

ONE WEEK IN

Nelson Maldonado on The First Week at Orange Blossom

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[Photo Courtesy of Orange Blossom]

A couple of weeks ago, **Think Hotel Group's** Charles St. very suddenly morphed into a new concept called **Orange Blossom**. The decor at the rebranded restaurant is indeed very different and the dinner menu has entirely changed, but much has remained the same. Being a part of **Boulan South Beach**, Orange Blossom—which now has a much more Florida-inspired/local menu—has decided to keep its global, stable items that will still appeal to tourists, and change what it can to be more local-friendly, according to chef **Nelson Maldonado**. We spoke to Maldonado about the first week as Orange Blossom, what's really changed and what folks liked the most so far. Here's the deal:

Tell me a little bit about yourself and how you got involved with the restaurant.

Well, I've been in the industry for about 13 years in the hotel business. I used to be a chef at the Intercontinental Miami, so I always did charity events with them like Make-A-Wish and all those kinds of events. Then I moved to New York five years ago. I stayed in New York with Intercontinental and working for celebrity chefs and I worked for David Burke as well. One day I received a phone call from the owner of the Think Hotel Group saying that he's opening a new project and he wants me to be involved and be involved of the F&B for the project, so I said yes, of course. Then I met Tatanka [Guerrero]. He's great and he had great ideas. He told me that he had an idea of creating a new concept for a restaurant here in Miami. We felt like we didn't have something that is very, very local for Miami and we said let's put my cuisine and my expertise together with Tatanka's ideas and we came with the idea to create Orange Blossom. He decided to come up with that name to give more of a local feel to the restaurant.

What's the cuisine like now?

I went to a French culinary school here in Miami, the Cordon Bleu. My background is French. I worked for David Burke for about a year, so I learned a lot of New American cuisine as well that I applied with everything I did here in Miami. We decided we wanted Orange Blossom to be New American cuisine. I try to work directly with the vendors and purveyors of the products, I try to buy local. I have a farm I work very close with in Homestead and they provide most of the produce for my restaurant as well as dairy and oranges.

Overall, how did the first week go?

Well, it was crazy, but it was crazy in a good way. When we did family friends ... you're never ready to open a new restaurant completely full for the first day, but I think overall, we did a good job. That's why we do family and friends for the first two days before we do the grand opening. It was kind of crazy, but at the same time it was good because it gave us an idea of what we can handle and what we can not, what dishes will work, what dishes will take long. It helps train the kitchen as well.

What were some of the biggest challenges that you faced this past week?

I think that the biggest challenge is getting used to it. South Beach is mainly tourist, but we want to focus on the locals. We want to build a culture with Think Hotel Group and I think that's the biggest challenge to get used to what the tourist and what the locals want and try to get in the know with the locals. We want to understand what the locals want.

What was the best part about the opening?

We did training before the opening for like close to a month. I think the best part of the opening was knowing that we were ready, that our team knows what to do. We are like a family, the restaurant is small, so we know each other and how to talk to each other. I think the best part was knowing that the people appreciated the food and like the service and love the concept of Orange Blossom. Most of the people that were here for the grand opening are coming back, they're booking tables. We're getting a lot of love from locals, which is good.

The transition between Charles St. and Orange Blossom was a fast one, how do you think locals responded to that?

I think the cuisine of Charles St. is different from Orange Blossom. Charles St. was more New Yorker bistro and Orange Blossom is the same chef, but it's different cuisine. But the locals I'm talking to are happy.

Did the entire menu change?

No. We are part of Boulanger South Beach, so we need to keep some things. We still have people from different countries and sometimes they are not familiar with foods and beers that are coming from Florida, so we still need to keep them happy. We mainly changed the dinner menu. But presentation wise we changed everything. We bought new plates, we bought new equipment, the presentation is totally different for all meal times.

On the new dinner menu, what are the favorite items so far?

The grouper is I think the best selling item. It's a Florida grouper, it comes with parmesan risotto, spring vegetables and watercress puree. One of the items that sell very well is the salmon tartare, it's organic salmon belly tartare and it comes with toasted naan bread on the side. What we're trying to do is seasonal, so in the menu that we are doing now we're using a lot of leeks, a lot of garlic, a lot of spring onions and asparagus. We're going to change the menu by season. We'll change, of course, for summer, late June, probably July. Everything on there is going to be different.