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OF WHAT SHE'S COOKING UP NEXT.

By Jennifer Leslie Kramer

If you've been in Miami for any length of time, a simple reference to "Michelle" conjures images of crispy fried chicken, ham and blue cheese croquetas and blistered squash blossoms-favorites from the empire of eateries she has created. Her restaurants, from Michy's and Sra. Martinez to Crumb on Parchment and Seagrape, have been lauded by locals in the know and industry bibles like Food & Wine and Gourmet. But Bernstein wasn't always convinced she would be a chef. "There was no big 'aha' moment," she says. "It wasn't until years later, in the thick of it at Azul, did I realize this was my career. I still sometimes scratch my head and wonder how it all worked out."

Since opening Michy's nine years ago, Bernstein is the first to admit how drastically the South Florida dining scene has changed. "What we used to consider casual can now be fine dining; there's literally been a 180-degree shift," she says. Because of that, along with the need for something new and a constant urge to never stop

creating, Bernstein and her husband-cum-business partner, David Martinez, shuttered Michy's at the end of last summer to prepare for a complete overhaul. "The time was right; we had been thinking about it for years," she admits. "Once it closed, we took a step back. We weren't sure what we would do or what exactly we wanted from the space. But it gave us some breathing room to pursue other projects." Such projects include her new Saturday morning program, SoFlo TASTE, a menu at MIA's new Centurion Lounge set to open this summer and a partnership with Memorial Cancer Institute to create a collection of healthy meals for oncology patients receiving chemotherapy treatments at the hospital.

Michy's, 6927 Biscayne Blvd., Miami, 305.759.2001; michysmiami.com; Seagrape, in the Thompson Miami Beach, 4041 Collins Ave., Miami Beach, 786.605.4043; seagrapemiamibeach.com.