



CULINARY MAGIC

MEET CHEF JHONNATAN PINILLA CONTRERAS, THE CULINARY MAGICIAN BEHIND ONE OF MIAMI'S MOST OPULENT ANNUAL CHARITY GALAS, THE MAKE-A-WISH BALL.

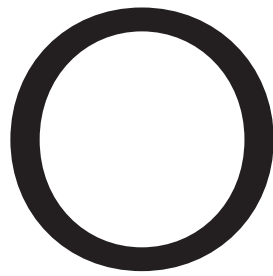
BY DANIELLE CHARBONNEAU



INTERCONTINENTAL
MIAMI
Jhonatas P. Cabrera

CAPTION: The Williams named
after the general manager of
the hotel in 2020.





On Nov. 4, 2023, the lower lobby and upper event spaces of the InterContinental Miami were transformed into a grandiose, fictional French art museum – the Musée Mondial d’art – where the world’s most valuable piece of art “Le Sceptre Rose” had gone missing. Two elite spies known as Oculus (played by actress and celebrity emcee Gabrielle Anwar and her husband, gala chair Shareef M. Malnik) were reportedly busy tracking down the burglars and retrieving the precious masterpiece. The “museum” – with its intriguing plotline -- served as the theatrical backdrop for one of Miami’s most opulent and anticipated black-tie galas of the year, the Make-A-Wish Ball, benefiting Make-A-Wish Southern Florida.

Now in its 28th year, this glamorous affair has raised collectively more than \$37 million and granted the wishes of more than 7,400 children with critical illnesses in South Florida. This year, the event produced by DECO Productions headlined pop-rock legend Sting and gathered roughly 1,000 VIPs dressed in high fashion, couture gowns and custom-tailored suits. Guests arrived in luxury cars to step out on a pink carpet rolled out at their feet. Inside, fictional investigators with giant magnifying glasses perused the crowd. Women dressed in black body suits slithered and tumbled their way through the masses. Men in French berets twirled striped umbrellas as they danced in front of a 20-foot replica of the Louvre, which served as the ballroom entrance. An Eiffel tower ascended from the bar where, nearby, an 80-square-foot ice sculpture beckoned guests to eat lobster, oysters and sushi.

At the heart of such a resplendent gala, of course, must be decadent food.

“The food must wow guests,” says InterContinental’s Executive Chef Jhonatan Pinilla Contreras, who has worked the event for the past 15 years in various capacities. Before taking the helm seven years ago, Contreras was mentored in the art of the gala by InterContinental’s previous Executive Chef, Alexander Feher.

Pulling off hors d’oeuvres, pre-dinner dining stations (like the seafood ice sculpture, meat carving stations, a fondue

fountain and lavish French charcuterie), plus the multi-course, fine-dining banquet meal for nearly 1,000 of Miami’s elite is no small feat. This year alone, Contreras imported 800 pounds of French cheese, 600 pounds of chocolate, 500 pounds of Wagyu beef, 20 pounds of truffle mushrooms, 250 pounds of octopus and a whole lot more.

“Our menu is always a combination of ideas and dreams that we make into a reality,” says Contreras. “For example, to incorporate this year’s theme, we created a chocolate sculpture in the shape of a rose where ‘Le Sceptre Rose’ was hidden... we transformed more than 15 hours of our chocolatier’s work into a completely edible chocolate sculpture. This piece encapsulated the art and jewelry.”

For the first course, Contreras created a plate worthy to be called art. On the left of a rectangular plate, a smoked trout mousseline was molded into a triangular shape that, true-to-theme, looked just like the Louvre. On the right, a lemongrass lobster ceviche served in a charming glass, topped with passion fruit caviar that burst with each refreshing bite. Finger lemon pearls, compressed melon and Mandarin emulsion adorned the plate, which was finished with an ornate tuille shaped like a classic doily, made of French lavender. The tuille, Contreras says, was a challenge. It had to be placed at the table in the last second before guests were seated to maintain its crunch.

The entrée course was equally creative, taking an elevated twist on a European classic: a Wagyu beef Wellington with a forest mushroom pâté and truffle cheddar puff pastry crust, topped with a Cabernet truffle demi-glace.

“Finding inspiration is always a challenge because after doing the gala for so many years it’s like, ‘Okay. What else?’” says Contreras. “I have a great team. We all start brainstorming ideas. I give it some time to form a vision. In May, we also attend the National Restaurant Association meeting in Chicago, which always has exciting new displays.”

Global travel, he says, also serves as inspiration. Contreras grew up in Venezuela and has been working for InterContinental for the past 17 years, including 15 in Miami, and two – from 2009 to 2011 – in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. His time in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), he says, gave him a flair for the decadent.

"It [the UAE] is well known for some of the most luxurious things in the world," says Contreras. "You see all these luxurious presentations – it's gold. It's crystal. It's extravagant. It was good to get exposure in that scenario."

Travel has also exposed Contreras to different culinary techniques, such as molecular gastronomy, which uses science to create whimsical components. For example, Contreras used a technique called "spherification" to create the passion fruit caviar.

"It creates these little bubbles that explode in your mouth with passion fruit flavor, which combines so well with the lobster ceviche," he says.

Every year, after Contreras and his team are given the year's theme around January or February, they begin to craft their vision for the menu. After they land on the winning dishes, the food goes through internal testing with InterContinental Miami's senior leadership team, the general manager and the banquet director, among others.

"Once we have finalized the last dish, we present it all to the Make-A-Wish board," he says.

In July, Contreras starts placing orders for products (earlier for obscure ones). Preparation of the ingredients begins at least a week in advance of the gala. On the big night, Contreras has a culinary staff of more than 70 people. The cavernous stainless-steel kitchen is lined with rows upon rows of rolling racks stacked with plated dishes. Digitally controlled warming ovens that can fit 84 plates each keep temperatures stable. A flurry of prep chefs and line cooks bustle throughout the kitchen, finishing, saucing, garnishing. Servers enter and exit the kitchen like bees from a hive, flying down a long corridor that leads to the banquet hall.

"Because the ballroom is so big, we cannot distribute the plates from only one side," Contreras says. "We have to create a secondary station on the other side of the ballroom in order for the food to arrive at the same time, hot, with the right temperature and presentation. It's an all-hands-on-deck situation. Sometimes you even



see HR people polishing glasses."

When service is finally complete, Contreras says he attends the after party with his wife and mother who often flies to Florida for the week of the event to be supportive. His mother, an interior designer, has also been known to help him with costuming his chefs and creating themed sets for the pre-dinner service stations. One year, they hand-painted fabrics and jeans to decorate the tables for a Bohemian theme.

"I have fun with it. I go buy furniture at antique stores and am very creative with design," he says. "It is kind of a hobby because I grew up in a house where my dad is an architect, and my mom an interior designer.

Since I was a child, I was surrounded by art and colors."

Contreras was so inspired by his parents' creativity that when he originally applied for college, he intended to be an architect. He had worked as a dishwasher and in a kitchen as a teen, but he didn't want to be a cook.

"I thought of grease and onions for all my life," he remembers laughing. "But then my dad said, 'You have a lot of skills in culinary arts. As a chef, you can travel the world, learn different languages, meet people from a lot of cultures.' So that clicked for me a bit. One of the best culinary schools in Latin America was in my city by coincidence. So that's what I did."

Now his interest in design and architecture instead appears on the plate – as little Louvres made of smoked trout mousseline.

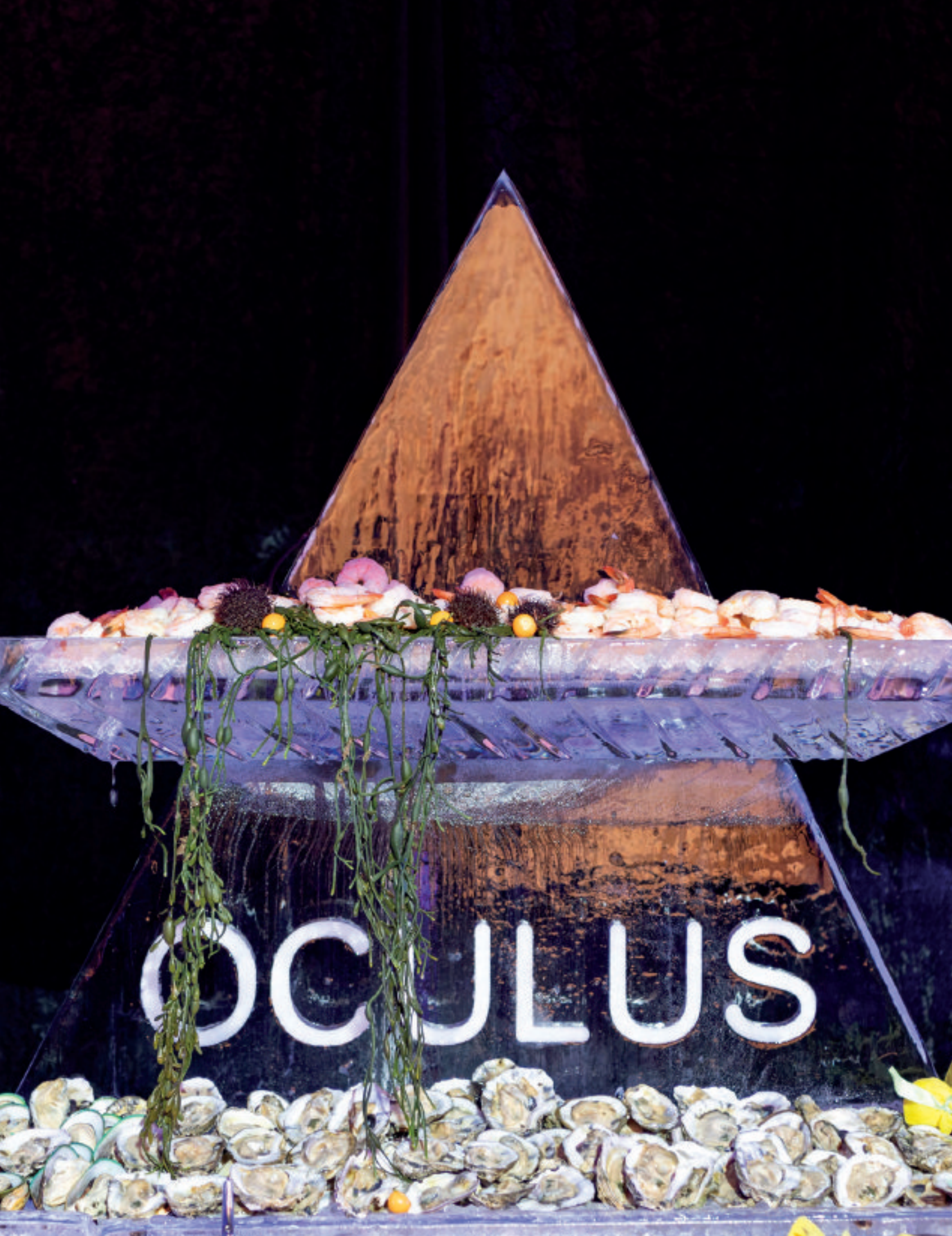
"I consider myself a culinary architect... on the plate we have to use techniques, temperatures, rulers and markers," he says. "I just love to create. I love buildings and interior design. But I think

if I died and was born again, I would still be a chef. I love what I do."

He especially loves doing it for a charity that helps grant the wishes of kids with critical illnesses.

"The donations are unbelievable," he says. "Working for such a great foundation for many years is a pleasure."

The Make-A-Wish Southern Florida organization celebrated its 40-year anniversary at the 2023 gala. The 29th annual InterContinental Make-A-Wish Ball in 2024 will be held on the first Saturday in November.



OCULUS



TAKATO

info@takatorestaurant.com | 551 N Fort Lauderdale Beach Blvd. Fort Lauderdale