



THE HEAT IS ON
Clockwise from far left: South American chef Francis Mallmann, who will open his only U.S. restaurant this fall; Estancia Vik, a colonial-style Vik Retreat in the countryside of Uruguay; en route to Garzón, home to Mallmann's boutique hotel and restaurant; dishes cooked with fire from Parador La Huella; inside Mallmann's El Garzón; the road that leads to José Ignacio.



FOOD NETWORK

CATCHING FIRE

Two of Uruguay's most acclaimed kitchens deliver their South American heat to U.S. soil.

BY TARAJIA MORRELL PHOTOGRAPHY BY HEIDI LENDER

THERE'S A RHYTHM to summers in the Uruguayan vacation destination of José Ignacio, where days of beach-going are elongated with striking sunsets and meals stretched into joyful processions. Since superchef Francis Mallmann put José Ignacio on the map by opening his first restaurant there in the '70s, the town's pulse has been connected to its kitchens. It's capped by a six-by-seven-block peninsula with a year-round population of about 300 that boasts some of the best food in the country. Soon, two of its culinary luminaries will introduce their South American flair to North American shores.

On November 1, Mallmann, the half-Argentine, half-Uruguayan chef famed for his masterful technique of cooking with fire, opens Los Fuegos at

the new Faena Hotel Miami Beach, which will be Mallmann's only restaurant in North America. "America hasn't seen this kind of cooking—bamboo beds hanging over fire, huge pieces of meat and fish," Mallmann says. "It's a very romantic scene where we use every position of fire—from ashes to the flame—to cook our food." From a cathedral-like lobby, patrons will be able to observe the *asados* (Argentine barbecue) in his fire kitchen, which includes a fire dome, grills, a wood oven and an area dedicated to roasting in embers, making it the first kitchen of its kind in an urban setting.

Meanwhile, the renowned team from Parador La Huella, the beach restaurant that since 2001 has been at the center of José Ignacio's daily life, will open Quinto La Huella in Swire Hotels' newest property,

EAST, Miami, in downtown's soon-to-open Brickell City Centre. At this urban reinvention of their original restaurant, owners Guzmán Artagaveytia, Martín Pittaluga and Gustavo Barbero, along with chef Alejandro Morales, will follow the same paradigm that made them a success in Uruguay, serving locally sourced produce and meats cooked with fire. "We don't want to be a typical Uruguayan restaurant—it doesn't exist!" Pittaluga says. "Our food is a mix between Italian and Spanish. It's a universal food, cooked with wood. That's our style."

To understand these openings, one must consider how José Ignacio grew up around these restaurateurs. Though less than 20 miles from Punta del Este, where high-rise apartment buildings and fast-food establishments litter the once bucolic shore, José Ignacio is a world away. In 1977, when the peninsula was home mainly to fishermen, Mallmann opened the formal Posada del Mar (José Ignacio's first destination establishment, which he ran with Artagaveytia for decades). There was no direct road to the town and no electricity, and water was delivered in a donkey-pulled tank. Yet with Mallmann serving up formal French dishes in the nouvelle-cuisine style of his early mentors Alain Senderens and Roger Vergé, Posada del Mar flourished.

In 1992, Mallmann opened his second José Ignacio restaurant: Los Negros, an intimate eatery in his former home by the iconic lighthouse,

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where many of the town’s current restaurateurs and several internationally recognized chefs got their start. “I changed my bedroom into a kitchen,” recalls Mallmann. “It had six propane fires, and I constructed a tin roof outside with a wood oven in 1995, which became my first real experience cooking with fire.” This technique of slowly cooking with flames would become his signature in an international career including over 50 restaurants, six cookbooks, a weekly newspaper column and an episode on Netflix’s *Chef’s Table*.

José Ignacio developed around Mallmann’s pioneering restaurants, but an essential element, which would represent the town’s heartbeat, was yet to come. In 2001, Artagaveytia, Pittaluga, Barbero and Morales launched Parador La Huella above Playa Brava, one of the town’s expansive beaches. “We opened La Huella with the goal of rebuilding the great typical beach restaurants from another time that our parents had enjoyed in the ‘50s and ‘60s,” Pittaluga says. “No plastic, no sponsors—just respect for the environment and food.”

Since its debut, Parador La Huella has been a staple for locals and a go-to for tourists from Punta del Este. Patrons stop in for an espresso, a boisterous lunch or a late, convivial dinner. The restaurant reinvigorated the village with simple, carefully sourced food year-round. “The people were waiting for something like that,” Pittaluga says.

The menu features local organic produce, *mariscos* (shellfish) and fresh fish, sushi and, of course, Uruguayan meat cooked with fire. “Theirs is an extremely successful language of food, wine, sun, glamour and happiness sunk in the dunes. It’s a landmark of Uruguay,” Mallmann says of La Huella.

La Huella’s birth heralded José Ignacio’s second boom, bringing an influx of international travelers (particularly Brazilians and Europeans). But the restaurateurs were quick to realize that José Ignacio’s success was tied to preserving its authenticity. “Discos are not allowed,” explains Pittaluga. “The music must end at midnight. There is almost no difference between José Ignacio in 2000 and in 2015.”

Improbably, the town’s spirit remains unchanged despite the arrival of some of Uruguay’s best restaurants and boutique hotels. On Playa Mansa, the calmer of the town’s two beaches, Vik Retreats boasts two exclusive hotels: Playa Vik and Bahia Vik feature art collections including works by James Turrell, Anselm Kiefer, Eva Claessens and Pablo Atchugarry.

At Vik-owned La Susana Restaurant and Beach Club, visitors savor ceviche and *caipiroskas*, the vodka-based version of the Brazilian cachaça cocktail. A short ride away is Estancia Vik, a Spanish Colonial-style ranch, with polo fields, a pool and a spa in a more pastoral atmosphere. On the peninsula itself, Posada Paradiso is a bohemian sanctuary where artists and chefs stay to enjoy how

chef-owner Clo Dimet brings urbane accents to local ingredients.

At the sand-floored, candlelit Marismo, owner Federico Desseno serves his signature four-hour-roasted lamb and straightforward wood-oven-roasted dishes that are masterfully restrained. The La Huella team also runs La Caracola, a private retreat accessible only by boat across Laguna Garzón, where guests spend the day in the lagoon surroundings, and Mostrador Santa Teresita, where Argentine chef Fernando Trocca serves a daily spread of salads, proteins and pastries.

In 2004, Mallmann moved half an hour inland from José Ignacio to the ghost town of Garzón, where he opened El Garzón, a boutique hotel and restaurant around which a community of designers and artists has congregated. At nearby Lucifer, chef-owner Lucía Soria serves charred sweetbreads with Argentine *criolla* sauce and fire-baked eggplant caponata. Alium, a chic boutique of Uruguayan designs, is on the square between the two.

Locals say that José Ignacio and El Garzón attract certain people. For those who find solace in nature and are inspired by what’s on their plate, this corner of Uruguay can quickly feel like home. And for those stateside who long to try the South American approach to eating and living, the opening of Quinto La Huella and Los Fuegos in Miami brings the region’s distinct taste one step closer. ●

