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## **LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT: CHEF MIKE MATA'S PASSION FOR FOOD AND THE ST. ANTHONY**

### ***"Every Plate Has a Story to Tell" at Hotel Known for Celebrations and Celebrities***

**SAN ANTONIO (2016)** – From the time it opened as San Antonio's first true luxury hotel in 1909, The St. Anthony, a Luxury Collection Hotel, San Antonio, has entertained, fêted and celebrated, hosting celebrities, notable names and locals for parties, celebrations and fine dining, leaving stories and tales behind. For Executive Chef Michael Mata, Executive Chef of The St. Anthony, those stories are entwined with food.

"Every plate has a story to tell," explains Mata. "Both when we serve it to a guest and when it comes back to us. The food and flavors—and what guests enjoyed—tell a story. We're always working to tell new stories."

Never thought about the story behind your breakfast, lunch or dinner? Then you've never enjoyed a meal crafted by Mata, a chef with boundless energy and passion for his culinary craft. A native of San Antonio, Mata has been with The St. Anthony since 2005. His passion for cooking ignites an endless creativity which is translated into memorable dishes for guests at the hotel where Mata fell in love—with the hotel itself. From the moment he walked into The St. Anthony, he's dedicated himself to crafting culinary delights that match the historic beauty's luxurious glamour, even building a rooftop garden himself so that he can offer the freshest flavors to hotel guests.

Mata's culinary history is anything but typical. Anyone who samples his dishes would be surprised to know that his training did not begin in the classroom, but instead in his family's kitchen, where he wanted to duplicate his grandmother's and mother's rice. His quest to make that dish sparked his culinary adventure, which includes working alongside chefs he felt he could learn from in San Antonio, including Andrew Weissman, John Besh, Steven McHugh, Jonathan Parker, Scott Cohen, Isaac Cantu, as well as celebrity chefs Lidia Bastianichi, Rick Bayless and Joanne Weir.

Known for unique dishes flavored by passion, ambition and raw talent, Mata has taken all what he's learned and developed his own signature style of blending flavors and textures. Serving as the hotel's Executive Chef since 2011, his goal is to create dishes that excite all of the senses. He doesn't focus on only the flavor of each dish, but also how it looks, smells and makes each guest feel. He strives to prepare memorable dishes that will create experiences, so guests will remember their dining experience and the flavors for years to come.

#### **Q: Tell us about your background. What drew you to a culinary career?**

**A:** I really didn't know what I wanted to do, but I was always drawn to my grandmother, who like most grandmas, cooked for us. My friends were dreaming of becoming firefighters and astronauts, and I was drawn to the kitchen. I spent hours watching my grandmother and mother prepare delicious dishes, then seeing how that always brightened the faces of every family member. When I was 11, I decided to cook my grandmother's Spanish rice. I loved the challenge of learning how things were done. My rice wasn't the same as hers, but that made me want to keep trying.

Food always ties families together and the main ingredient is love: a mother cooks all day, but it's worth it. It's one of the ways she cares for her family. My mom and grandma don't make the rice now—I do. I have my own twists to it, but it's inspired by what they did. I carry that legacy on and I can share my rice with them.

#### **Q: What does The St. Anthony mean to you?**

**A:** The moment I stepped foot into The St. Anthony it was an eye opening experience, one that no other can describe. As I stood in the Loggia, I knew that my priority in life, my main goal, was to have the upmost, humble attitude toward gaining the knowledge to become the face of all things “food” in this exquisite, luxurious hotel.

Everything about this hotel is inspiring. The décor, the history, the feeling you get when you’re here. I fell in love with The St. Anthony from the moment I walked through the doors. People say you do outrageous things when you’re in love and that fuels me. I can’t imagine being anywhere else. I strive to be the most welcoming host, the most presentable and passionate chef—and the chef that a hotel like this deserves. I’m committed to always giving the attention and care that each of our guests deserves and to constantly find ways to go above and beyond expectations. With our renovation almost complete, those expectations are high but I’m determined that we’ll exceed them. No matter how well we do, we always ask how we can be better next time—we don’t rest on what we’ve done before.

**Q: What inspires you in the kitchen?**

**A:** I get a spark from things I haven’t worked with yet—ingredients I haven’t tried or techniques that are different. But I also see things in every day life that lead me somewhere in the kitchen. I might see a pattern on a wall and wonder how I can create that with food? Or a combination of things: an ingredient I like, but using it in a different way than what people might expect.

Sometimes, I just like to see where something takes me. For instance, you can take squash and burn it. Most people think you just throw it away, but what if you add vinegar to it? It becomes a fantastic vinaigrette that adds a new dimension to a salad. I’m always wondering where I can go, how can I take a dish to the next level, what can I do to make each ingredient shine?

**Q: Where has your culinary adventure taken you?**

**A:** I’m still the little boy trying to learn the secret to his grandmother’s rice. I like to learn. Knowledge is power, so the more I study and observe, the more I can grow and expand what I do. Once I knew culinary was where I wanted to be, I began compiling my education by studying regional dishes in some of San Antonio’s premiere downtown restaurants. I didn’t care what role I played, I just wanted to be there and soak in knowledge. I tried to experience places that with my limited knowledge and experience at the time, were out of my reach. I was determined if I could learn just one thing working somewhere or alongside someone, that experience was worth it.

I experienced the world of seafood at Pesca at the Watermark Hotel & Spa, learning from Jonathan Parker, Charles Bartsch, and Theo Burney. I learned from Andrew Weissman at La Rêve. At Las Canarias at La Mansion, I worked alongside Chef Isaac Cantu, then when he opened Yokonyu, I had the opportunity to fully grasp the technique and tradition of sushi. Working with John Besh and Steve McHugh when they were

**Chef Mata’s Kitchen Wisdom**

- Approach a recipe like a kid creating a banana split or standing in front of a sundae buffet: without adult supervision.
- Purchase a spice or herb you have never tasted; or hardly use. Try it every morning in its purest form for a week before your coffee/tea/energy drink and about 15 minutes after brushing your teeth.
- Vinegar! Vinegar! Vinegar? Try different vinegars in everything and anything you can from salads to marinades to desserts (including homemade ice cream) and even mixed drinks.
- Eat at a sushi bar on the day they receive a fresh delivery. Close your eyes, take a deep breath and see if you can taste the difference.
- Even if a recipe doesn’t come out as planned, smile because it is slowly becoming your recipe as you evolve it to the taste you like. Don’t get frustrated because then the flavor of frustration will come out in the food and it is not a good taste.
- You must truly be in the mood to not cook, but to create with your heart, soul and knowledge. NEVER take it out on the food, the food never did anything to you!
- When reading about food and coming across a word or ingredient you don’t know, research it and stop at nothing to let your palate become familiar with it.
- When planning a meal, think two days ahead. This will help better plan for ingredients that should marinate, defrost properly, or be prepared at that minute for the freshest flavor.

opening Lüke, I learned the flavor that is Louisiana is really the flavor of family, friends and hospitality. I've also seen these qualities come alive while hosting celebratory chef dinners at The St. Anthony with culinary legends like Lidia Bastianichi, Rick Bayless, John Besh and Joanne Weir.

**Q: What is your vision for the flavors of The St. Anthony?**

**A:** Every thing should have a story, and every dish we serve has a story. No matter where we start, with a certain ingredient or a recipe that inspires us, we build it from there. As we build, we make our own stories through that new dish. We can use the power of food to positively affect our guests' lives. One of the basic needs for life is food. However, by offering creative and indigenous dishes, you can elevate that food, tantalize taste buds and create fond memories. People should remember the flavors they enjoyed, as well as what they were wearing, who they were with and what a great time they had.

I ask myself how can we be better and create a newfound appreciation for every single ingredient? How can we highlight each ingredient in the best way possible to grow an appreciation for every aspect of a dish? With that, we strive to respect a farm to table approach, such as rooftop gardening, and relying on truly indigenous ingredients, incorporating our knowledge of local flora and fauna to create flavors that elevate our guests' experience.

Everyone thinks Mexican food is indigenous to San Antonio, and it is, but we're so much more than that. We have a fantastic array of flora and fauna native to this area—that's what's truly indigenous. I want to highlight those flavors, those unexpected ingredients, and create something new for our guests to enjoy. We want to highlight San Antonio, give a taste and feel of what is truly local, but also highlight the variety of influences here.

I also like to change things. I'm constantly tweaking recipes and creating new dishes. Each area of the hotel has a different feel, a different personality, so how do you recognize that? We work to showcase it and highlight in our food options. The menu for the pool area is different than the menu in The St. Anthony Club or The Loggia. I want our guests to enjoy a wide variety of flavors to accompany their stay.

We are the only Luxury Collection property in Texas. That carries a responsibility. We strive to provide that luxury experience every day, but we want to go beyond luxury to re-establish The St. Anthony as THE place to be and THE place to dine. This hotel is more than a tradition—it's a legend. And we want our food to match that legend. We want to be the best, every single time. That should be our culinary identity. We're not competing with anyone but ourselves—what can we do to grow and make ourselves better than what we've done before?

**Q: What do you keep in mind as you create menus for events and weddings?**

**A:** I know many people think of hotels as only offering what's on the menu—and we have great menus for event planners and brides to choose from—but that's not what drives us. We want to create something that tells the story for that event, for that bride and groom, for those guests. We work to personalize every menu and make each event and each meal special. We want everyone to have that memory, and to talk about the food that night as well as well after the event.

I meet with each meeting planner, wedding planner or bride and groom personally. I want to hear their story and make the food for their event unique to them. When we do a tasting, I listen not only to what they say to me, but what they say to each other. I pick up on cues and ideas and look for ways to incorporate that into what we're doing for them.

Whether an event has 10 guests or 1,000, we want to make each guest feel like they're the first guest—not the last to be served or just another person who is enjoying a food station or a buffet. Each guest deserves the best culinary experience possible—they're not just part of a crowd. Everything we do, from menu planning through to serving, is designed to make each guest's experience the best it can be.

Each event is an experience for us and crafting personal aspects into one meal for one guest gives us new experiences to draw on. We make it memorable for that one event, but we also remember that, giving us more options to offer as we customize events for other guests.

**Q: Locally sourced, indigenous foods are a passion for you. Tell us about your rooftop garden.**

**A:** The renovation has given me an opportunity to repurpose a private area of the 10<sup>th</sup> floor rooftop, creating a garden. I want the entire garden, and the path to it, to reflect The St. Anthony—the garden has to be as beautiful as the hotel. I've been hauling soil up there and building the area, even working on the stairwell that leads to the garden to give it a fresh look. I've painted the walls and scored them to give them a distressed woodwork look. It's been a slow process—I'm fitting that in around my schedule—but it's something I enjoy. I like to create. I'm also crafting a chandelier from repurposed materials, starting with an old wheel. The lights will be composed of a variety of glasswork I've collected—I want to hollow the glass out and put LED lights in.

I've been studying and researching plants and flavors to plan year-round crops for the garden. There are so many varieties of mint and basil, as well as other herbs—pineapple sage has the essence of pineapple, for instance, so you don't use that like you would traditional sage. I'm still working on our full planting schedule, but I do want to try different varieties and see what does well. Texas sun can be brutal, especially when your garden is elevated in downtown San Antonio, so we have to work around that.

But the garden is more than just herbs. I want to nurture and grow flavors and by growing things ourselves, we're creating part of the story behind our food. A garden can also grow an appreciation for each of your ingredients—the blood, sweat and tears that it can take to nurture tomato plants, for instance. We don't have enough space to produce all of the tomatoes or lettuce we need to feed all of our guests, but I want to offer flavors no one else can. Perhaps that means a special salad for a special guest, or a chef's table for a meal under the stars, featuring items grown in the garden. Gardening is a personal touch and I want to share that with our guests.

**Q: With the variety of events at The St. Anthony, and the extensive menus you offer, how do you track everything?**

**A:** We photograph everything. Every dish we present at a tasting gets photographed so we know exactly how it was presented and can duplicate that for the event. We're meticulous with how we plate things—I want every plate to look as if it belongs in a magazine. To ensure we get the presentation correct, we store all of the photographs and have a monitor in the kitchen where we can review each event and every dish, along with the production sheets, so we can create the dishes down to the precise sheen of the sauce we used to compliment the plate. We want to take stress off of our event planners and our brides—they never need to worry about the quality of the food or the presentation their guests will enjoy.

**Q: When you're not at The St. Anthony, how do you like to spend your time?**

**A:** Cooking! Really, I love to be in the kitchen. I stay until the end of every event we host at the hotel—I want to make sure that everything is as it needs to be for our guests, so I'm constantly walking the floor, talking to guests and checking plates. On the nights when that means I get home at 2 or 3 a.m., I'll still put something together to eat. Even when my wife leaves something out for me, I whip up a sauce or something to go with it.

I also take classes to expand my food knowledge. I've been taking one on indigenous foods, learning what else you can do with things like Mesquite, which is everywhere in Texas. I love exploring flavors, looking for new ways to present things, something that we haven't done before. I've expanded my plant knowledge so that now when I look at pictures, I can tell rosemary flowers apart from oregano flowers or thyme flowers—all of which can add unique elements of flavor to a dish.

And I love to get outdoors with my family, or just spend time with them whenever I can. We enjoy movie nights and being together. My wife, Crystal, and I met in the food industry, so she understands the crazy life of culinary. And my kids get it—my youngest son (Zale, 9) likes to cook with me and go to classes that I take when I can, while my oldest, Aaron (21), wants to work so he has the money to eat good food all the time! Laray (16), my daughter, always wants me to cook for her, which I enjoy doing—remember, cooking is love.

**Q: What's your favorite cuisine?**

**A:** There's so much, but sushi is probably my favorite. When the seafood is fresh, there are such clean flavors. Each ingredient and the quality of the ingredients can really shine. Sea urchin, when prepared well, has a buttery, toffee-like sweetness. I like experiencing that. If you want great sushi, find out when the local restaurant gets their seafood in and eat there that day—the flavors will amaze you.

**Q: What do you do to keep your team motivated?**

**A:** We've got a great crew. Everyone really gives their all throughout the hotel—we want our guests to be happy. We have hotel staff members that have been here for decades and we all think of The St. Anthony as home. We have a commitment to each guest and we work together to divide and conquer what we need to do make each event and each meal the best that it can be.

For my team—we work together to serve our guests the best flavor we can, I work to make sure that they're comfortable with each task. We work together to make sure that they are confident in the recipes and the presentation so that we're all on the same page. I touch each dish—that's my commitment to make sure that everything is just right—but my team works with me. I work to make sure that each of them understands how much I appreciate what they do and I support them so they can focus on the end goal: making our guests happy. At the end of the day they are a guest in my house for that work shift. Sometimes that means little motivators, like a Big Red or chocolate milk during a long shift—whatever it is that team member is into, I know it and go out of my way to make sure they get that token of my appreciation and they see that we're all in it together. And when guests want to thank me or introduce me, I make sure the team is a part of that—I couldn't do this without them.

**About The St. Anthony, a Luxury Collection Hotel, San Antonio**

A Texas jewel reborn, crafted from the dreams of two Texas cattlemen in 1909, The St. Anthony, a Luxury Collection Hotel, was the first luxury hotel in San Antonio and has remained one of the finest expressions of Texas hospitality for more than a century. Featuring 277 guest rooms and suites, as well as more than 31,500 square feet of indoor and outdoor meeting and event space in the heart of downtown San Antonio, The St. Anthony is an unrivaled classic reborn with contemporary glamour and opulence. The hotel's timeless elegance and tradition, fused with stunning city views and modern design, serve as the epicenter of San Antonio's social scene, including its sixth-floor outdoor pool and tenth-floor rooftop lounge, as well as the storied St. Anthony Club, a cocktail lounge with historic tales to share, Rebelle, San Antonio's newest culinary destination, and Haunt, a bar offering classic cocktails inspired by the haunting legends of The St. Anthony. For reservations or for more information, contact 210-227-4392 or visit [www.thestanthonyhotel.com](http://www.thestanthonyhotel.com). #TheStAnthony, #TexasJewelReborn

**About The Luxury Collection Hotels & Resorts**

The Luxury Collection® brand is comprised of world-renowned hotels and resorts offering unique, authentic experiences that evoke lasting, treasured memories. For the global explorer, The Luxury Collection offers a gateway to the world's most exciting and desirable destinations. Each hotel and resort is a unique and cherished expression of its location; a portal to the destination's indigenous charms and treasures. Magnificent decor, spectacular settings, impeccable service and the latest modern conveniences combine to provide a uniquely enriching experience. Originated in 1906 under the CIGA® brand as a collection of Europe's most celebrated and iconic properties, today The Luxury Collection brand is a glittering ensemble of nearly 100 of the world's finest hotels and resorts in more than 30 countries in bustling cities and spectacular destinations around the world. The Luxury Collection includes award-winning properties that continuously exceed guest expectations by offering unparalleled service, style and class while celebrating each hotel's distinctive heritage and unique character. All of these hotels, many of them centuries old, are internationally recognized as being among the world's finest. For more information, please visit [www.luxurycollection.com](http://www.luxurycollection.com). #theluxurycollection