

JANUARY FEBRUARY 2019

DEPARTURES

**THE
ESCAPES
ISSUE**



Departments



Travel

23

Papal Privileges

After a no-expense-spared restoration, a 17th-century pope's secret love nest has become Rome's most exquisite new lodging.

28

Altitude Slickness

Across the American West, it's high season for a fresh kind of glamorous yet rugged winter experience, from Michelin-starred restaurants to a new private alpine club.

34

The Dominican Republic Dresses Up

Santo Domingo's most stylish and creative power players are turning the historic Zona Colonial into a new Caribbean hot spot.

42

Order the Lionfish

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Style

47

Yours, Truly

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50

Close to Home

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Culture

53

High Art

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Living

61

The Belgians Are Coming

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64

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Whole fried lionfish, as served at Fish by Jose Andres, at the Bahamas megaresort Atlantis.

Lionfish

At his new Bahamas restaurant) chef Jose Andres is helping save the Caribbean reef, one crispy bite at a time. *by Maggie Shipstead. Photographs by Katherine Wolkoff*

ONE AFTERNOON in the Bahamas, storm clouds patrolled the horizon and a breeze stirred the turquoise water into a chop. I bobbed at the surface in scuba gear, peering down through my mask, watching as an unusual predator glided along the reef, yellow-finned and wielding a spear. It was chef Jose Andres, and he was out for lionfish.

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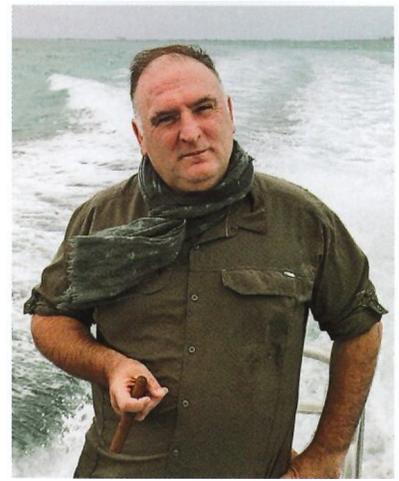
native to the Indo-Pacific, first came to these waters—the leading theory is that some were carelessly released by aquarists beginning in the 1980s—but once established, they began growing and reproducing and gobbling down other species at a fantastic rate, drastically unbalancing sensitive coral ecosystems. "In their stomach," Andres said, "you're gonna find baby lobsters, baby crabs, little octopuses. They eat everything. They are my type of people."

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Studies have shown that recreational spearfishing derbies and persistent hunting can control lionfish numbers and reduce their harm. Andres and other ecologically minded chefs are trying to expand the market for lionfish by getting people excited about eating them and dispelling the misconception that, because of their stinging spines, their mild, flaky

Right: Chef Jose Andres on the hunt. Below: Fish by Jose Andres, part of the Cove, a luxury enclave of Atlantis.



white meat is poisonous. "They are super delicious," Andres says. "Fried, they are great. In a stew with potatoes, they are my favorite!" Lionfish is officially on the menu.

From our dive spot, the turreted pink towers of the Atlantis megaresort were visible in the distance. Its luxury enclave, the Cove, is home to Fish by Jose Andres, the 31st entry on his roster of restaurants, which run the gamut from Washington, D.C.'s avant-garde, Michelin two-star Minibar to food trucks peddling sandwiches. Fish's signature offering? Locally speared, whole-fried lionfish, stripped of its spines but with showy tail intact, accompanied by tartar sauce and lemon wedges, with a share of the proceeds to benefit the Blue Project Foundation, Atlantis's ocean-and-reef-conservation nonprofit. Andres has also served lionfish at restaurants in D.C. and Miami, and he's not alone in seeing potential: Whole Foods sells the fish in Florida.

On the boat ride out from the marina, Andres had been quiet, a little grumpy. He set up his dive rig and then stood staring at the wake, his back to the entourage he didn't particularly want: handlers and PR reps, a camera crew, a local spearfisherman known as Captain Allan, and me, his interviewer and dive companion. Tentatively, I sidled up and shouted a question over the engine noise. How had he gotten into diving?

Andres fixed me with his appraising, bright blue gaze. He has the vibe of a benevolent Tony Soprano: authoritative and watchful, with a physical burliness that can seem swaggering one moment and self-protective the next. But he can be gregarious, too, and emits, in flashes, a bon vivant's bottomless gusto for enjoyment. "I always wanted to do it," he said, "but it was something I didn't have time for. Everything I do, I do very intensely?" When the timing was finally right, he got started in

the Cayman Islands and is now a certified advanced open water diver. "It's a good thing to do with friends," he added a little wistfully, alluding to the absence of such people on our crowded boat.

But Andres is at least as famous for his generous spirit as he is for small plates and frothy Salt Air margaritas, and he is never without friends for long. When I'd dallied too long at the surface, he swam up and signaled for me to descend. As we dropped toward the seafloor, he busied himself tightening the straps of my buoyancy vest and reminding me to equalize my ears, repeatedly asking, via sign language, if I was okay.

This was kindness on a smaller scale than, say, the more than 3.6 million hot meals Andres and his non-

profit World Central Kitchen have distributed in Puerto Rico since the devastation of Hurricane Maria, or the ongoing poverty-fighting programs—all centered on food—that he's established in places as far-flung as Haiti, Zambia, and Nicaragua. Nevertheless, he'd noticed an opportunity to help and did just that.

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As the boat turned for home, the lionfish went on ice, bound for the restaurant.



I asked Andres if, when he'd started out as a teenage cook in the Spanish navy, he ever thought food would lead to activism.

"Everything that everybody does in life is activism," he said. "You wake up in the morning and you walk to your local bakery to buy something—that's a form of activism. It might seem uneventful, but you are actively deciding that you want to support a bakery, that you like the bread, and you want more and more businesses like that. So everything is activism. You vote with your plate. Even if you are not aware, you are voting with your choices?" Order lionfish, in other words, and you are casting a vote for native species, for reef health, for diversification of menus.

He hastened to point out that his own choices were far from perfect and expressed discomfort with the amount of praise he's been getting lately. "I always say I am a sinner. I'm not the most local guy, but I am very outspoken about local. I'm not the most seasonal guy, but I am very outspoken about seasonal. What happens is, I try to be more pragmatic."

Pragmatism, to an extent, is unavoidable when one is the proprietor of more than 30 restaurants. After pointing out that he can more easily get tuna from Japan than lionfish from local waters, he said, "Everything has a value. Everything has to find its price—what people are willing to work for, what people are willing to pay for—and the restaurant is in between. They have to make money. The processes are complicated?"

But the hope is that Andres's high-end example will spur a broader demand and expand Bahamian cuisine beyond conch, which has been depleted by overfishing. "If you can be activating local scuba divers and fishermen," he said, "when other seasons end, they can change focus. It's got to be a good thing for the reef."

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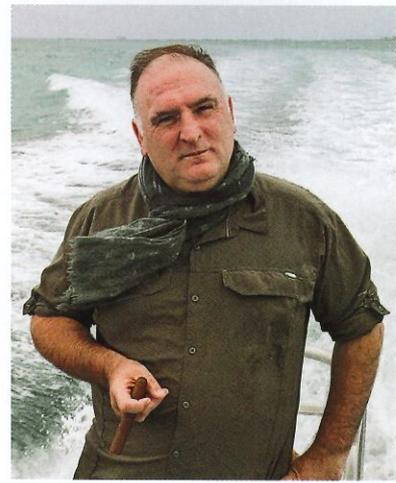
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