

How One Chef Is Heating Up The Miami Dining Scene

Having made a name for herself in kitchens around **Aspen**, Colorado, chef Dena Marino ventured to **Miami** in 2010 and debuted one of the area's newest hot spots, **MC Kitchen**, in 2012. Located in the up-and-coming Design District amid art galleries, haute couture and other restaurants, MC Kitchen draws crowds for its rustic flavors, seasonal harvest and farm-to-table approach to Italian cuisine. Of course, those aren't the only reasons why MC is so popular — Marino insists that fresh, sophisticated food mingles with modern design to create a multi-sensory dining experience at every table.

On top of fulfilling those nightly expectations, she's also teaming up with Forbes Travel Guide Tastemaker **Alex Guarnaschelli** at the **South Beach Wine & Food Festival** for a special dining event on February 20. Still, the New Jersey native managed to carve out some time to bring us up to speed on MC Kitchen, her latest culinary adventures, the Miami Heat and more.

When did you realize that cooking was your passion?

I realized at a young age while cooking with my mom and grandma. My first food-related job was when I was 13, at an ice cream shop. The shop made all its own ice creams and toppings — cookies, brownies, cakes, toffee, etc. When I was 14, they promoted me to shift manager; it was a big deal. The most important things I learned were how to treat a customer and that quality of product is everything.

Where do you find your culinary inspiration?

I love to read — that always provides inspiration and industry chatter outside of the South Florida area. Like other chefs, local and fresh ingredients inspire me to create different dishes. And not to be forgotten are the 3 a.m. thoughts that keep my mind running.

How did MC Kitchen come to be?

My business partner, Brandy Coletta, and I worked together at Ajax Tavern [at Forbes Travel Guide Five-Star **The Little Nell**] in Colorado. Brandy had a place in Miami, so when I moved here for another project, we reconnected. When the project I was working on didn't work out, she said, "You're not going back to Colorado. Let's open a restaurant here." So, after months and months of looking, we finally resolved on this beautiful home here in the Design District. The "MC" in MC Kitchen comes from our respective last names — Marino and Coletta.

What is the focus at the restaurant now?

We have always been focused on creating great food and offering great service for our customers. From the industry side of things, we are working to create great relationships with our farmers and educate our staff. We welcome guests that are open-minded and care about where their food comes from.

What can diners expect when they come to MC Kitchen?

They can expect a great experience, great music and good energy. More specifically, a wine list that is extremely focused and detailed, highlighting unique vineyards, 20 Dogfish Head Brewery beers on tap — one of the largest selections in the Southeast — and a unique beverage menu that highlights craft spirits. From the food side, you can always expect to see me on the line.



What are some of the most popular dishes at MC Kitchen?

We change our menu seasonally, but some of our star dishes that remain on our menu consistently are signatures that are inspired by a memory or a personal story. Some of these include our artichoke heart bruschetta, stone-oven-roasted octopus, Black Mission fig pizzetta, heritage breed poulet rouge and our homemade pastas.

What was it like to compete on Iron Chef?

Iron Chef was everything it looks like on TV — amazing, crazy, super fun, challenging, and I would do it again in a heartbeat.

Where do you like to eat in Miami?

It's always a challenge to break away from the restaurant, and so my wish list of "to tries" continues to grow. However, if I do eat out, I love The Forge, Joe's Take Away, our neighbor Michael's Genuine Food & Drink, and being from the tri-state area, I'm always on a mission for great Chinese.

What do you like to do for fun in Miami?

Thanks to my business partner, I'm officially a Miami Heat fanatic. We love to go to the games together. I also enjoy the beach and, of course, spending time with my family — my parents, husband, Marcus, and son, Cash.

What does the future hold for you and MC Kitchen?

I'm focused on making MC Kitchen shine in year two. Now that we have our first year behind us, I'd like to focus on getting behind a charity. I'm passionate about educating children on where their food comes from as well as mentoring up-and-coming students looking to become chefs.

What can you share with us about your events at the upcoming South Beach Wine & Food Festival?

This year, I'm participating in two very unique events — on Thursday, February 20, MC Kitchen is hosting the Bella Cucina dinner with Alex Guarnaschelli — an amazing evening that will be filled with great food and wine. Next, and not to be forgotten, the first-ever **Kitchen Heat** battle with my teammate Shane Battier of the Miami Heat. We've been training and we are ready to take on [Heat forward] Chris Bosh and his chef in our relay cooking event, which benefits their charities The Battier Take Charge Foundation and Team Tomorrow Inc. The event will be Saturday, February 22, in the Grand Tasting Village at 3 p.m.

