

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

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CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF



**TAMPA** — Michelle Baker and her husband Greg are the kind of people you're magnetically drawn to because you feel cool-by-association in their presence. He's the low-key, inked-up, James Beard-nominated chef behind two of Tampa's smartest restaurants. She's over 6 feet tall, tells cheeky stories, and dyes her hair the color of blanched almonds.

Chatting on their porch under the watchful blue eyes of their cat Handsome Dick Manitoba (named after the lead singer of the punk band the Dictators), the culinary trailblazers seemed a bit hesitant at first to take credit for Tampa's burgeoning restaurant scene. After some prodding and cajoling, they finally relented. "I'm just going to be cocky and finally embrace it,"

## A NEIGHBORHOOD BROUGHT TO LIFE THROUGH ITS STOMACH

BY CHRISTOPHER MUTHER | GLOBE STAFF

Greg Baker said. "We changed the restaurant game in Tampa."

He's not just strumming his own ukulele. The Bakers' pioneering gumption helped transform their once-blighted neighborhood into a nascent foodie destination. They laid a foundation for the new gastro scene.

When they opened their first restaurant, the Refinery, in 2010 there was nothing like it in Tampa. The menu changes multiple times a week based on the local harvest. For a city that is the corporate home of chains such as Outback Steakhouse, Fleming's Prime Steakhouse, and Checkers Drive-In, the Refinery's farm-to-

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**Chef Greg Baker and his wife, Michelle Baker, owners of the restaurants the Refinery and Fodder & Shine in Tampa.**



FAENA HOTEL

## A star is born: A look at Miami's hottest new district

By Christopher Muther  
GLOBE STAFF

**MIAMI** — It sneaks up on you slowly as you emerge from a patch of low-slung 1970s apartment buildings toward the beach. This once-forgotten strip of Collins Avenue is called Mid-Beach, but it's currently morphing into

Miami's hottest neighborhood, re-Christened the Faena District.

What's most intriguing about the emerging Faena District is that it eschews the predictable script of a downtrodden neighborhood slowly waking up like a real estate Rip Van Winkle. Most areas come back

once a sprinkling of galleries and restaurants gradually appear. However this town-within-a-town makeover is the vision of one man (with a lot of artistic and architectural assistance).

Argentinian hotel impresario Alan Faena and business partner Len Blavatnik bought all the real estate on the stretch of Collins Ave. that runs from 32nd Street to 36th Street and reimagined it as a cultural playground where people come for a taste of old Miami glamour, with a luxury price tag.

"I am a storyteller," Faena said. "I know how to tell a story and to bring something new to the world."

When it's completed, the \$1.2 billion project will encompass the Faena Hotel Miami Beach (which opened late last year), an 18-story Foster + Partners-designed condominium tower called Faena House, a drum-shaped performing

arts center designed by Rem Koolhaas/OMA called Faena Forum, two adjacent condo towers called Faena Versailles, a beachside guest house, and Faena Bazaar, a retail space also designed by Koolhaas.

It was a real-life game of Monopoly as Blavatnik and

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The view of Miami Beach from the balcony at the Faena Hotel.

### Inside

#### SPA DAZE

Carillon has amenities so good you want to work out.

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#### WARM THOUGHTS

Curacao's colorful mix of cultures and things to do.

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#### OPENING DAY

The Fenway suite debuts at Hotel Commonwealth.

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#### SNOOZE FEST

Sleepovers are cool, especially in a zoo.

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PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

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fork mindset was revolutionary.

With this formula, Greg Baker not only lit a fire under his Yard Bird en Cocotte, but he also lit an inspirational fire under many of the city's chefs.

I need to stop here and reiterate that this James Beard-nominated chef endearingly refers to the chicken on his menu as yard bird.

Thanks to the Bakers and their ilk, the neighborhood of Seminole Heights, a part of Tampa once known for its ruffians, strumpets, and non-stop transgressions, has become the epicenter of a movement that's spread across the city. On a characterless boulevard full of used car dealerships and empty sidewalks there are now restaurants where people wait for tables on Friday and Saturday nights — sometimes up to three and four hours.

It's changed so much that Michelle Baker wants to celebrate her neighborhood on a T-shirt.

"It would say 'Seminole Heights' on the front," she said. "And the back would read: 'It's not just hookers and drug dealers.'"

Before we get ahead of ourselves, the Seminole Heights neighborhood is not exactly the new Brooklyn. You'll hear the comparison from everyone, but please disregard. Also, good food is not a foreign concept in Tampa. It is the somewhat disputed birthplace of the Cuban sandwich and the home of the legendary and opulent Bern's Steak House and its spin-off Haven. Bern's is so legendary that its owners recently partnered with a hotel group to open Epicurean Hotel, an innovative food-themed hotel in the Hyde Park neighborhood.

London-born mixologist Ro Patel recalls his first stroll through the city shortly after moving to Tampa eight years ago.

"I remember going downtown at 8 or 9 at night to check it out, and it was tumble weeds," Patel said. "There was nothing going on. All the bars and

# Innovative chefs lit a fire of inspiration in Tampa



businesses were closed and I thought, 'Oh my God, what have I done? Why did I move here?'"

Three years later, Patel, a well-regarded cocktail master, changed the city's bar culture by opening a speakeasy called Ciro's. He said residents were slow to warm up to his menu of classic cocktails, but now reservations (and a password) are necessary to gain entry. Downtown Tampa, which is a short drive from Seminole Heights, is experiencing a renaissance of its own thanks in part to the newly completed Riverwalk

"The transformation of the restaurant scene here is happening at breakneck speed," he said. "It's amazing. Seminole Heights has been perfect because the rent there was conducive to young chefs opening up restaurants."

Two of those young restaurateurs,

**Top, from left: Masaru Takaku, Ty Rodriguez, and Ferrell Alvarez are among the young chefs and restaurateurs who have transformed the Seminole Heights neighborhood in Tampa. Above, from left: A chicken and jam breakfast biscuit at Fodder & Shine and barbecue chicken from Ichicoro Ramen.**

Ty Rodriguez and Ferrell Alvarez, saw just how starved (bad pun intended) Tampa residents were for new dining options when they opened their restaurant Rooster & the Till at the end of 2013. They started with 35 seats, grew to 42 seats in March 2014, and this July doubled their space. The walls are paneled in horizontal slabs of recovered wood and finished off with a pic-

ture of a giant rooster from the Ybor neighborhood.

On a recent Saturday night the place was packed. Alvarez darted around the open kitchen while I stuffed myself with a small plate of gnocchi, short ribs, smoked ricotta, and spicy pickled peperonata. It may sound like a lot for one dish, but Alvarez is a master of playing with flavors without excessive portions. Look no further than the artistry of his matcha custard, miso butterscotch, black sesame nori "glass," with valrhona chocolate five spice sorbet. It resembles modern art on a small plate.

Tampanians — or Tampanans, take your pick — who previously steered clear of Seminole Heights, are now starting to approach the neighborhood, but cautiously.

"There's tons of funny stories about

that," says Rodriguez. "I hear people say 'I hope my car is safe out there.' There was a group that got back to their car, and they saw that their hubcaps weren't stolen and said 'I get to keep my hubcaps and this place is awesome, I'm definitely coming back.' It's pretty hilarious."

Many of these young chefs moved away from Tampa, but returned to be near their families. Noel Cruz, co-owner of the insanely popular Ichicoro Ramen grew up in Tampa and came back after opening two restaurants in New York. He and chef Masaru Takaku opened Ichicoro Ramen in a former auto body shop. The two put an innovative Asian spin on favorites such as the Cuban sandwich and fried chicken.

"There's a lot going on here," said Takaku, looking a bit frazzled after the Saturday lunch crush. "We saw an opportunity, and the timing was perfect."

So perfect that patrons wait up to four hours for tables. I didn't have that kind of time or patience, so I came for a very late lunch and dug into the CuBaoNo bun. I had spent most of the day eating, but it didn't stop me from trying some of the favorites at Ichicoro, or the Independent Bar and Cafe, the Mermaid Tavern, Fodder & Shine (also owned by the Bakers), and Ella's Americana Folk Art Cafe, which technically isn't in Seminole Heights, but close enough for me to visit for the funky monkey waffle. I confess that I stepped into Tampa's buzzy gastro scene with a skeptical attitude, low expectations, and a raised eyebrow. I left with a much snugger waistband on my jeans.

"We're not a safe restaurant scene," said Alvarez of Rooster & the Till. "But that's why people are coming to this neighborhood. The restaurants aren't cookie cutter. People have this misconception that Tampa is mundane. I'd like to think that's quickly changing."

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Faena bought up the Collins Ave. properties and started to bring their vision to life. He was wildly successful with a similar transformation in Argentina.

"For me a hotel alone doesn't have the power to make change in the city," Faena said. "I pooled all these great minds to work together to create a place in one of the most important American cities that will be hopefully be a cultural center in the city. Not only in the city, but in the world."

Many buildings in the district are still under construction, but it's already made headlines. The penthouse of Faena House sold for \$60 million last year, making it the most expensive home in Florida.

Although he's collaborated with designers, architects, artists, and even a movie director and costume designer for this new Miami neighborhood, the district is clearly the vision of one man. Alan Faena is a charming, larger-than-life figure who favors ensembles of white linen topped with feather-adorned broad rim straw hats. He regularly references that his goal is to create a neighborhood filled with transformative experiences.

If the retro-fitted 1940s Faena Miami Beach Hotel (formerly the Saxony) is any indication of what's to come, then Faena will be one of the most well-curated, imaginative, and phantasmagorical neighborhoods on the East Coast.

When you enter the hotel, you're not in the lobby, you're in a stately entryway called the cathedral. The walls are covered with murals from Argentinian painter Juan Gatti, and the vast room is lined with gold-leaf pillars. Continue walking outside and you come face-to-tusk with Damien Hirst's \$18 million 24-karat gilded woolly mammoth skeleton sculpture. Check-in is off to the side. The idea is that you don't enter a busy, stressful lobby, but a calm, artistic space that sets the tone for your stay.

# Miami's hottest district is a feast for the eyes



To create his escapist and luxury lodging tone, Faena collaborated with Australian director Baz Luhrmann and his Academy Award-winning costume designer wife Catherine Martin. Having directed movies such as "The Great Gatsby" and "Moulin Rouge!," Luhrmann has a background in creating fantasy worlds. Parts of the hotel could have come directly from Luhrmann films, such as a cabaret theater that feels as if it were plucked right out of "Moulin Rouge!"

"I really wanted some of the most talented people I could find to work on the project with me," said Faena, who could pass as a character from a Luhrmann film. "I always admired Baz and Catherine. They not only know only how to tell the story, but they look at the design of the story, the design of the scenery, and the music, so we have a lot in common."

The hotel is filled with dramatic staircases, innovative chandeliers, grand art, and bold hues that meld old Hollywood with Miami's monied, jet-set salad days. Everything from the museum-worthy art installations to the world-famous chefs (such as Francis Mallman) in the hotel's restaurants, to the pillow cases embroidered with Faena's trademark hat are used to tell his story.

"This kind of old Miami is very important. It's forgotten," he said. "I almost feel a responsibility to bring some of that back through this project."

**FAENA HOTEL MIAMI BEACH**, 3201 Collins Ave., 305-534-880, [www.faena.com](http://www.faena.com). Rates from \$745 and up.

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The service and style at the Faena Hotel in Miami Beach is a blend of retro and modern touches.