read books about the latest food I heard about,” he says. “I got up early to go to the butcher to learn how to debone the meat.” He found a job at Neichel, Barcelona’s only Michelin three-star restaurant at the time. Before Alsace-born chef Jean-Louis Neichel opened that spot, he had perfected his craft in the kitchens of Alain Chapel and George Blanc in France. Then he made El Bulli a destination restaurant in the 1970s, before turning it over to Ferran Adrià.

Through Neichel, while still at culinary school, Andrés got an apprenticeship at El Bulli. It was 1988 and it changed his life. “Ferran made me what I am as a chef,” he says, simply. “He showed me what was possible.”

But it would take several years before Andrés could call a kitchen his own. After serving in the Spanish Navy, which got him to the United States, he worked in restaurants in Puerto Rico, New York and California. Then, in 1993, Rob Wilder called. Wilder and his business partner, Roberto Alvarez, had a successful Caribbean grill called Café Atlántico in Washington, D.C. Their next project, the tapas bar Jaleo, needed a chef. “Through a Spanish contact we heard about José, so we brought him in for a weekend of interviews and had him cook tapas for 20 in an apartment kitchen,” Wilder recalls. “Even then we could tell he was it.”

He was 23 years old.

Months after Jaleo opened, to popular and critical acclaim, Wilder and Alvarez reassigned their new chef to revitalize Café Atlántico. The place had become more party house than serious restaurant,

*“Ferran [Adrià] made me what I am as a chef. He showed me what was possible.”—José Andrés*

where members of the Latin American diplomatic corps could be seen dancing on the tables. “Roberto was a lively host,” Wilder notes drily. Andrés’ Nuevo Latino menu updated dishes from Central America, South America and the Caribbean.

Jaleo then expanded to locations in nearby Maryland and Virginia. In 2002, Zaytinya extended the idea of small plates to other cuisines. Two years later, Oyamel embraced Mexican food. To understand these cuisines, new to him, Andrés and his team aimed for as much authenticity as possible by bringing expert chefs to Washington to teach his cooks how to do things right. That’s why Zaytinya makes fresh phyllo dough every morning and bakes its own pita bread fresh to order, according to techniques taught by the Abi-Najm family, restaurateurs from Lebanon. Andrés and his chefs at Oyamel learned to press and grill fresh tortillas and simmer *posole* on visits to Mexican-cooking authority Diana Kennedy.

Today, the company employs more than 800 and estimates annual revenues at \$70 million. It almost didn’t happen, however. Andrés launched his Spanish TV series *Vamos a Cocinar* (“Let’s Cook”) in 2005 on Televisión Española, and a run of 265 episodes made him a household name in Spain. He started to think maybe

his career should be there. But too much tied him to America, and when Alvarez left for a career in diplomacy in 2006, the company, then called Proximo, reorganized as Think-Food, and Andrés became an equal partner.

Andrés still keeps a firm hand on what’s happening in his kitchens. Every six weeks, he spends one week visiting Los Angeles and Las Vegas. And in his chef’s whites and running shoes, Andrés can often be seen hurrying among his several restaurants clustered within a few square blocks in the nation’s capital.

On a midwinter afternoon, he occupies a back table at Zaytinya as chefs bring several new items for him to approve for the menu, which already features dishes such as fava and squash soup for \$8, or lamb chops with smoked yogurt for \$14. The sommelier pours samples of several new Greek wines destined for the list. As Andrés starts to leave, a young couple flags him down to gush over how much they love him on television. He obligingly poses for a picture with them. Before he leaves he tells the host to comp them a half-bottle of wine.

On the four-block walk to Café Atlántico, where Andrés’ deconstructed *feijão* (a Brazilian dish based on rice and beans) goes for \$28,



Beverage director Lucas Paya stirs the pot for a liquid-nitrogen caipirinha at The Bazaar in Beverly Hills, Calif.

he strides across G Street and climbs the steps of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. "I always take this shortcut," he admits. "Sometimes I look in on one of the rooms, just a few minutes in the day to appreciate something beautiful." We pass Jaleo. The original tapas restaurant still feels like a coffee shop despite a long menu that can embrace Ibérico ham at \$40 or a \$7 plate of *ensalada rusa*, a Spanish version of tuna salad. Around the corner is Oyamel. Turkish, Spanish or Mexican, each gets the flavors uncannily right.

## At Home With Wine

Andrés arrives at his modern, two-level home in the woods outside Bethesda, Md., as chefs from two of his restaurants tend a suckling pig rotating over coals on the back patio. They shiver in the winter cold. The pig is not ready, and the guests, including winemaker Mariano García from Bodegas Mauro in Ribera del Duero, Spain, are on their way. "Push all the coals under the pig," Andrés counsels. "It needs heat!"

As soon as he climbs the stairs, his 6-year-old daughter, Lucia, runs up to get a hug. Another daughter, Ines, 9, perches at a counter facing the kitchen, eyes intent on the extrawide screen of an iMac. Patricia, his wife, welcomes him with a kiss and brings him up-to-speed on dinner preparations. Their oldest daughter, Carlota, 12, sits to the side, reading a book. The kitchen bustles with several of Andrés' chefs and a visiting noodle specialist from China making final preparations. An Ibérico ham stands ready for slicing.

Later, at the table, Andrés introduces a wine-guessing game. He has asked Jill Zimorski, who manages the wine programs at his D.C. restaurants, to choose a bottle from his cellar and serve it blind. "Make it difficult," he whispers in her ear. He assigns Ines to draw up sheets for each guest with spaces for New World/Old World, country, grape variety, appellation, vintage and producer. The game, called 3-2-1, allots three points for a correct guess in the first round. After indicating which guesses are correct, a second round gets two points for each correct answer, and a third round, one point.

For Andrés, thinking about wine, even in the context of a game, is as important as enjoying its flavors and textures.

The contest takes place after several dinner courses, including the suckling pig, which the chefs have rescued by carving into serving pieces and finishing to mahogany crispness under a small broiler called a salamander. Guesses are all over the board, and when the wine is revealed Andrés is fuming because even García does not recognize that the wine is from his own region. "I wanted a great wine!" Andrés grumbles. After a brief sulk, he brightens, disappears into his cellar, and pops up with two bottles of a 1985 Pomerol for everyone to enjoy. Clearly, Andrés knows his way around the grape.

He should. He has been drinking wine since he was a child. He vividly recalls his first memory. "I was probably 8 or 9 years old and for *merienda* my mother would make this amazing piece of toast, sprinkled with red wine, sometimes heavily, with a little sugar on top. I cannot tell you how good that was, not *drinking* but *eating* wine."

His father, he recalls, occasionally drove to Catalonia to visit wineries and bring home bottles of cava. "There was no label. It came from small, family-owned wineries. He was so proud to say that no one else knew about this wine. When he could afford it, he would buy special wines for occasions, more often than not from

Penedès [another region in nearby Catalonia]. Torres was the big wine in our part of the world. When Torres won the Wine Olympics [a much-publicized international tasting], my father showed off his five or six bottles to friends. That's probably the first moment I remember conversations about Spanish wine with great pride."

As a student in the 1980s, Andrés remembers, he saved up to buy bottles of Pesquera Reserva. But it wasn't until he moved to the United States that he had what he calls a wine awakening. "At retail stores then, Spanish wines did not even have their own section. The few good wines were mixed in with the other international wines. I tried Gewürztraminer from France. I got introduced to Amarone, a strange wine from Italy with an extraordinary aroma. All these new *terroirs*. Every time I opened a bottle it was an amazing trip somewhere. My relationship to wine is always like that. It opens an array of different flavors that makes you feel like you are traveling, something new all the time."

Although he keeps a few bottles at home, he does not have an extensive cellar. "It requires too much thinking," he laughs. "I prefer to keep trying something new." He got into a wine-tasting group with friends. "For me, this became a university of wine. We made sure that after two, three, four hours of tasting we all left knowing more about wine," he says.

Despite this broad interest in wine, none of Andrés' restaurants has yet assembled a deep or broad wine list. That, he says, has been intentional. With limited space in his D.C. restaurants, Andrés chose to limit each list mostly to wine regions close to the cuisine. "If we put in California and France, that is all they will drink," he sighs. "But I want to create a total experience. We have the sensibility to create a new ecosystem in each restaurant."

Today the original Jaleo in D.C. has about 200 Spanish wines, including some of the most prestigious, and a broad selection of Sherry, the traditional accompaniment to tapas. It and the Jaleo in Bethesda have earned *Wine Spectator* Awards of Excellence. Jaleo Las Vegas adds about 65 wines from grapes commonly used in Spain. Café Atlántico, also an Award of Excellence-winner, offers a more eclectic list, its 200 options focusing on Argentina and Chile but also ranging from Australia and New Zealand to Oregon and Italy. Zaytinya actually has some Turkish bottlings, and a few from the Middle East to go along with its 36 wines from Greece. Oyamel has a few choices from Mexico fleshed out with more familiar options from the southern half of California.

"They don't duplicate each other," he hastens to add. "If you put all my wine lists together, it's very powerful." Well, yes and no. The total for all the D.C. lists is about 650. But that could be changing.

Zimorski, who manages the wine lists and bars in all the D.C. restaurants, came to Café Atlántico in 2006 after working at Charlie Palmer Steak, a Best of Award of Excellence-winner. She is starting to move away from the strict-constructionist approach, expanding the boundaries with complementary non-Spanish wines at Jaleo and going beyond California for Oyamel.

"Guests are more wine-savvy today. They're open to more things," Zimorski says. "And the world of wine has changed. We used to have trouble getting enough interesting Spanish wines for Jaleo's all-Spanish wine list. Now the diversity of Spanish wines has taken off. We can do more."

Andrés admits that his need to focus has limited his sommelier's options. "Someday, I want to have an amazing wine list that's very



JASON VARNER

At home in Bethesda, Md., Andrés consults his extensive library of cookbooks for creative inspiration, both for himself and his staff of chefs.

powerful in quantity and quality," he says. "Today I don't feel the need to be restrained so much. Let the country be the anchor, but allow it to expand. I want to tell a story through the wine list, but very much bring in wines from anywhere that enhance the idea."

Lucas Paya, who is responsible for the wines at The Bazaar and the Las Vegas restaurants, came from El Bulli, where he was the sommelier. His opening list at Jaleo totaled 175, and he is busily adding to the non-Spanish sections. The Bazaar's list now stands at about 200 wines.

Not surprisingly, when Andrés chooses a wine with dinner, it's not in the way most of us look at the task. He does not fret over matching wine to food, for example. He just goes with something he likes, and with most food it's usually a crisp, tangy white wine such as Alabriño or a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc. "I like whites with food," he proclaims. "To me, reds are better by themselves. A good red is like a steak. It doesn't need anything else."

## Behind the Creativity

For a chef who's nuts about the avant-garde, Andrés has an enormous fascination with eggs. ThinkFood's logo is egg-shaped. The final flourish of a meal at minibar is the presentation of the check, revealed when the server shatters the intact eggshell hiding it. Don't forget that Parmesan egg with the cheese-infused white. But he really gets serious about fried eggs.

"The egg is something I learned with Ferran in the kitchen," he muses. "A fried egg becomes a metaphor of what perfection means, and what humbleness means. I still can't make a perfect fried egg every time, and I love that you have to make them one at a time. You cannot escape that reality."

A cook brings a fried egg to the chef. It is nicely browned and round as a soccer ball. Andrés stabs at it with a spoon. The yolk oozes out. "Ah, this is right," he says. Later that evening, at Jaleo in Las Vegas, the egg appears in a dish topped with caviar and *migas*, this time cut into tiny croutons. With two spoons Andrés breaks the egg into bite-size pieces. The yolk becomes a sauce for the browned egg white. With a waiter's finesse, he folds in the caviar and spoons some on a thin, crisp crouton. It's heavenly.

He wants to make the point that the creativity behind every dish on his menus, from the simplest tortilla at Jaleo to the most complex high-wire act at minibar, starts with getting to the essence of each individual element. Then

it's simply a matter of assembling the building blocks into unexpectedly delicious combinations. "We call it creation by association. You move three building blocks, you create a new dish," says Andrés.

The egg also reminds him that the modernist techniques he favors are no different from hundreds of innovations that occurred so long ago that they are now considered traditional. Isolating hydrocolloids (important elements in the avant-garde's jelling of liquids) is no more weird than extracting from seeds the oil that fries the egg, he argues. "It took centuries for that to become normal. What we call tradition today was once avant-garde. What we



With Michelle Obama in the White House garden

## JOSÉ ANDRÉS, ACTIVIST

As a star chef, José Andrés wants to use fame to focus interest on key food issues. A frequent guest at the White House, he is a vocal supporter of First Lady Michelle Obama's anti-obesity campaign. He appears in a White House video showing how to cook healthy meals. He hosts informal roundtables that include bigwigs at the National Institutes of Health, and he is the only chef on the Secretary of Commerce's Travel and Tourism Advisory Board.

As an immigrant, Andrés feels a compulsion to give back, which is why, shortly after he opened Jaleo, he wandered a few blocks to a somewhat seedier part of town and dropped in on D.C. Kitchen. No one knew who he was, but he rolled up his sleeves and joined other volunteers working side-by-side with the ex-cons and other disadvantaged or unemployable souls in the program, making food for those who need it.

"As he's gotten more famous, he's even more involved," says D.C. Kitchen CEO Mike Curtin. "Often with celebrities it's the opposite. They have less and less time to give. I still see José here several times a month. He walks in, high-fives everyone, and shows them how to cut the vegetables better."

D.C. Kitchen uses donated surplus food and buys other ingredients from local farmers and suppliers to prepare meals mostly for small institutions, such as halfway houses, homeless shelters and social-service agencies. Culinary job training is part of the program. Several of the graduates now work at Andrés' restaurants.

In 2004 Andrés created a fundraising event for D.C. Kitchen called Capital Food Fight, which has raised more than \$3.5 million in seven years. It pits four young chefs in an *Iron Chef*-style cooking contest. Last year, José's friends Anthony Bourdain, Eric Ripert, Tom Colicchio and Michael Mina were judges. "It's big and noisy, like a rock concert," Curtin smiles.

D.C. Kitchen inspired Andrés to start, in the wake of the devastating earthquake in Haiti, World Central Kitchen, which aims to use the same model to feed and empower vulnerable people in humanitarian crises around the world. He is also working with a Spanish company to develop a solar cooker that he hopes will revolutionize poor nations' abilities to feed themselves without depleting their natural resources.

call modernity today will be tradition tomorrow.”

And so Andrés learned to embrace “ingredients” such as calcium chloride, sodium alginate, sodium citrate, liquid nitrogen, methyl cellulose and maltodextrin. Identifying starches, gelatins, pectins and natural gums as hydrocolloids, the scientific umbrella term for them, gives food purists the willies. But Andrés argues that it’s just the chemical names that throw people off.

“The scientific terminology of vinegar (acetic acid) or aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid) sounds just as scary,” he says, adding that the penicillium mold, extracted in a laboratory, which cheesemakers inject into curd to make blue cheese, doesn’t seem to bother anyone much, either. Likewise, although no one gets upset about chilling things in a mechanical freezer, using pure liquid nitrogen (at -321° F) raises eyebrows, even though nitrogen makes up 80 percent of our atmosphere.

Last fall, Harvard University’s engineering department featured Andrés in a series of lectures on science and cooking. In his presentation on gels, he explained how he makes a puree of strawberries, then spherifies it. The process involves spooning the puree into baths of calcium chloride and sodium alginate, then immersing the gels in liquid nitrogen to freeze them on their surfaces.

“You might say to me, José, why not just serve me a bowl of perfect strawberries with a little whipped cream? But we are here, I believe, to push the envelope a little bit,” he told the class. “You come to my restaurant, you eat this, and as you put it in your mouth you go”—he spits disdainfully—“then I have a problem. But I know you’re going to say, ‘Wow.’”

The key to using these techniques, he insists, is a sense of refinement. “Everything we must treat with finesse,” he says. “Any of these things, we try to use just enough gelatin to hold it together but when you put in your mouth, at body temperature it melts. If it doesn’t, it’s terrible. But if you make a French onion soup without finesse, it’s terrible too.”

One of his most controversial dishes is a deconstructed New England clam chowder. He created it in part to show off his modernist techniques, but also to solve a problem with traditional clam chowder: that the clams come out overcooked. His version drops the shucked clams in boiling water for a few seconds, just to firm them up and release the flavor while retaining their shape. He arranges them on a plate with a mousse from the clam juice, a puree of long-cooked onions, creamed potato with chives and parsley, and tiny dice of bacon, fried to add crunch. The same clearly identifiable flavors combine with new, and some might say improved, textures in the mouth, stamping some personality on a classic. It’s now a regular offering at minibar.

He created the dish for a special event at New York’s Gramercy Tavern in 2000, where other stars included French chef Pierre Gagnaire. “They hate me in New England,”



As a child, Andrés watched his father make the traditional Spanish dish paella. Today, the chef honors the cuisine of his native land while also elevating it through invention.

## JOSÉ ANDRÉS’ PORTFOLIO

### CAFÉ ATLÁNTICO (1991)

405 Eighth St. NW, Washington, D.C.  
**Telephone** (202) 393-0812 **Website** [www.cafeatlantico.com](http://www.cafeatlantico.com) **Open** Lunch and dinner, Tuesday to Saturday **Cuisine** Nuevo Latino **Cost** Entrées \$23-\$30 **Award of Excellence minibar** by José Andrés **Website** [www.cafeatlantico.com/miniBar/miniBar.htm](http://www.cafeatlantico.com/miniBar/miniBar.htm) **Cost** Tasting menu \$150

### CHINA POBLANO (2010)

The Cosmopolitan, 3708 Las Vegas Blvd. S., Las Vegas **Telephone** (702) 698-7900 **Website** [www.chinapoblano.com](http://www.chinapoblano.com) **Open** Lunch and dinner, daily **Cuisine** Chinese and Mexican **Cost** Small plates \$8-\$17

### JALEO DOWNTOWN (1993)

480 Seventh St. NW, Washington, D.C.  
**Telephone** (202) 628-7949 **Website** [www.jaleo.com](http://www.jaleo.com) **Open** Lunch and dinner, Tuesday to Saturday **Cuisine** Spanish tapas **Cost** Small plates \$5-\$15 **Award of Excellence**

### JALEO BETHESDA (2001)

7271 Woodmont Ave., Bethesda, Md.  
**Telephone** (301) 913-0003 **Website** [www.jaleo.com](http://www.jaleo.com) **Open** Lunch and dinner, daily **Cuisine** Spanish tapas **Cost** Small plates \$5-\$15 **Award of Excellence**

### JALEO CRYSTAL CITY (2005)

2250A Crystal Drive, Arlington, Va. **Telephone** (703) 413-8181 **Website** [www.jaleo.com](http://www.jaleo.com) **Open** Lunch and dinner, Tuesday to Sunday **Cuisine** Spanish tapas **Cost** Small plates \$5-\$15

### JALEO LAS VEGAS (2010)

The Cosmopolitan, 3708 Las Vegas Blvd. S., Las Vegas **Telephone** (702) 698-7950 **Website** [www.jaleo.com](http://www.jaleo.com) **Open** Lunch and dinner, daily **Cost** Small plates \$7-\$22; **é** by José Andrés **Website** [www.ebyjoseandres.com](http://www.ebyjoseandres.com) **Cost** Tasting menu \$150

### OYAMEL (2004)

401 Seventh St. NW, Washington, D.C.  
**Telephone** (202) 628-1005 **Website** [www.oyamel.com](http://www.oyamel.com) **Open** Lunch and dinner, daily **Cuisine** Mexican **Cost** Small plates \$6-\$14

### THE BAZAAR (2008)

465 S. La Cienega Blvd., Beverly Hills  
**Telephone** (310) 246-5555 **Website** [www.thebazaar.com](http://www.thebazaar.com) **Open** Dinner, daily **Cuisine** Spanish tapas **Cost** Tapas \$7-\$18 **Saam** **Website** [www.thebazaar.com/experience/saam](http://www.thebazaar.com/experience/saam) **Cost** Tasting menu \$120

### ZAYTINYA (2002)

701 Ninth St. NW, Washington, D.C. **Telephone** (202) 638-0800 **Website** [www.zaytinya.com](http://www.zaytinya.com) **Open** Lunch and dinner, daily **Cuisine** Greek, Turkish, Lebanese **Cost** Small plates \$6-\$14

**Note:** Andrés’ avant-garde cuisine options are available within some restaurants:

**minibar** by José Andrés (see Café Atlántico); **é** by José Andrés (see Jaleo Las Vegas); **Saam** (see The Bazaar)

Andrés laughs. “I almost lost my green card over that dish. But Gagnaire understood what I was doing. I was connecting my cuisine with every American guest at that dinner, because they already knew New England clam chowder.”

## Inside the Incubator

Adrià has his laboratory, where he retreated for six months every year to develop new ideas for El Bulli. Andrés has minibar. It became an integral piece of Andrés’ mix in D.C., but he has since replicated the idea of a small hideaway where chefs dish up the latest experiments to six or eight adventurous diners at both Saam, tucked away at The Bazaar, and *é*, at Jaleo Las Vegas.

Minibar, which opened in 2003 to extravagant critical praise for its witty use of adventurous techniques, never was, and doubtless never will be, a moneymaker. But it is an outlet for creativity, a sort of gastronomic think tank, where Andrés and his team can perfect techniques and ideas that would not be possible in the hubbub of a regular restaurant kitchen.

“That’s where we do the new dishes first. It’s the incubator,” Andrés explains. Many signature items in his newest restaurants got their start at minibar, including the “magic mojito,” sweetened by pouring the drink over cotton candy, the “Caprese salad” made from gels of mozzarella and tomato, and the “dragon’s breath” popcorn, frozen in liquid nitrogen so that biting into one shoots vapor out of one’s nostrils.

“This is like a true boutique wine. It raises the level of everything else,” he insists, “because you are always comparing yourself to this. We could probably make just as much money without it, but it’s an amazing human resources benefit. Every young kid wants to work in an environment like this. I owe it to myself, I owe it to my people.”

Some of the most creative ideas come from the books in his home library, which has so many cookbooks they spill over onto nearby surfaces. He treasures an original copy of *The Physiology of Taste* by Brillat-Savarin. “I had to save for years and spent everything I had to buy that book,” he muses. “I cried when I opened it.” He also prizes his rare 1931 first edition of *The Joy of Cooking*; an 1810 book on preserving food by Nicholas Appert, the man who invented canning for Napoleon; and *The Food of a Younger Land* by Mark Kurlansky, a collection of essays on American food from a Depression-era Works Progress Administration project. These books are not hidden behind glass, but well-thumbed from repeated readings.

One of the prime users of this library is Ruben Garcia, ThinkFood’s creative director. Garcia worked at El Bulli as pastry chef and eventually chef de cuisine before Andrés hired him to take responsibility for minibar and develop the high-end techniques.

“This week we all met at José’s house, the top chefs from around the company,” Garcia notes. “We spent six hours just going through José’s books, looking for ideas. Among us we came up with about 100. Then we will go try things. The best ones will eventually make it onto a menu.”

But Garcia spends as much time researching for the next restaurant, whether it’s reading up on an exotic new ingredient for Zaytinya or traveling to China to eat six meals a day to prepare for the latest restaurant, China Poblano, which juxtaposes Mexican and Chinese food.

When Andrés and his team travel, they do not look to copy



Ruben Garcia oversees minibar, where he develops new high-end culinary techniques.

specific dishes or recipes. “I look for flavor profiles,” says Andrés. “I can only get that from personal experience. For classic dishes, I can research recipes. I can hire the right chefs.”

That’s why Garcia tracked down a venerated noodle-puller in Beijing to come to America and teach the chefs how to make the silkiest, most refined noodles. (The *siu mai* pork dumplings at China Poblano are the most ethereal I’ve ever had.) Garcia defines the reasoning behind this extra effort another way: “You have to know the story to make the food work,” he says. “We don’t do it if we don’t believe it, if we don’t eat it ourselves. Going to China helped to write the story.”

## Food as Compelling Narrative

The setting is casual at China Poblano, located downstairs from Jaleo in Las Vegas. Walk-up windows offer those crossing to the lobby a chance to try authentic-tasting *cochinita pibil* taco or surprisingly good dim sum. What do these cuisines have in common? “Maybe nothing,” Andrés shrugs in a moment of candor. “I want to believe that it happened one time in history. But there’s a story behind it.”

He cites connections between China and Mexico through the 16th-century Manila Galleon, the first seafaring route between China and the Americas through the Philippines. “That was the Spanish empire, which used Mexico as the stopping point on that route,” Andrés says. “In Oaxaca you see [artifacts] that came to Mexico from

China. The China Poblano dress is very much Mexican culture. The story is that a lovely Chinese slave wore a beautiful dress, which the Mexicans copied with their own decorations." The lavishly embroidered skirt, worn with a frilly white blouse, will be familiar to anyone who has seen Mexican folk-dancing troupes.

The spice trade brought Oriental spices to Mexico, but there is little indication that any Chinese dishes found their way into the Mexican canon. "The way I address the issue," says the chef, "I let Mexico be Mexico and let China be China. But we know the flavors are compatible, because when we're sitting in the office lunchroom if you get Chinese takeout and I get Mexican, I take off your plate, you take off mine. And in the end it's no different from drinking an Australian Shiraz with French food. It works."

Sometimes the story simply explores an ingredient. One of the most compelling dishes at minibar, "Zucchini in Textures," was inspired by a puree Andrés' wife cooked for him. He noticed that the zucchini seeds had taken on a tapiocalike consistency. Experimenting, he and his chefs discovered that long cooking produces this texture, all the while developing the flavor of the squash. The refined version at minibar first simmers some of the zucchini until very soft, so the seeds can be squeezed out by hand. The rest of the zucchini, peeled, chopped and sautéed in butter to intensify its flavor, makes a puree as silky as custard, garnished with the tapioca-textured seeds.

That zucchini dish can serve as a metaphor for Andrés' career. The sophistication reflects a mind that constantly seeks different ways to look at food, whether it's a fresh way to treat a familiar ingredient or introduce a new taste from an unfamiliar tradition, such as Turkish or Lebanese.

Now he's on to plans for an American restaurant, based on recipes and ideas from the original *Joy of Cooking* and other old cookbooks. "I found a recipe for a grapefruit and shrimp salad with French dressing," he grins. "It's so old it feels new again. Who says you have to do the same thing over and over again?" He also wants to do a Sephardic restaurant, bringing to light the food of southern European Jews. He wants to do a Chinese restaurant.

"It would be easier to just do 20 Jaleos," he shrugs. "I have plenty of chefs. But that's not me. My most sincere need is to keep learning. Opening yourself to new frontiers is the riskiest thing for our society. But there is no better learning than when you have to go out of your comfort zone, take risks."

Many practitioners of avant-garde cuisine, molecular cuisine or modernist cuisine push that envelope as far as they can, creating extraordinary fantasies. Andrés can do that too, but he prefers to anchor everything he does to something immediately familiar. Maybe it's that his restaurants rely on such a wide range of ethnic

*"It would be easier to just do 20 Jaleos; I have plenty of chefs. But that's not me. My most sincere need is to keep learning."—José Andrés*



Andrés and Ferran Adrià lecturing at Harvard University last fall, where the chefs discussed innovation in cooking.

cuisines. Or maybe it's something more.

Like D.C.'s minibar, *é* in Las Vegas invites a handful of diners at a time to experience a meal of tiny bites. Hidden away at the back of Jaleo, its walls evoke an old-fashioned library card catalog. The drawers pull out, some individually, some in groups of three or four. Some hold wineglasses, others the tea service, and a few display fresh fruit. There are knickknacks such as religious statuettes, toys and an upright Olivetti typewriter, on which the waiter types the check at the end of the meal. It's all intended to tell a story.

"These are ingredients," he insists. "Religion is an ingredient. Childhood memories are an ingredient. The typewriter has memories for many of us. This is the taste that takes you back."

The storyteller hands me a tiny edible cone filled with a foam of La Serena (a Spanish sheep's milk cheese) and tiny caviarlike spheres of the quince paste called *membrillo*. "At *é* we always start with canapés you eat with your hands, no forks, no spoons. I make food and I hand it to you." He extends his hands. "I want to surprise you, to entertain you, and I want you to like it," he says. "It's me for you." □