

# restaurant development + design

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PROJECT PROFILE

# CVLTVRA

Cocina de Mercado, Miami Style







By Dana Tanyeri

**A**s part of a recent brand transformation from ME by Malia to a Curio Collection by Hilton Hotel, The Gabriel Miami owners embraced the opportunity to create a unique hospitality experience inspired by and reflective of its local community. An essential part of that transformation for Miami-based CGI Merchant Group included introducing a new flagship restaurant, CVLTVRA (pronounced like the Spanish word “cultura”), an upscale Latin American-inspired concept with all of the ingredients that combine to make Miami and its Downtown Arts district sizzle.

Opened last December, CVLTVRA is big, bold and eclectic in its menu — which blends Latin and Mediterranean flavors — as well as in its design. Created by celebrity consulting Chef Sebastian La Rocca, who helped to shape its culinary approach, and Executive Chef Fabian Di Paolo, a Jean-Georges Vongerichten Restaurants alumnus who was tapped to lead CVLTVRA’s kitchen, the concept draws on the chefs’ travels and shared love for cocinas de mercados, or open-market-style kitchens found throughout Latin America.

“They’re everywhere in South America and Europe, and we really wanted to emulate that vibe — these nice little open kitchens and casual places where

**With lush greens and blues as primary colors throughout, strategic use of secondary colors makes CVLTVRA’s design pop. Mustard-yellow leather covers banquettes, and feature wallpaper sets tropical greenery against a pink backdrop.**  
*Images courtesy of Bigtime Design Studio*

everyone gathers to socialize and have a bite to eat,” Di Paolo says. “We wanted CVLTVRA’s ambience and layout to match that. It’s a high-end interpretation of it, but it’s also very natural and open, and just like at a cocina de mercado, you can walk in and eat right at the counter.”

Including a featured open kitchen counter was one of the first priorities in what the team initially thought would be a relatively straightforward, simple refresh. But, as with many conversions of second-generation spaces, as layers of the previous restaurant — a short-lived STK Rebel steakhouse — were stripped away and as a unique design vision for CVLTVRA began to take shape, plans for simplicity went out the window.

Miami-based Bigtime Design Studios, commissioned to assist with both brand development and design, quickly identified a major structural change that would be key to creating the type of vibe and ambience desired for CVLTVRA. The bar, which STK had positioned against one long interior wall, would need to be moved.

“It’s the sweater phenomenon. You start out thinking, ‘Oh, we’ll just re-cover this and re-skin that,’ but it hits you soon that no, you need a bar in the center. And you need the open kitchen. And you need indoor-outdoor appeal that’s so important in Miami,” says Callin Fortis, principal at Bigtime Design. “Before you know it, you’re rethinking and ultimately gutting the place in order to be able to do what you know you need to do. That was the case here. It took a much bigger level of commitment and renovation than a simple refresh.”

Ultimately, a new square bar with seating for 20 was constructed in the



center of the 8,000-square-foot space. The previous bar was remodeled to serve as a chef's counter fronting a display kitchen. A 30-foot retractable window wall system was installed along the front, facing a roughly 100-foot-long by 14-foot-wide outdoor cafe seating area. All vestiges of the previous dark and clubby, upscale steakhouse were removed to make way for CVLTVRA's vibrant primary palette of greens and blues, warm woods, hot secondary accent colors and eclectic mix of materials and furnishings.

## Managing Scale, Creating Zones

At 8,000 square feet and with 22-foot-

high ceilings, creating an effective design depended to a great degree on managing scale. Centering the bar and giving it an architectural overhang that extends up into the ceiling was one strategy for doing so.

"It helps to create a sense of intimacy at the bar," Fortis says. "It's a sculptural piece that gave us the ability to add some architectural detail. In a space that big, when you're dealing with such scale issues, we wanted to have a piece that was really finely crafted. The shelves are nicely detailed — not just typical steel pipes and wood. The lower shelf has integrated lighting and

is functional, providing bottle storage space, and the upper shelf gave us a place to bring in more greenery. We lined the ceiling within that enclosure around the bar in vintage, pale green-gold tin tiles, which lend an old-school vibe and complete the composition of the bar and over-bar. And both the top of the overhang and the face of the bar are painted blue, making it a real focal point."

With the bar as a central zone — the "town square" of the restaurant, according to Fortis — additional zones were created largely by varying wall finishes and furnishings to manage space and scale. The back wall behind the long white marble display kitchen counter, which seats 10 to 12 guests, is lined in white subway tiles and is the backdrop for oversize, Argentinean-style painted Longhorn steer head art pieces. Dining areas feature a mix of mustard-yellow leather banquettes, classic blue leather-clad bar-height chairs and traditional loose tables. Dining area walls are covered in either vibrant, green-on-pink wallpaper showcasing overscaled tropical leaves or black wood paneling charred in the Japanese shou sugi ban method. Surrounding the bar proper is a variety of seating styles, including bar- and counter-height tables, communal tables and lounge seating.

Furniture styles were chosen to convey a sophisticated look as well as a residential vibe. "We wanted the restaurant to feel professional and serious, not like a cafe," Fortis says. "Both Chef Di Paola and Sebastian La Rocca have huge culinary heritage, so the furnishings needed to match that level. They also had to be comfortable, and we wanted to bring a little bit of an old-school vibe in, which is why we went with the classic leather-covered barstool seats in some areas. We just made them new and fresh by choosing blue leather."

Two large columns, one structural and one added by the design team for balance, flank the bar and are covered in handcrafted ceramic tiles in varying shades of green. "Those columns are



Centering the bar and giving it a finely detailed, architectural overhang was one strategy for creating order and intimacy in the large, open space. Painting its woodwork blue made it an even stronger focal point.





Charred black wood paneling on some walls serves as a design counterpoint and contrast to the vibrant colors and bold patterns used elsewhere. It's also a great backdrop for artwork.

such significant architectural features that we felt they should have their own significant design language," Fortis notes. "We went with green because the owners wanted CVLTVRA to have a very lush, vegetation-heavy, indoor-outdoor feel. We didn't want to bring in any artificial greenery, so we brought lushness in by using a lot of shades of green. That's what those columns represent, and it's the idea behind the feature wallpaper as well. It hits the vegetation theme in a very overscaled, dramatic way and also brings in our 'primary secondary' color, which is pink."

That pink is picked up again on vertical panels imprinted with examples selected to reflect CVLTVRA's brand essence, translated to Spanish and presented in overscaled fashion.

Zoning, Fortis says, is important even before guests fully enter the restaurant. That's thanks to a vestibule designed to ease their transition inside and set the tone for the experience to come.

"Coming in, you notice a deconstructed wood frame structure. That was meant to subtly evoke a street market or little *cocina de mercado* that you'd find in any South American urban setting," Fortis says. "Oftentimes, they're built out of whatever framing they can find to create a shelter, and the frames would all be exposed. It lends concept authenticity, but it also provides compression so that when customers come in, they don't just walk into a huge, vacuous space with really high ceilings. Instead, they come into this dramatic little decon-

### Project Team

**Ownership:** CGI Merchant Group  
**Executive chef/concept development:** Fabian Di Paolo  
**Opening consulting chef:** Sebastian La Rocca  
**Interior design, branding:** Bigtime Design Studio

structed *mercado*." With its open framing providing peek-a-boo views into the restaurant, the vestibule's vibrant 8-inch mosaic tile flooring, moss-covered back wall and massive red flower art installation, crafted from dried, preserved and synthetic flowers, provide design sizzle. "One of the first things we talked about was the hexagonal tiles used in the





The previous restaurant's bar was transformed into an open kitchen, visually set apart with white tile and a white marble counter, custom millwork and oversized, hand-painted longhorn steer head art pieces.

entry flooring," Fortis says. "It's a very powerful, custom pattern and represents the Central and South American color palette. It is supposed to be a delicate pattern but is also intentionally super bold. We wanted people to walk in and go, 'bam!'"

Once inside, attention to managing scale continues from flooring choice to ceiling design. For flooring, Bigtime chose wood-look luxury vinyl tile planks of two different tones and widths. "We tried to keep the pattern as random as possible to create a kind of piano-key effect and do it in an oversized way. The place is so big and so vacuous that all of the details would have gotten lost

otherwise," Fortis says. "Everything, including the floor, was done on a larger scale to add graphic intimacy. Had we just gone with a solid tone, it would have felt just like this huge expanse of floor."

Up above, the 22-foot-high exposed ceiling was brought down and softened both visually and acoustically with panels made of fabric tightly stretched over wood frames.

#### **A Finishing Touch**

With cocinas de mercados as its original inspiration, CVLTVRA's open kitchen is designed both for visual appeal and to efficiently produce the operation's small-

### **Snapshot**

**Concept:** Upscale Latin-Mediterranean fusion

**Location:** Gabriel Hotel, Miami

**Opened:** December 2018

**Size:** 8,000 square feet

**Seats:** 198, including bar and patio

**Design highlights:** Vibrant Latin color palette, open-frame entry with mosaic flooring and flower art installation, center bar, open kitchen, hand-painted Longhorn steer art, tropical feature wallpaper, two-tone wood-look flooring, green tile columns, greenery, retractable window walls, polished-yet-residential-style furnishings

**Build-out:** 1 year

plates-focused menu. There is, Chef Di Paolo points out, no open-flame cooking done there, and no venting was added above the production line. Rather, all of the heavy lifting in terms of prep, mise en place and traditional hot-line cooking is done in a behind-the-scenes kitchen upstairs, which also handles the hotel's room service and banquet needs. Before each shift, everything that's needed is sent down on carts to CVLTVRA for station setup.

"Our display kitchen is primarily a cold line for finishing, plating and assembly," Di Paolo says. "There's a station for vegetables, one for fish and crudo, a pastry station, etc. We use sous vide, induction, a small oven for flat-breads and other ventless cooking technologies. And we do a lot of dehydrating of fruits for our specialty bar drinks there. Basically, we created a menu based on the kitchen that we have versus the other way around. The result is that it's different, but it's very functional for our menu, and it works very well with the overall design."

Fortis adds that in addition to the white, modern aesthetic and steer head art that helped to create a special zone within the space, the kitchen provided



an opportunity to introduce additional design interest. Below its sharp marble top, the counter is clad in softly curved, painted millwork inspired by antique Victorian frames.

"We took an old piece of molding, blew it up in scale and cut it out on a CNC machine," Fortis says. "It created overscaled curves and a little softness that counterbalances what are a lot of hard surfaces and geometric shapes in

the space. It was supposed to feel like an old-school decorative frame. We shot it with industrial paint like that used on cars or airplanes, which gave it a soft, metallic finish."

Given the variety of colors, finishes and styles that make up CVLTVRA's design aesthetic, Fortis adds that the most challenging part of the project was weaving all of those pieces and parts together to create a cohesive composition. "It was

really hard not to panic when we saw individual pieces go up — like when I saw that colorful entry tile go down next to a concrete floor, I had to cross my fingers," he notes. "And a hotel manager panicked when the black wall paneling went up. But piece by piece, everything started to fit together like a puzzle. The big aha moment was when that wild green-on-pink wallpaper went up. That was a fantastic day." +

