



Mla dolce Marea

Acclaimed chef Michael White brings his New York celebrity hot spot Marea to Dubai, with architect Viktor Udzenija steering the design

Words CHRISTINE VAN DEEMTER

CHEF MICHAEL WHITE – NEW YORK’S “PASTA KING” – exudes a warmth and conviviality that might not be immediately recognizable as shrewdly underpinning a global culinary empire. This is a chef who received his first Michelin star at 29 and, at one point in his 29-year career, held seven stars at the same time. A chef who, with his business partner, the Egyptian-born Ahmass Fakahany, founded the Altamarea Group in 2009, which currently owns and operates 17 restaurants worldwide. Yet also a chef who still exalts the humble burrata with the fervor of a poet; who shucks his own fava beans. And now, a chef with the second branch of his wildly successful New York restaurant, Marea (meaning “tide” in Italian), newly opened in Dubai. “It’s the 10th anniversary of Marea in New York,” the chef says. “We’re celebrating this with the opening of Marea in DIFC, which is an area where we really wanted to be.”

The Michelin Guide may not have alighted in Dubai yet, but that doesn’t mean the emirate lags behind when it comes to upscale

dining options. With more than 8 000 restaurants (New York has 26 000), residents are spoiled for choice – including eateries from the world’s best, like Massimo Bottura, Akira Back, and Alain Ducasse. Marea, however, is in a league of its own. The epitome of upscale chic – or “new luxury,” as White calls it, the New York establishment has been hosting celebrities like Beyoncé and Lady Gaga and fine diners for a decade. The restaurant embodies that most elusive of qualities chased by tycoons and dreamers alike: it’s cool without being cloying. White’s bold, original Italian dishes – fusilli braised octopus and bone marrow; red snapper with beluga lentils, mussels, and saffron – consistently prove why he is such a master of the genre.

Bringing such an institution halfway around the world is a thrilling challenge, and one that Croatian-born, Dubai-based architect Viktor Udzenija reveled in. “Marea New York is a beautiful, neutral yet luxurious environment where you feel comfortable, where you want to spend time and go through all the incredible courses on the menu,” says Udzenija. The two-level space evokes the feeling of a luxury yacht bobbing around the Amalfi Coast, light-dabbled sea all around and the freshest flavors bursting on your palate. In the dining room, repeated textures like lacquered pearl wood, Italian marble, herringbone stone floors, and fused glass play with the senses, showcasing a hallmark of true opulence: subtlety. “The backlight on the wall is its most well-known feature, which we definitely wanted to use as well, while also infusing it

with our own DNA,” the architect shares. This was pulled off with aplomb, with the bar area offset by a stop-in-your-tracks backlit marble slab, perfectly cut to showcase its natural undulations. It took Udzenija almost five months to find the perfect piece of stone – large enough to cover the area, with a pattern void of cracks and blemishes. A solid handrail hand-carved in Dubai from a single block of Italian marble is another standout, creating a visual reference point to lead you through the dining area.

Book-matched marble stairs take you below deck, to the darker, moodier lounge, with hand-blown Bohemian glass from the Czech Republic enveloping the elevator shaft in a burst of bubbles seemingly rising from the depths of the water. “We’ve played with these smaller details, which are not immediately apparent,” Udzenija says. “It’s nice to have these different dimensions so the more time you spend here, the more you discover.”

And there is much to discover at Marea. Fresh produce is flown in directly from Italy, the South of France, or Spain so the flavors are as genuine as they come. While White excels at bringing a *cucina* to Dubai – he spent eight years in the country and is married to an Italian, which he jocularly concedes gives him “credibility” – he does have a surprise in store for his Dubai clients who are looking for a twist on regional tastes. “Burrata is very sought-after here and I think I’ve cracked the code,” he reveals. “Everyone grew up with labneh, which is acidic. So I serve burrata with oil, which looks the same as labneh but is creamy and delicious. I add lobster for brightness and pickled eggplant for acidity. So it’s known flavors, yet not so known, at the same time.” This antipasto – called Astice on the menu – was made for Dubai. “I didn’t do it on purpose,” White smiles. “I’d rather be lucky.” Having grown up in a Norwegian family in Wisconsin, the chef’s focus on freshness was set from a young age, whether gardening with his grandmother or “not eating cereal as a kid.” If you want to make White’s day, describe his food as “clean” – that is the kind of authenticity of flavor he is chasing. □

“We’re celebrating the 10TH ANNIVERSARY of Marea in *New York* with the OPENING of Marea in *DIFC*”



ABOVE LEFT RICOTTA DONUTS WITH LEMON RICOTTA CREAM AND CHOCOLATE-CARDAMOM SAUCE LEFT SPAGHETTI WITH CLAMS, CALAMARI, BABY LEEKS, AND CHILI FAR LEFT THE DINING ROOM OPPOSITE VIKTOR UDZENIJA AND MICHAEL WHITE; HAND-BLOWN BOHEMIAN GLASS INSTALLATION

PHOTOGRAPHS DRINA CABRAL AT THE FACTORY PRODUCTION STUDIO, ZIGMA MIHAILIC AT THE FACTORY PRODUCTION STUDIO