

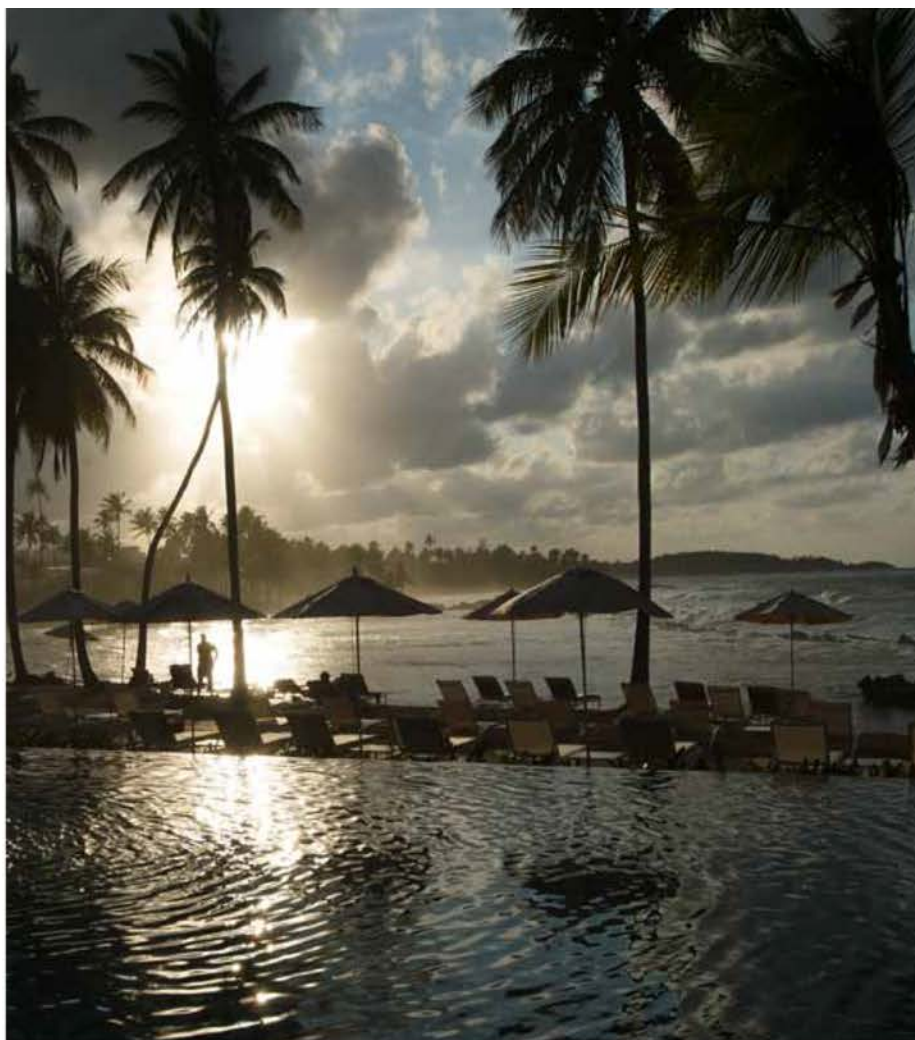


COOKING UP A POT OF GOLD

CULINARY SUPERSTAR JOSÉ ANDRÉS,
WHO LEFT EL BULLI TO CREATE A SMALL
PLATES EMPIRE, TAKES ON PUERTO RICO.
LAUREN SANDLER DECLARES A WINNER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN LANE





“**QUE PASA? BUENO?**” Jose Andrés strides into his kitchen at Mi Casa at Dorado Beach, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve, hugging and high-fiving everyone in the kitchen. Andrés is a bit behind schedule — he’s been out in the dining room slicing *jamón* for guests’ breakfasts. This kitchen is as bilingual as the chef himself, and it’s fitting that he flows in and out of languages in it like he cooks — an American chef, he calls himself, though a Spanish one who got his start in Ferran Adrià’s famed El Bulli outside Barcelona, now overseeing the burners in Puerto Rico. On his way, he’s picked up every major award for a chef in the U.S., not bad for someone who started off his stateside tenure with 50 bucks in his pocket and a roll of chef knives.

MARINE CORPS
 Chef Andrés in his
 caribbean kitchen; his
 take on the national dish,
 asopao; the oceanfront
 at Dorado Beach.





IT'S NO SMALL THING TO SHOW UP ON SOMEONE ELSE'S ISLAND AND COOK THEIR GRANDMOTHER'S SPECIALTY.

HOMARD HOMMAGE

Clockwise from left: Spiny lobsters ready for the pot; Chef Andrés; leaves of culantro, a local herb, essential to *asopao*.

Andrés, who is as affable outside the kitchen as he is strenuously exacting inside, dropped out of high school in Spain to enroll in cooking school, which led to a place in Adrià's hotbed of molecular gastronomy. But America beckoned, specifically its capital, where Andrés opened a tapas restaurant in the '90s that was to be a mere foundation for the small plates empire he was to build. His latest venture takes him in the most literal sense into Latin American territory. It's perhaps the perfect melding of his Spanish roots and his adopted hemisphere. Not only the overall menu, but each dish at Mi Casa reflects this layer of traditions and interpretations: European twists on the island's own folk dishes, decadent products from abroad used to draw out the best of ingredients from local farms and waters.

Consider the lobster: I find myself in this hectic kitchen, watching the chef goad a twitching spiny lobster awaiting its end in a heavy black pot. "Let's go!" he yelps at the crustacean. "¡Vamos!" The fate of this particular lobster, and his friends in

a freestanding tank in the Mi Casa dining room — pulled out of the sea just a few days ago by the hands of a local fisherman — is to star in a bowl of *asopao*, the national dish of Puerto Rico. It's no small thing to show up on someone else's island and cook their grandmother's specialty. I ask a Puerto Rican sous chef, "Is it by the book? The one you ate as a boy?" I get a smile and a thumbs up. "What else is he going to tell you?" says Andrés with a big belly laugh.

To create this rich, briny "mother of all *asopao*" Andrés ate the dish all over the island, gathered as many recipes as he could, and then added his own Spanish twist: a short-grain Valencia rice instead of the long-grain local variety. "Rice is a sponge for flavor," Andrés says, "so we used a better sponge." Here's what it's sponging up: a *sofrito* of olives, red peppers and caramelized onions, a broth of wine, tomato and smashed lobster heads ("that's where all the flavor is!" he exclaims, flipping a massive steaming iron skillet), scented with culantro, a local aromatic leafy herb, and annatto seeds which give the dish its blood-orange color and a slightly smoky flavor, enhanced by dense chunks of pork. Then the rice is laden with exquisite lobster tails, and finished with what Andrés calls "the truffle of the Caribbean" — shaved hearts of palm.

This is as close as the chef gets to a traditional interpretation. After all, not only did Andrés come of age in the kitchen-lab of El Bulli, but now he teaches culinary physics at Harvard, and spends his spare time in the school of engineering and applied science there, working to understand, for example, the chemistry of mayonnaise. His molecular gastronomy has made him famous, but the tasting menu at Mi Casa is warmer, more satisfying, more accessible than what you might expect to find coming out of one of his famous kitchens — these dishes are prepared in chefs whites rather than lab



“EVERYONE DREAMS OF HAVING A COCONUT STRAIGHT FROM THE BEACH,” ANDRÉS SAYS, WITH A GLINT IN HIS EYE.

SUGAR & SPICE

Clockwise from left: Sugar-dusting the Mallorca buns before caramelizing them; the bull's head, symbol of Spain, in the dining room; a splash of rum finishes the signature coconut *coquitos*.

coats. Still, there's always a clever reinterpretation, an adventure to be found on a plate. Or in the case of Andrés' *coquitos*, a coconut shell. Each morning his staff combs the beach for the massive fruits that have fallen to the sand. “Everyone dreams of having a coconut straight from the beach,” Andrés says, with a glint in his eye.

That glint is because not everyone imagines the flesh and water of the coconut rendered into perfectly round orbs through a technique called “spherification.” This is why alongside the tubs of limes and plantains on the stainless shelves opposite the burners there is one labeled “align”: The spherification technique involves injecting alginate into the coconut liquid and then dropping it into an algin bath to give it a solid skin. The result is like giant ikura eggs, ready to burst into your mouth. These spheres are gathered in a coconut shell and then served in a bath of rum and club soda. The coquito is a traditional cocktail here on the island, almost like an egg nog. But in Andrés' hands it becomes a fascinating refreshing palate cleanser. “You are eating the essence of the coconut,” he says finishing his concoction with slivers of mint leaves. Indeed, it is the most simple of tropical tastes, water for castaways, made modern and elegant in

the master's kitchen. There's something thrilling about the high-low split on the Mi Casa menu — the simple things, the classic staples, made new.

In the dining room, a giant, regal bull's head hangs on the wall, sporting a gold lame Mexican wrestling mask. This is the credo of this menu: The old world meets the new one, with reverence and irreverence, always with wit and pleasure. That credo, and that pleasure, comes no more acutely than in the “Mallorca” dish, which upon first bite caused my often-reticent husband to moan, “I want to cry.” (I would have opened my mouth to agree if I wasn't already deep into my second bite. *Pan de Mallorca* is a pastry traditionally eaten for breakfast on the island. Andrés re-interpreted the bread for the base of this dish (which is essentially the world's greatest slider), by making it with Spanish techniques, making a dough with butter instead of the traditional pork fat, layering it à la *mille-feuille*, and baking it into a light, sweet bun. Then, “to make it truly 2.0,” as he puts it, the bun is sliced in half and filled with foie gras. As if that were not enough, the sandwich is then caramelized with sugar. This is a dish that can make you forget all about the bikini you packed for the next day. Cardiologists, judge me not. Despite the fact that veal cheeks, pork buns and a couple of dessert courses beckoned ahead of me on this refined but relaxed tasting menu, I ordered second one. Bueno, indeed.