

South Beach Wine and Food Festival digs into Fort Lauderdale



By **Phillip Valys** · Contact Reporter

At this year's South Beach Wine and Food Festival, a cast of local chefs and Food Network celebrities aim to take a big bite out of Fort Lauderdale.

Blame organizer Lee Brian Schrager for the extra traffic and black limousines. He has outgrown Miami, and after 14 years of nurturing his megapopular event on the sands of South Beach, the festival's trek north into Broward County felt "like a natural push."

"Why Fort Lauderdale? It's home," Schrager says of the South Beach Food and Wine Festival, whose 15th edition kicks off Wednesday, Feb. 24, and runs through Sunday, Feb. 28.

Schrager's Broward expansion is the newest dish at the Food Network- and Cooking Channel-sponsored shindig, which this year unfolds with 80 events and 400 chefs in Miami Beach, Wynwood and beyond. Also debuting is the Taste Fort Lauderdale series, seven chef-studded dinners and tastings highlighted by Feb. 24's sold-out dinner Seaside Eats, hosted by mercurial Food Network star Robert Irvine at the Bonnet House Museum and Gardens.



Adrienne Grenier, executive chef of 3030 Ocean restaurant in Fort Lauderdale, will take part in the South Beach Wine and Food Festival's Seaside Eats dinner opposite celebrity chef Robert Irvine. (Carline Jean / Sun Sentinel)

But the reason Schragger widened the festival's scope to Fort Lauderdale — instead of Hollywood, or, say, Tamarac — came down to practical geography, and a personal mission to goose the city's dining scene, one Schragger says did not exist 40 years ago, when the chef and author worked in a handful of local restaurants.

Schragger is hardly demure about crediting his festival for boosting Miami's prestige amid the "country's great culinary destinations." He wagers he can do the same for Fort Lauderdale.

For the festival's 2015 edition, Schragger programmed a "test-run" dinner, hosted by chef Amanda Freitag, at S3 Restaurant on Fort Lauderdale Beach. That sold-out 80-seat dinner triggered many enthusiastic phone calls demanding more events in the city, he recalls.



Amanda Freitag, a chef on Food Network's "Chopped," will judge Bloody Marys during the Bloody Mary Brunch on Feb. 28, part of the Taste Fort Lauderdale series at the South Beach Wine and Food Festival. (South Beach Wine and Food Festival / Courtesy)

"We don't take credit for the Michelle Bernsteins and Michael Schwartzes of the food scene," Schragger says. "But we do take credit for introducing big-league chefs and people from out of town to these local restaurants. There's nothing better than Bobby Flay and Giada De Laurentiis in your restaurant — that creates big hype. There are so many great restaurants now in

Miami as anywhere else. I hope for Fort Lauderdale, we are half as successful in doing that."

Schrager has plenty of reasons to celebrate Fort Lauderdale. He rattles off the bygone restaurants in the city where he worked as a teenager like personal trophies: Ken Snyder's Stage Door Dinner Theater, near the 17th Street Causeway; Charcoal Charlie's Smokehouse, a barbecue chain purchased by his father; Eduardo's on Las Olas Boulevard, where he bussed tables.

The city is keen to back the festival's Broward presence. For Taste Fort Lauderdale, the Beach Business Improvement District and Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention and Visitors Bureau kicked in \$65,000. Other Broward dinners include a New Style Remix Dinner with beats by DJ Felix Da Housecat and Japanese cuisine by Justin Warner (Food Network's "Food Network Star") and chef Alex Becker, Feb. 27 at Kuro at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel and Casino; and a quartet of dinners at Casa D'Angelo Ristorante, S3, Valentino's and Auberge Beach Residences and Spa. The series finishes noon-2 p.m. Feb. 28 with a Bloody Mary Brunch at the Ritz-Carlton, Fort Lauderdale, hosted by Food Network's "Chopped" judges.



Celebrity chef Robert Irvine will kick off the 2016 South Beach Wine and Food Festival with Seaside Eats, a seafood dinner, on Wednesday, Feb. 24, at the Bonnet House Museum and Gardens in Fort Lauderdale. (South Beach Wine and Food Festival / Courtesy)

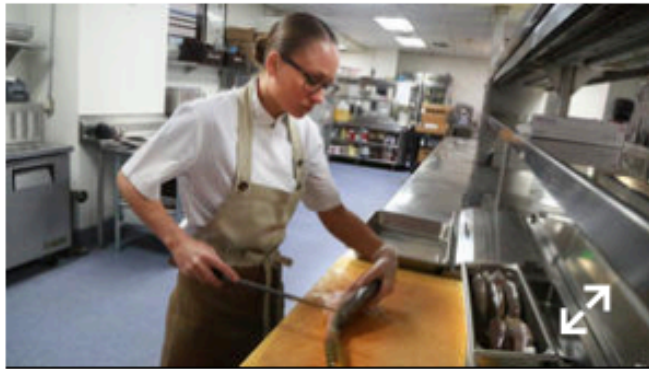
Robert Irvine (Food Network's "Restaurant: Impossible") is one of those blue-chip personalities Schrager is counting on to lift Fort Lauderdale's culinary profile. Irvine has already done plenty to spark the festival's reputation: In 2014, Irvine's visit drew national publicity after he allowed **Paula Deen** to climb on his back and mount him like a horse. The stunt wasn't planned.

Irvine, recalling the incident by phone between fits of laughter, says what Deen did next was just as spontaneous: She slathered his bare chest with sticks of butter, then licked his well-sculpted abs.

"It was funny at the time. If it happens in the moment for me, I don't think about things," says Irvine, the muscular British chef whose credits also include "Dinner: Impossible" and "Worst Cooks in America."

Irvine says he hasn't planned Wednesday's Seaside Eats menu at Bonnet House — he prefers the pressure of on-the-spot dinner prep — but is eager to work opposite chefs from Fort Lauderdale restaurants, which include Nicolay Adinaguev of Steak 954, Jeff Pfeiffer of Lobster Bar Sea Grille and Adrienne Grenier of 3030 Ocean.

"This is an exciting time for the festival to really branch out from Miami, and I'm kind of excited to be the inaugural guy to take it into Fort Lauderdale," Irvine said. "It's going to be a riot."



Executive chef Adrienne Grenier of 3030 Ocean restaurant in Fort Lauderdale, prepares snappers for the dinner crowd. Grenier will take part in the South Beach Wine and Food Festival Seaside Eats dinner opposite celebrity chef Robert Irvine. (Carline Jean / Sun Sentinel)

The 2016 festival will showcase more local chefs than ever, especially at Feb. 27's Grand Tasting Village at the foot of 13th Street in Miami Beach, a day of culinary demos and booths representing areas such as Wynwood, Brickell and Fort Lauderdale.

Closing out the Taste Fort Lauderdale series will be the Feb.