



Michelle Bernstein

A foreign affair

Superstar Miami chef Michelle Bernstein offers up a unique take on Latin cuisine infused with colourful world flavours

Even as a young child, Michelle Bernstein showed signs of an adventurous palate. “When I was seven or eight, I asked my mother to get me a kit to make escargot for my birthday,” recalls the Miami-based chef. “She bought the snails and we made it together. I ate over three dozen of them in one sitting!”

The 39-year-old award-winning restaurateur, who recently released her first cookbook, *Cuisine à Latina: Fresh Tastes and a World of Flavors From Michy’s Miami Kitchen*, attributes her culinary curiosity to her Argentine mother – a devoted foodie and Michelle’s ambassador to flavour.

When her mother moved to the U.S. to marry Michelle’s American father, not knowing a lick of English, she communicated through food, cooking all day and serving Argentine dishes, comple-

mented with Italian influences like risotto and pasta. “We used to roll gnocchi when I was four,” Michelle remembers fondly.

Growing up in a multicultural family in Latin-influenced Miami, Michelle was exposed to the flavours of the world at a young age. Although making fresh pasta and exotic seafood dishes came naturally to her, a career in the kitchen was not a given. In fact, she initially chose a very different path.

Having trained as a dancer, at 17, Michelle moved to New York City when she was granted a scholarship at the highly acclaimed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. After toughing it out in the Big Apple, studying at Alvin Ailey and then auditioning for various dance companies for months on end, she grew homesick and lost



White gazpacho with almonds, grapes, and cucumber

INGREDIENTS serves 4 to 6

2 cups chopped, peeled English cucumber (about 1 large)

2 cups seedless green grapes

1½ cups salted Marcona almonds or other salted almonds

1 small garlic clove, peeled

½ shallot

1 tbsp chopped fresh dill

1½ cups low-sodium vegetable broth

½ cup good extra-virgin olive oil

1 tbsp sherry vinegar

2 tbsp sherry

kosher salt and freshly ground pepper

OPTIONAL GARNISHES

¼ cup sliced seedless green grapes

2 tbsp crushed salted Marcona almonds or other salted almonds

1 tbsp chopped fresh dill

1 Put the cucumber, grapes, almonds, garlic, shallot, dill and broth in a blender and purée until very smooth. With the motor running, drizzle in the olive oil in a thin stream until the mixture emulsifies. Stop the motor and taste the gazpacho; it should be smooth and creamy (if slightly grainy). If it’s still a bit chunky, more like salsa than soup, purée it for another minute.

2 Add the vinegar and sherry and purée on high for 1 more minute. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve at room temperature or refrigerate until cold. (The gazpacho can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 2 days.)

3 Ladle the gazpacho into bowls and garnish with sliced grapes, crushed almonds and/or dill, if desired.

INGREDIENTS serves 4

4 chicken thighs or drumsticks
kosher salt and freshly ground pepper

¼ cup olive oil

1 cup minced Spanish onion

2 tbsp minced garlic

1 medium red bell pepper, cored, seeded and diced

1 medium green bell pepper, cored, seeded and diced

2 cups Valencia (Spanish short-grain) rice

¼ tsp saffron threads

1 cup dry white wine

4 cups shrimp stock or chicken stock, warmed

1 cup chopped, peeled beefsteak tomato

½ cup thinly sliced scallions, white and green parts

8 littleneck or middleneck clams, scrubbed

8 mussels, scrubbed and debearded

8 jumbo (11-16 count) or large (16-20 count) shrimp, peeled and deveined

8 dry-packed sea scallops,

2 tbsp minced fresh flat-leaf parsley

1 Season the chicken with salt and pepper. Heat 2 tbsp of the oil in a large heavy skillet over medium heat. Add the chicken and cook until golden on both sides, about 4 minutes per side. Transfer the chicken to a plate.

2 Add the remaining 2 tbsp oil to the skillet and heat over medium heat. Add the onion and garlic and cook, stirring until softened but not browned, 3 to 4 minutes. Add the bell peppers and cook, stirring, for 4 minutes.

3 Add the rice and saffron and cook, stirring, until the rice is toasted, about 4 minutes. Stir in the wine, bring to a simmer until reduced by half, about 6 minutes. Add the warm broth, chicken and tomato and cook at a gentle simmer for 15 minutes.

4 Preheat the oven to 375° F.

5 Add the scallions to the rice mixture, season lightly with salt and pepper and remove from the heat. Divide the rice mixture and chicken pieces among four ovenproof 2-cup casseroles or ramekins. Add 2 clams, 2 mussels, 2 shrimp and 2 scallops to each dish, tucking the seafood into the rice (do not stir). Cover each dish with foil. Put the dishes in the oven and bake for 10 minutes or until the clams and mussels have opened; discard any that do not open after 10 to 12 minutes.

6 Remove foil, sprinkle the paella with the parsley and serve.

interest in the competitive, and at times cruel, dance world. But the discipline she gained as a dancer proved invaluable for her destined career in the kitchen.

Upon her return home to Florida, Michelle’s mother told her about a new culinary institute opening just blocks away. “I immediately felt some strange magic, a tingle went right through me,” recalls Michelle of the moment she entered the Johnson & Wales University. “Something felt right, so I went for it.”



Mini paellas

After being accepted into the school’s culinary arts program, Michelle was soon balancing her studies with three apprenticeships at some of the finest restaurants in Miami. Upon graduation in 1992, she headed to Washington, D.C., and trained under the late renowned French chef Jean-Louis Palladin at the Watergate Hotel, where she learned classic French technique.

For the next five years, long and arduous days were spent in steamy kitchens at various restaurants, lifting crates of food and chopping, dicing and slicing for hours on end. She was often one of the only female cooks, which only fuelled her need to prove herself amid her male peers.

One day, a head chef pulled her aside with

some tough love. “He said, ‘You need to pull your weight around here or it’s not going to work,’” Michelle remembers. So without hesitation, that’s literally what the 5’6”, 90-lb. dynamo did: she started lifting weights. She also began sneaking into the kitchen three hours early each day off the clock to do prep work.

Her determination paid off, and soon Michelle was accepted by her male peers and gaining notice by others in the restaurant industry. Following some time off spent travelling through South America, the Caribbean and Europe, Michelle landed a coveted spot as the executive chef at Azul in Miami’s Mandarin Oriental Hotel. It was here that Michelle met her future husband.

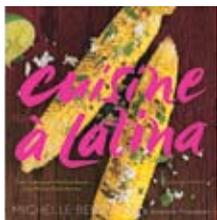


Michy's bread pudding

INGREDIENTS serves 6

½ cup	raisins
	grated zest of 1 orange
1 cup	brandy or sherry
2 cups	heavy cream
1 cup	half-and-half
6	large egg yolks, at room temperature
¾ cup	sugar
1 tbsp	vanilla extract
4 cups	diced (½-inch) soft crustless challah, brioche or white bread
4 oz	semisweet chocolate, coarsely chopped
	vanilla ice cream, for serving

- Put the raisins and orange zest in a small bowl, add the brandy and let the raisins and zest soak, covered, in the refrigerator for 24 hours, or up to 1 week.
- Put the cream and half-and-half in a small saucepan and bring to a simmer over low heat.
- Meanwhile, whisk the egg yolks, sugar and vanilla in a large bowl. Whisk one-third of the warm cream into the egg mixture, a little at a time, to prevent scrambling the eggs, then whisk in the rest of the cream mixture.
- Add the bread to the bowl and stir to soak it with the custard. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 24 hours, or up to 48 hours.
- Put a rack in the centre of the oven and preheat the oven to 325° F. Butter six 4- to 6-oz ramekins or baking dishes.
- Drain the raisins, reserving the brandy. Add the raisins and a tbsp of the brandy to the bread mixture and mix well. Spoon the bread mixture into the prepared ramekins. Sprinkle the chocolate over the top of the bread puddings.
- Put the ramekins in a roasting pan and fill the pan with enough warm water to come halfway up the sides of the ramekins. Bake, uncovered, until the pudding is just set, about 25 minutes; when you shake the pan, the custard should wobble for just a moment.
- Remove the pan from the oven and carefully place the ramekins on small serving dishes. Serve the bread pudding hot, with a scoop of vanilla ice cream right on top.



Miami chef Michelle Bernstein's first cookbook, *Cuisine à Latina: Fresh Tastes and a World of Flavors From Michy's Miami Kitchen* (Houghton Mifflin), offers more than just Latin cuisine; it's a tribute to her international travels and French cuisine training. Offering a fresh take on classic dishes (her Braised Chicken Thighs were chosen by *Food & Wine Magazine* as one of their favourite recipes of 2008), Michelle challenges readers to try new meals rich in flavour. Personal stories about the origins of various recipes dot the pages, as do helpful cooking tips, definitions of rare ingredients and vivid, vibrant photographs.

David Martinez, then a waiter, in 2000.

In 2004, the pair decided to strike out on their own and opened Michy's, their flagship Miami restaurant, whose name pays homage to Michelle's childhood nickname, showcasing a fresh, globally minded take on Latin cuisine and helped earn Michelle the 2008 James Beard Award for Best Chef: South.

Today, the pair enjoy a successful partnership. Not only have they been married for three years, but they own and operate three restaurants. "I keep my head in the kitchen," Michelle says. "David keeps his head in the business." He also helps Michelle with multiple other projects, which include designing in-flight menus for Delta Airlines

and making regular TV guest appearances as a food expert on the *Today* show. "I've got my hands in a lot of pots, literally," she quips.

Her latest restaurant, the tapas bar Señora Martinez (named in honour of her husband) opened in December to much fanfare in Miami's up-and-coming Design District, while her third restaurant, MB, has been a staple in Cancun, Mexico, for years. "What's great about being your own chef is that you are your own choreographer as well as your own dancer," says the *Iron Chef America* winner. "Every single evening, you are orchestrating a new ballet."

With the launch of *Cuisine à Latina*—filled with recipes honouring her Latin heritage, and incor-

porating influences from her formal French training as well as her travels through Peru, Mexico, Jamaica and Spain—Michelle hopes to help readers spice up their own repertoire.

"I want to give people approachable cuisine that's just fun and delicious and filled with a lot of passion," she says. "And maybe give them a little whimsy once in a while!" Michelle believes the greatest misconception about Latin food is that it must be spicy. "It's not only about the chilies," she says, with a laugh.

Michelle recently extended her focus beyond the buzz of the restaurant business to her community, launching a free cooking course for underprivileged Miami-area kids. "Every Monday, we are busing about 25 kids, ages eight to 11, from one of the poorest schools in south Florida." Her aim: to educate these children on the importance of nutrition and physical well-being.

Despite her rise to culinary stardom, Michelle has never forgotten the one person who had the greatest influence on her destiny—her mother—dedicating her cookbook to the woman who first taught her how to make escargot as a child: "For Mamá: Thank you for giving me the flavours of my life."