

New Orleans

MAGAZINE
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CHEF OF THE YEAR
ADOLFO GARCIA,
LA BOCA AND RED MNR

BEST IN DINING

- ▶ CHEF OF THE YEAR
- ▶ BEST NEW RESTAURANT
- ▶ BEST NEW CHEF AND MORE

» HOLIDAY FASHIONS
Back in time

» AARON NEVILLE
At home in Nashville

» MODINE'S
CHRISTMAS

30°
90°

A guide to
Reveillons



WYES-TV/CHANNEL 12
PRESENTS
THE BLUE MAN GROUP

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ONE WAY THAT NEW ORLEANS HAS NOT SUFFERED IN RECENT TIMES IS IN THE QUALITY OF ITS RESTAURANTS. OUR ANNUAL EXERCISE OF DETERMINING THE BEST IN LOCAL KITCHENS HAS LEFT US TOTALLY ENCOURAGED ABOUT THE TALENT IN THIS CITY. SELECTIONS WERE MADE BY THE MAGAZINE'S EDITORIAL STAFF INCLUDING OUR FOOD WRITERS. AS ALWAYS, THE COMPETITION WAS INTENSE. DID WE MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICES? TRY DINING OUT AT OUR LOCAL RESTAURANTS AND JUDGE FOR YOURSELF. PHOTOGRAPHED BY THERESA CASSAGNE



ONE NIGHT ADOLFO GARCÍA might be putting the finishing touches on a flat iron steak with grilled asparagus and greeting customers at La Boca – his new Argentine steak house on Fulton Street. The next night, he could be around the corner at Rio Mar sautéing Gulf shrimp *à la jil-flo* or, if necessary, running plates through the dishwasher. “I just do whatever it takes,” García says.

He spent six years immersed in every aspect of Rio Mar, talking to his fish purveyors more than his wife. Now that he runs two restaurants, García must trust his well-trained staff with more of the daily details. “I’m playing the role of orchestra leader,” he says,

“and I’ve got some great guys in my mind and my string departments.”

García always worked in restaurants while growing up in New Orleans. After graduating from the University of Texas at Austin in 1984, he enrolled in the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, NY. “Down South, we didn’t have a lot of people that went all the way up north to go to school for cooking, of all things,” he says.

After his first year of classes, he trained at the Windsor Court. “That’s where I learned some of the most basic things in cook-

ing,” García says. “I like don’t grab a hot pan without a towel.” He graduated from culinary school in 1987, and planned to work in New York for six months – maybe a year – and then come home to New Orleans. It would be almost a decade, however, before García cooked again at a New Orleans restaurant.

He worked his way across the kitchens of New York City and eventually became the executive sous chef at the Russian Tea Room, where he oversaw 30 cooks and served 1,000 people a day. However, in the early 1990s García was searching

for a new direction. He left the Russian Tea Room to intern at restaurants in Spain. “I started looking for my own identity and my heritage,” he says. “As a Latino, a Spanish descendent, where was I going to take my food?”

In 1996, a meal at Peristyle convinced García that it was time to come home. “There was a plate of lentils, garlic sausage, squash and huckleberries,” he recalls. The restaurant was full and everyone was talking about the food. Susan Spicer, Mike Fennelly and Emeril Lagasse were cooking food that matched García’s ambitions and interests. “They were starting to use different ingredients,” he says. “It was not just trout meunière, which I love, but that’s not what I wanted to do.”

His first restaurant, Criollo, brought fashionable Nuevo Latino cuisine to New Orleans, but closed after two years.

A year later, in 2000, he opened Rio Mar, which has become one of New Orleans’s favorite restaurants. The seafood-centric menu draws inspiration from across Latin America and honors the simplicity of Spanish cooking, allowing the fish and seafood to shine.

This year, García opened La Boca, a steakhouse that uses the same approach: simple preparations that don’t hide the main ingredients and creative dishes that remain within the tradition of Latin American cuisine.

Adolfo García, like the New Orleans chefs he admires, brought diners in this cultural melting pot a new range of flavors. He let our world-class dining city taste a few more corners of the globe.

—Todd A. Price



CHEF OF THE YEAR

ADOLFO GARCÍA

La Boca/ Rio Mar

