

# MIAMI

Best of the city '09!

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FOOD DRINK | REVIEW



## Extreme Makeover

Once a staid and respected neighborhood fixture, Chef Allen's goes all out for culinary glory

By Jen Karetnick | Photography by Simon Hare

What a difference a floor makes.

Of course, removing the carpeting and installing a distressed stone floor isn't all that Aventura chef-proprietor Allen Susser did to revitalize Chef Allen's, the venerable establishment that he opened in 1986, this past fall. He also knocked down the glass-block wall that had partially separated dining rooms, turned the bar into a 360-degree viewing post and brought in designer Amanda Rice to give the walls and furniture a tropical color palette that ranges from mango blush to roasted coffee bean brown. And he radically lowered prices, along with changing his concept to become a "modern seafood bistro" that concentrates on serving regional, seasonal and sustainable fish and shellfish.

"It was time for a significant change," says Susser, a member of the original "Mango Gang," which implemented what he then termed New World cuisine. "I'd always done little things to help refresh the restaurant, like changing the paintings on the walls, updating the décor a little." Indeed, a few years ago, while watching fellow Miami Mango Gang peers Norman Van Aken (now stationed in Orlando) and Mark Militello (now executive chef at the Regent Bal Harbour) decline, Susser even tried re-inventing the name of his brand, calling the fare Palm Tree cuisine—because he only used ingredients from those tropical and temperate regions where palm trees could grow.

Between the décor makeover and the culinary touch-ups, Susser's reinvention is a success. Stylistically, Chef Allen's has gone from *Woman's Day* to *Vogue*. Now, the formerly muted and somewhat outmoded restaurant, appropriate for a Saturday night dinner date, is a buzz-worthy eatery that sees an energized, enthusiastic crowd every evening of the week. The result is that some of his staff is having trouble figuring out how to manage—are they supposed to be stiff and formal, or friendly and loose?—and longtime customers are unsure how to blend. So you still might find yourself amidst Aventurians dressed in sequined cocktail wear. But do feel free to put on your best pair of boyfriend jeans and a machine-washable button-down, which is all the better to absorb the complimentary house-pickled crudité and ever-changing dip (could be romesco or remoulade one evening, baba ghanouj or hummus the next).

Meanwhile, Susser himself has lost none of the excellent culinary technique that made him an augured name in the business. In fact, when you look closely at the menu, you see he's not so much as abandoned New World or Palm Tree cuisines as much as he's incorporated them into a new direction. I recognize some elements of dishes—the "cool orange raita" that accompanies the blackened red snapper with platanos maduros for one—from the past, and I'm sure patrons who are more regular

### CHEF ALLEN'S

RATING: ★★☆☆

19088 N.E. 29th Ave.,  
Aventura, 305.935.2900,  
chefallens.com  
Sun-Thu, 6PM-10:30PM  
Fri-Sat, 6PM-11PM

What the stars mean: 1 = fair, some noteworthy qualities; 2 = good, above average; 3 = very good, well above norm; 4 = excellent, among the area's best; 5 = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambiance and service.

### HOW'S THE COCKTAIL SCENE?

Trendy, top-shelf liquors abound, so ask for your favorite drink. But don't expect a list featuring muddled rhubarb-basil concoctions.

WHAT ABOUT VEGETARIANS? Vegans will struggle here, but those fond of green things will glory in side dishes such as grilled asparagus topped with Maytag blue cheese and an unctuous spinach fondue.

WILL I EVER SEE THE MAN HIMSELF? Absolutely. Chef Allen Susser is almost always on hand, overseeing the kitchen and roaming the floor. He signs menus, his books (he's written three, on display) and he takes pictures with guests.

WHAT IT COSTS: Appetizers, \$5-14; main courses, \$19-35; sides, \$5-7; desserts, \$5-8 (Valhrona chocolate soufflé for two, \$18).

Clockwise from top left: The renovated dining room at Chef Allen's. Susser's take on surf & turf: garlicky shrimp and Niman Ranch skirt steak. The popular clams casino. Dates stuffed with mango, wrapped in crispy applewood bacon.



than I can do better than that. To their great relief: Susser always keeps favorites on the menu in loyalty to his clientele.

Nor is he bowing to the "green" trend simply for the sake of it. Susser has always had an interest in conservation of species (and that includes humans, as his untiring charity work demonstrates), and thus has invested his time serving on boards and committees devoted to his interests: mangoes, Florida citrus and wild American shrimp, among others. But don't feel obligated to order any dish with wild American shrimp simply because Susser stumps for the industry. Try the shrimp as an appetizer with pistachio pesto or as an entrée with zucchini and ricotta ravioli, tossed with a lemon-shallot sauce. Simply superb, these beauties are shrimp the way you remember them, when shrimp were a delicacy freshly pulled from the water and not from a plastic supermarket bag. And the popcorn shrimp starter—plump specimens striped with thin, savory lines of sherry aioli—are a slightly guiltier pleasure, if only because they are fried, not because they're greasy.

If you're a fan of mollusks, which pair so well with a crisp Albariño that won't set you back more than \$40, definitely order the mussels poached in an aromatic fumé blanc broth. The brininess of the small black European mussels, like the kind you find in Belgian preparations, is kept in check by both the acids in the wine and the herbal infusion of fennel root, which is added as a small dice and cooked until tender. Topped with a plane of crouton for dipping, this top-quality dish, which is a mere appetizer that can easily satisfy a mild appetite, is an outstanding find.

Ditto the lobster mac and cheese, which is made with hand-formed macaroni and, to my mind, rivals anything I've had in the finest Italian restaurants abroad. Tossed with chunks of sweet Maine crustacean, sliced shiitakes, a touch of tarragon and a sheen of cognac-cream sauce, the macaroni is so rich you should probably spring for a good Saintsbury Pinot Noir to take it down a notch between bites. Order a bowl of fragrant seafood chowder before this, with its plethora of clams in the shell, pliable calamari and bacon that somehow retains a crunch in the

cream, and you might end up on a stretcher—but at least you'd be able to afford to pay your medical bills.

Fish dishes tend to be less luxurious to the point of artery hardening, particularly the whole grilled yellowtail snapper with saffron tea, capers and red quinoa. The fish is really something of a monster, served over the bed of quinoa, and so sweetly fleshed you don't actually need the "tea," which comes on the side. But if you appreciate the qualities of saffron, dip a bite into this brew once in a while for fabulous steeped flavors.

Swordfish in a pinot noir pan sauce, garnished with chanterelles, red grapes and smoked almonds, is a meatier chew, and also takes you to a completely different part of the globe taste-wise. But it's a subtle journey, not a jostling one, and it displays Susser's versatility with aplomb. As does his way with beef, pork, veal and chicken. Yes, Chef Allen's is now a "Modern Seafood Bistro," but carnivores can turn the page. There, you'll find a list of options that include slow-braised beef short ribs, double-cut Berkshire pork chop and a free range chicken that comes with a skin so crisp it shatters. These are cooked at 720 degrees on Susser's wood-burning Lyonnaise grill, which adds a stupendous flavor. And if you can't decide between fish and steak, note that there's an ever-changing surf-and-turf that could be shrimp and skirt steak one night, or diver scallops and filet mignon another.

Relax at the end of a meal with a French-press pot of Costa Rican coffee and a study of banana sweets, or choose from a generous list of teas to complement a classic soufflé. But do keep in mind that the more things change at Chef Allen's, the more things stay the same: You'll still need a reservation, especially on a weekend night. And I have a feeling it won't be long before that holds true all the time, for every table on that new floor. **M**



SWEET AND SOUR: Susser's lemon soufflé dessert.

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SEA LEGS From left, Susser and some of his favorite ingredients. A Maine lobster.

