The Chicago way

THE UNTOUCHABLE PAUL KAHA N COOKS UP A STORM IN THE WINDY CITY

—CHICAGO, USA—

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EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN

L’Escalier was a much-loved fine-dining institution at Palm Beach’s historic Breakers resort. But, as Liz Campbell discovers, replacing it with a daring new concept has made it the darling of Florida’s billionaires’ playground.
uilt by legendary business tycoon, Henry Morrison Flagler in 1896, The Breakers Hotel plays host to the world’s wealthy – at least to those who don’t live aboard their yachts or in one of the fabulous Palm Beach homes for ‘the season’.

After all, this is the richest postcode in America, boasting more than 30 billionaires (yes that is a b, not an m), who flock here from around the world between January and April. About 87% of the population are just your average millionaires. And the rest? They make up the workforce that caters to the glitterati.

From January to April – the season – this 3.9 square mile island welcomes back residents such as Donald Trump, David Koch, James Patterson and Yoko Ono. The register of homeowners who have made this their playground has included Flagler himself, the Kennedy clan, Estée Lauder and Frank Sinatra.

Palm Beach is home to Worth Avenue, the elegant, cultured East Coast rival to Hollywood’s Rodeo Drive. Here, you won’t find the typical pink flamingos and tacky T-shirts so beloved of Florida visitors. Instead, the iconic blue of Tiffany’s awnings and an elegant Art Deco clock quietly proclaim the treasures within. The Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus signs are discreet. The small boutiques include a veritable who’s who of designers – Giorgio Armani, Cartier, Louis Vuitton, Hermès, Polo Ralph Lauren, Gucci, Chanel, Brooks Brothers, Salvatore Ferragamo – with the emphasis on haute couture and chic.

Given the emphasis on names, it’s not surprising that the restaurants of Palm Beach feature celebrity chefs such as Daniel Boulud, Michelle Bernstein and Michael Wurster (who recently moved to Gordon Ramsay at The London). The emphasis has traditionally been on high-end cuisine drawing on French or Italian roots.

But a quiet evolution has been slowly changing the food scene and nowhere is it more evident than at The Breakers itself.

At L’Escalier, the hotel’s legendary dining spot, appropriately-attired diners once sat at tables dressed with floor-length linen, under soaring ceilings with hand-painted beams. They enjoyed four- or five-course French-inspired dinners, paired with wines. “It was a dining marathon,” says Shari Mantegna, director of marketing for The Breakers. “It was fine for some clientele, but we found guest preferences were changing. They didn’t necessarily want to get dressed up and have a long dining experience.”

Located in the Florentine Room, L’Escalier and The Tapestry Bar together filled the 10,000 sq ft space, an opulent area open to the lobby. Patterned after the 14th-century Palazzo Davanzati in Florence, the Florentine Room is richly decorated with ornate, intricate details including a hand-painted, high-beamed ceiling and wrought-iron chandeliers. While appreciating its beauty and grandeur, designer Adam Tihany, who was given the brief to redesign this space, commented, “…It was a little forbidding, not a cozy, intimate space. It was more like a big lobby.”

Mindful of its history, Tihany transformed the Florentine Room into HMF (Henry Morrison Flagler’s initials form the new restaurant’s name), using contemporary furnishings and fixtures to create a vibrant contrast with the Italianate architecture. And it works.

At either end, twin contemporary bars featuring ribbon mahogany with bronze accents beckon guests to enjoy cocktails at one or sushi at the other. Stylish, modern furniture in rich tones of cognac and cyprus green softly contrast with a bold, colourful carpet. Soft radiance from over-sized floor lamps and wall sconces lining each column around the perimeter give the room a sophisticated ambience. And a prominent wine wall provides a 3,000-bottle showcase of The Breakers’ 28,000-bottle wine collection.

Made of polished stainless steel and clear glass, the Wine Wall was designed to contrast with the room’s original...
architecture. In fact, the resort boasts two master sommeliers – Virginia Philip and Juan Gomez – who carry the legacy of Wine Spectator’s Grand Award since its inception in 1981.

But at HMF, the wines and single malts of L’Escalier have been augmented with craft beers and time-honoured cocktails, updated with a snappy, even healthy twist. The traditional Sidecar is reborn in the Railcar #91 with Courvoisier VSOP, fresh lemon juice, local honey and orange foam. Their version of a gin and tonic is the GT, infused with rosemary and Kirby cucumber. And that Palm Beach poolside classic, the Mimosa, is made with freshly-squeezed Florida orange juice, champagne and Grand Marnier.

Guests at HMF are tended by an engaging, highly intuitive team, each skilled in the art of cocktail culture and stylishly dressed in striking, custom-tailored attire. In a distinct nod to the past, a ‘cigarette girl’, inspired by the social theatre and atmosphere of cocktail clubs of the 1950s and 1960s, moves through HMF nightly, offering tastings of specialty items for sale – an aperitif, a culinary sampling or dessert. She might take guest photos or offer a whimsical
surprise, all designed to enhance the HMF experience.

“We envisioned HMF to be the most fabulous place to meet for drinks, anywhere,” said Nick Velardo, director of food & beverage/restaurants, at The Breakers Palm Beach. “It is a place that goes way beyond where cocktails and dishes are simply prepared and served. HMF revives the joie de vivre yet refined spirit of classic Palm Beach cocktail culture and restores social drinking and eating as an enduring tradition… a fashionable epicentre of food and drink that ultimately inspires an emotional connection with our guests.”

Bringing HMF into “the epicentre of food” has meant some major changes to the menu and the way the food is presented. HMF chef Joey Tuazon (formerly of Acqua at the Four Seasons Miami) working with resort executive chef Anthony Sicignano and director of restaurant development Bill Lalor, has created a global offering of small plates.

Sicignano acknowledges that the menu at L’Escalier might have been intimidating for some. “We had beautifully-designed dishes with ingredients maybe some people didn’t understand,” he says. “The transformed menu is beautiful – and simple.”

HMF’s menu includes categories such as Nibbles and Bites, Hearth and Robata, and – gasp! – Food Truck. Desserts come under, “Oh! But you should!” It’s happily informal while remaining inventive and appealing, drawing from world cuisines and using seasonal, local ingredients: Duck Bao Buns with Blood Orange Ponzu; Blistered Shishito Peppers with Maldon Salt; Wood Roasted Asparagus and Burrata; Orecchiette, Duck Sausage and Wild Mushrooms; Churrasco Steak Chimichurri; Lamb Meatballs with Spanish Mole; Wild Boar Empanaditas with Spicy Sauce; Chicken Albondigas Tacos… It’s proving to be a winner. After all, in the midst of the conspicuous consumption that is Palm Beach, the one sin is conspicuous consumption. Small plates allow the diner to try several dishes without appearing greedy. More importantly, small plates give the chef ample opportunity to not only showcase his craft, but also to make a few hits even if one dish doesn’t score.

ihany, who designed restaurants such as Per Se, Restaurant Daniel, Le Cirque 2000, and MO Bar London, is delighted with the results. “The nostalgia and the glamour of yesteryear are quite in fashion at the moment, while palates continue to become more sophisticated,” he said. “We conceived HMF to be an open, interactive arena of decadent delights, and to cultivate a distinctly social, dynamic and inviting environment for the resort’s savvy clientele.”

Interestingly, the town’s savvy residents are also being drawn to HMF. While some might lament the demise of French cuisine at The Breakers, since HMF opened in November 2012, the new concept has increased sales 339% over the Tapestry Bar and 158% over L’Escalier. Most importantly, local customers have increased from 46% to 62% and it just keeps growing as word spreads about the hip new hot spot.

And while HMF himself might be turning in his grave at the demise of haute cuisine, the profits being turned over in his namesake have proved that today’s clientele are hungry for change.