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# dish

## Miami Vibe

Lounge on 20 brings white leather chairs and a faux-sand wall to midtown, not to mention colorful culinary creations (like diver scallop with poached quail egg) and 25 kinds of champagne by the glass. Now this is our kind of South Beach diet

by Martin Kuz & Lark Park

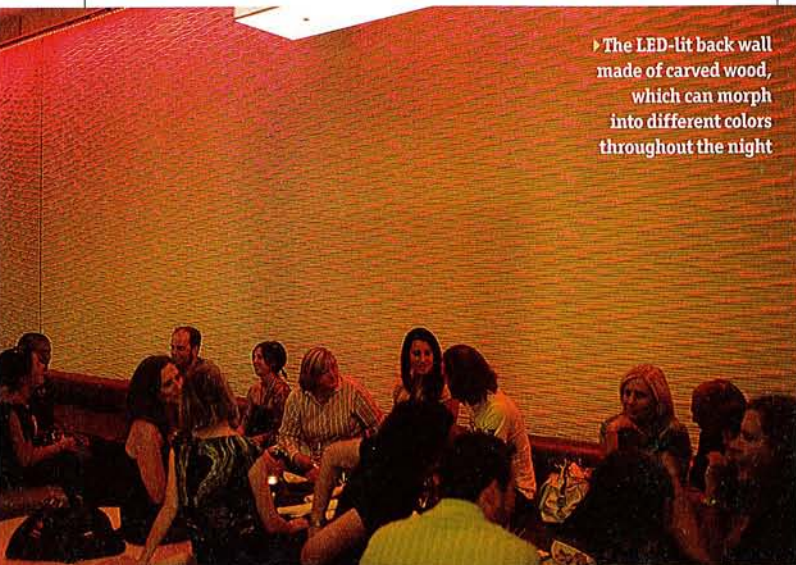
Photos by  
Marc Thomas Kallweit

**B**y day, All Mackani looks every bit the typical well-dressed businessman—Armani suit, Ermenegildo Zegna tie—as befits the well-heeled clientele at his upscale 55 Degrees restaurant on Capitol Mall. But as the sun slowly sinks, his alter ego gradually surfaces: off come the suit and starched-collar formality, on go the Seven jeans and laidback attitude. Then Casual Mackani heads to midtown's South Beach, better known as Lounge on 20, his latest venture and the

► Pan-roasted diver scallop topped with poached quail egg, parsnip purée and prosciutto







▶ The LED-lit back wall made of carved wood, which can morph into different colors throughout the night

answer to an age-old question: What happens when MOMA meets *Miami Vice*?

Like Mackani himself, the lounge, housed inside the MARRS building at 20th and K streets in midtown, possesses a canny duality. Cool and sultry, cozy and sprawling, buzzy and serene, the space doubles as a champagne/wine bar and restaurant, with bubbly from around the world, artisanal cocktails and a dining experience that emphasizes communal eating. It aims to appeal equally to patrons who want to sip and run and those who want to chill and chew the fat—or the food—for awhile.

"You can come in and have the best cocktail and enjoy the setting, or you can come in and have a 10-course meal and enjoy the setting," says Mackani, who with his business partner, Hayk Galachyan, conceived Lounge on 20 to fill what they saw as an empty niche in the city's wine-and-dine scene. "It's how you would feel if you came to our house for a dinner party."

And one very hip house at that. The lounge is a classic expression of the modern aesthetic, with a sleek, chic, invitingly minimalist décor that can be glimpsed from the outside through glass walls on two sides. "This is a space that you walk by and you want to know what's happening inside," says Valerie Hoffman, a principal with Lionakis, the architectural firm behind both of Mackani's eateries.

Perhaps the most striking design element of all is the back wall. Constructed of carved wood composite, it reflects colorful LED lights from above, creating a mirage of undulating sand that transports you to the land of Crockett and Tubbs. Across the 5,000-square-foot room, exposed wood ceiling beams and pillars contrast with the high-gloss counters and shimmering bronze floors, while chocolate brown couches and mahogany tables accent swivel chairs sheathed in white leather. An elegant, pearl white curved bar that showcases small distillery liquors anchors one side of the loft-like expanse; at the opposite end, exhibited like works of art, bottles of champagne and wine are affixed horizontally to the wall.

The display gives conspicuous visibility to Lounge on 20's more than two dozen different champagnes and sparkling wines,

imported from as close as Napa and as far away as Australia, Italy and the Champagne region of France. Along with soothing international lounge beats—played at a volume that, mercifully, doesn't inhibit intimate conversation—and a hypnotic, ever-changing digital-art wall display, it's the eclectic array of bubbly that sustains the *boite's* vibe. Whether it's a \$50 glass of 1999 Dom Perignon or a more modest Schramsberg rosé for \$12, Mackani believes the next toast is always the best one.

"I think we should start with champagne and end with champagne in social gatherings," he says. "You don't say, 'God, I had a really bad day, I'll drink champagne.' It's about celebrating and being happy."

The upbeat mood will be apparent to anyone passing by the lounge's spacious deck overlooking 20th Street, where by mid-August customers will be able to relax on banquettes as servers, who sport fashionable threads from local boutiques M.E., Bijoux and Lazio, take their orders. And considering the size of the drink menu—presented as a coffee-table book, it's filled with pictures of available libations and an extensive non-sparkling wine list, including Willamette pinot, Paso Robles cab and German Riesling—there's no reason not to be in, well, good spirits.

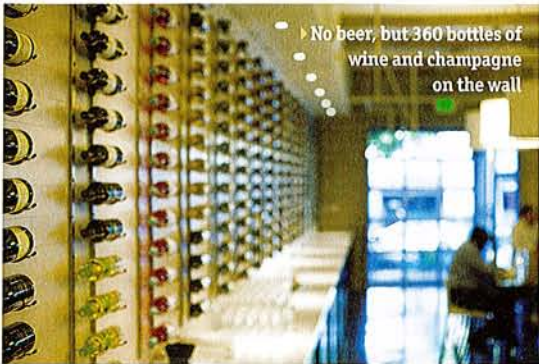
Aside from wine and champagne, there are cocktails made with handcrafted gins, vodkas and bourbons from specialty labels—Hendrick's, Gvori, Old Bardstown Kentucky—and enhanced with exotic ingredients such as green chartreuse, elderflower liqueur, sazerac rye and absinthe. (Lounge on 20 stocks three brands of absinthe, all served tableside by way of an absinthe fountain, which through a process called *louching* dilutes the notoriously potent liqueur and creates a milky effect.) Add to that an emphasis on seasonality—the bar chefs use only fresh-squeezed lemon, lime and orange juices as well as mint, basil and other organic herbs—and the result is a profound new celebration of the cocktail.

Likewise, executive chef David Boswell, late of Formaggio in Sacramento and Calistoga Ranch in Napa, has created a wide-ranging yet intimate menu. Fusing his penchant for French and



▶ The 5,000-square-foot space with exposed wood beams and open kitchen



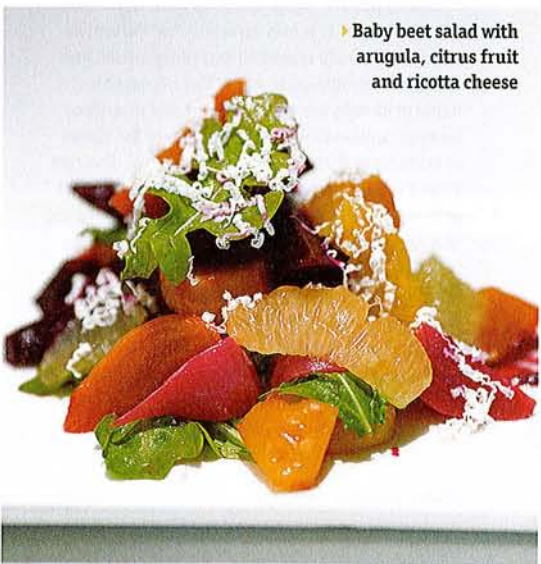


▶ No beer, but 360 bottles of wine and champagne on the wall

Italian cuisine with the ideology of Asian cooking, which emphasizes using all one's senses (not just taste), he presents what he calls "fully constructed dishes" as small plates and platters. That means an elaborate entrée—seared langostino (which are like small lobsters) in a vinaigrette made of Madras curry, heirloom tomatoes and piquillo pepper, or a pan-roasted diver scallop with poached quail egg, parsnip purée and crispy prosciutto—is done in microcosm, reduced to a few glorious bites: tastes great, less filling. His offerings also combine the rustic and the sophisticated, such as hand-cut pomme frites drizzled in oxtail gravy and fried risotto with white truffle oil.

As Lounge on 20 evolves, Mackani plans to bring in live DJs and host small house parties where a famous name—his ambitious wish list includes Jack Johnson and Mary J. Blige—performs a 45-minute set for a couple of hundred patrons. Even so, don't expect him to turn his newest hot spot into a den of dusk-'til-dawn revelry. "It's not a nightclub and I don't want to be a nightclub owner," he says. "I want to have a place that I can hang out with my friends and have fun." That's a sentiment worth toasting. Champagne, anyone? ♦

*1050 20th St., Sacramento. 443-6620. loungeon20.com*



▶ Baby beet salad with arugula, citrus fruit and ricotta cheese