



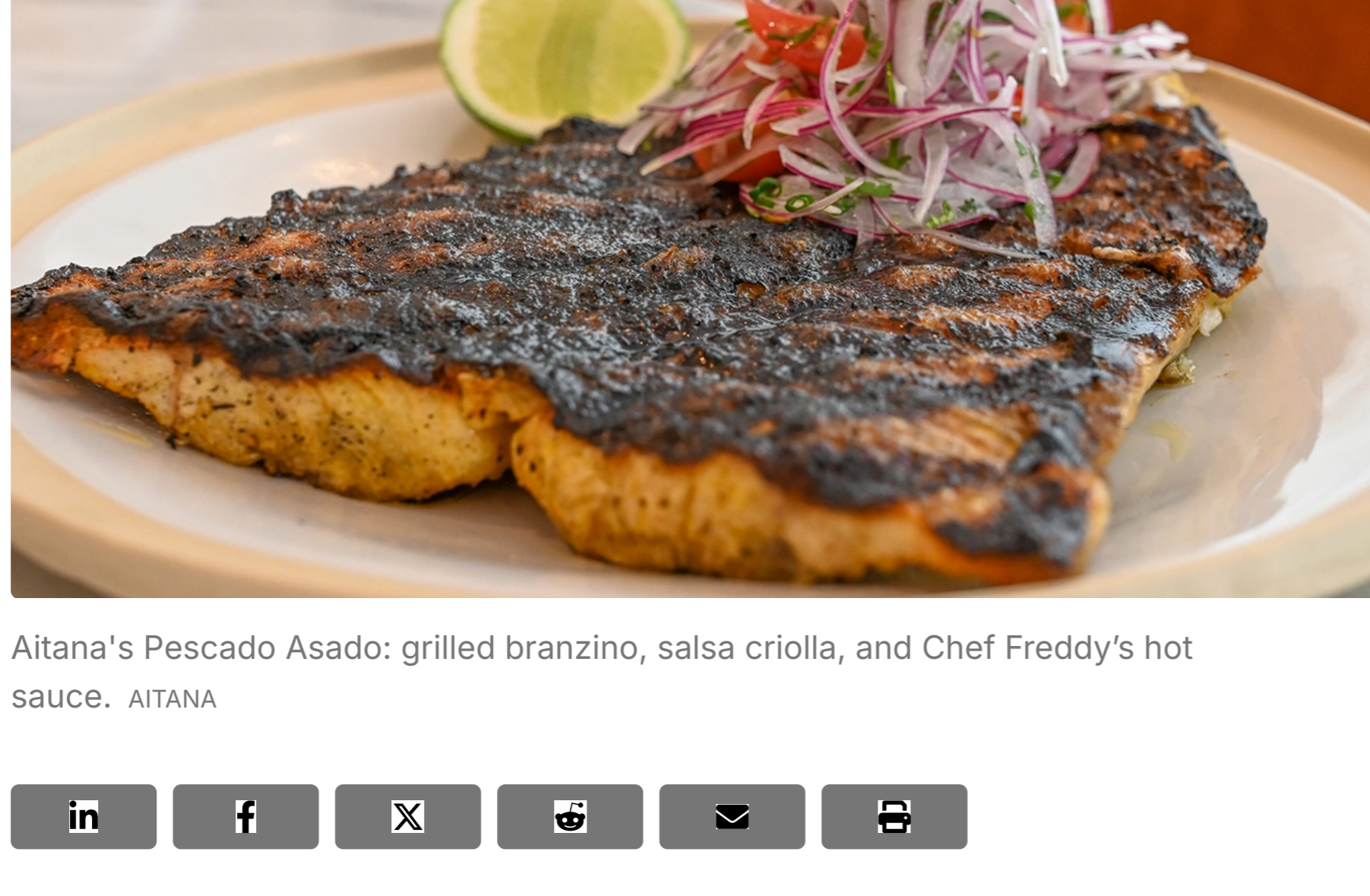
NEW RESTAURANTS ■ CHEF PROFILES ■ HOTEL DINING

Chef Freddy Vargas opens new restaurant Aitana in NYC's Virgin Hotels

Aitana is his most personal restaurant yet, fusing cultures to create fine dining


 Ally MacConchie
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Aitana's Pescado Asado: grilled branzino, salsa criolla, and Chef Freddy's hot sauce. AITANA



Chef Freddy Vargas, the executive chef of New York City's Virgin Hotels, opened his newest restaurant, Aitana, on Nov. 15. The restaurant, which features Latin-Mediterranean cuisine, is the final addition to Virgin Hotels' dining lineup, joining Everdene, the Pool Club, and the Riff Raff Club.

Situated on the hotel's fourth floor, Aitana's interior features a view of the Empire State Building from the bar area, accented with geometric chandeliers, tambour wood paneling, and black and white tilework. In addition to crafted cocktails such as the sweet Plum Serenade and the savory Verdant Spirit, the restaurant features an extensive wine selection curated by sommelier Andrew McFetridge, with suggested pairings on the menu.



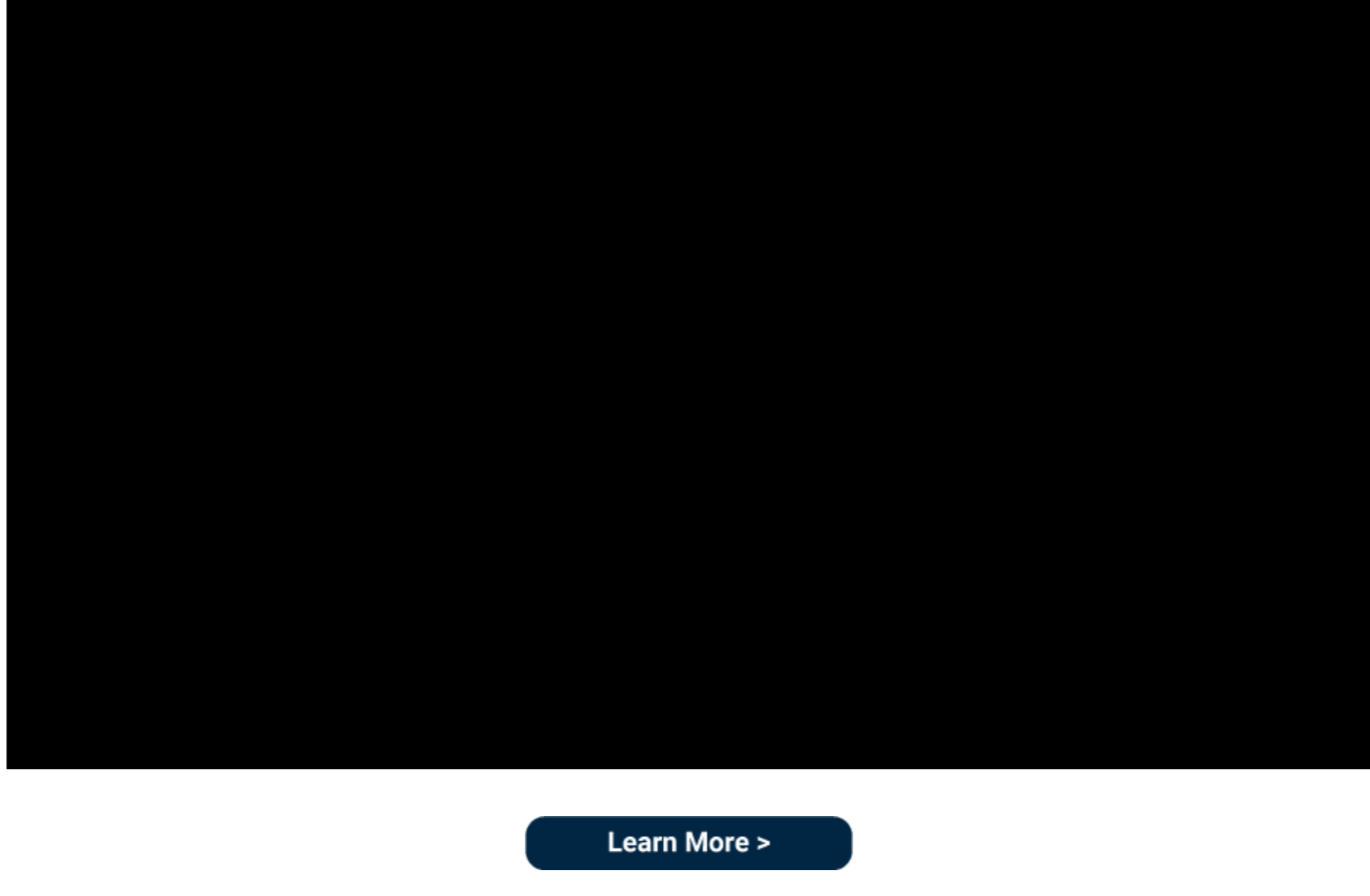
Vargas, who is Ecuadorian and Puerto Rican but was raised in Staten Island, blends his heritage with his experience in fine dining, especially Italian food. By serving appetizers like tostones with caviar and his grandmother's shrimp ceviche, and entrees like plantain-cruste'd bass and a 24 oz. dry-aged ribeye with chimichurri, he is able to elevate family dishes that he grew up eating using his years of experience as a chef.



Aitana's Ceviche de me Abuela. Photo credit: Aitana

Vargas's love for cooking was ignited by watching chef Emeril Lagasse on the Food Network as a teenager. Inspired by Lagasse's enthusiastic style and bold flavors, he began experimenting in the kitchen, even attempting his own cooking show. "I just fell in love watching Emeril, to the point where I even had, thank god nobody could find them anymore, videos of me impersonating him or doing my own cooking show. But, fortunately, they can't be found as they're on VHS," he said.

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After a brief stint in college for general studies, Vargas decided to pursue his culinary dreams and enrolled in the Art Institute of New York. "At first, I wanted to [get into cooking] right after high school. My father kind of convinced me to just go to college first, so I tried that, but I wasn't really finding any fulfillment. So, I made a trip to the Art Institute of New York, which had a culinary program on Varick and Canal Street. And then I just went one day, took a tour, and just went to culinary school, and then I started working. And my love really came from, you know, watching Emeril and his whole 'Bam!' thing. That's really where it took off for me."

Drawing inspiration from his years working in the kitchen in different places, from Miami to LA and South Carolina to New York, along with his trips to Ecuador and Paris, Vargas incorporates modern techniques with traditional flavors to conceptualize new menus. "I try to take all my cooking experiences, and even my dining experiences, and anything that really just inspires me. That's just taking my influences from my time living in LA and even my time working at several restaurants in New York City."

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"I worked at David Burke & Donatella, which was a very modern American menu with a lot of little gimmicky stuff in the plate-up," he said. "But a lot of those influences conceptualize menus. And then with Aitana, this is really very special to me because it's a lot of dishes that have been transformed into being modern, but it's a lot of the dishes that I had as a child."

When asked about his favorite dish on Aitana's menu, he said it was "definitely the plantain-cruste'd bass. But I would say coming second, we do a pappardelle with an oxtail stew, with dried porcini mushrooms and basil and aged Parmesan cheese."

"So, growing up, my father used to make that, but it was just regular beef stew meat with spaghetti and dried shiitakes. Given that I worked for an Italian chef for a really long time, I feel our pasta program is pretty worked here. So I just elevated that into something a little bit more luscious as opposed to just beef stew meat. It was always typically dry as a kid, so we did it with oxtail, which has a little bit more fat content. We even tried porcini as opposed to shiitakes just to make it a bit more elevated."

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As for ingredients, Vargas loves to utilize flavors in unexpected ways. "We have this sour orange that we're using; there are several names for them. It's called naranjilla in Ecuador, but some South Asian cuisines would call it lulo. It's just like a sour orange, a little bit more tart than sour."

"We haven't been able to source them. Some of the ingredients are very hard to source in the States, but we've been able to get them frozen; there are some Latin purveyors. We've been using a lot of it in our stews, like our duck dish that we're showcasing. We use that in an emulsion with foie gras just to add a little bit of acidity and cut through the richness of the duck."

"We also use it in one of the bar dishes, a duck empanada, and then in the stew. So that is used in a stew called seco from Ecuador. You go to a mom-and-pop restaurant, and they have several different proteins with the same kind of cooking method, and they use this naranjilla that is just tart and cuts through the richness of some of those gamey meats."



Aitana's Langosta Spaghetti Negro. Photo credit: Aitana

Vargas acknowledges the challenges of the industry, particularly the difficulty of finding passionate and skilled cooks. "I think it's just finding talent, especially with cooks. I mean, it's hard sometimes to find somebody that really wants to be a chef. It's really difficult to find those types of cooks nowadays."

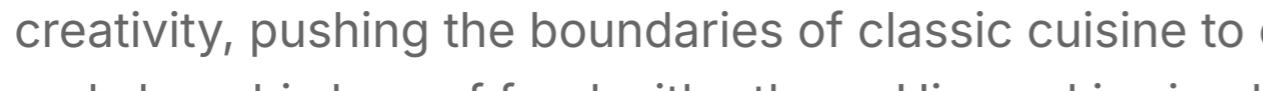
Despite the challenges, he has found a team that shares his enthusiasm. "You know, it's almost a diamond in the rough. For the most part, we are finding labor around it... It's hard to find, but you do find them. But I would say that it's a struggle to find true, passionate cooks. You know, when I was [coming] up in the industry, I was working with other line cooks who wanted to be chefs one day, and you don't typically find that."

However, he remains optimistic about the future of fine dining, believing that diners are increasingly seeking out unique and memorable experiences. "I think fine dining is on its way back. I think after the pandemic as well, we kind of saw that people, especially this next generation, didn't necessarily want to be in such a stuffy environment. And not that that's being requested nowadays, but I think they still want the service aspect. They still want the white tablecloths. They want to feel like they're going out and having a special night out, where they get to get dressed up and, you know, put on nice shoes and get all dolled up in makeup."

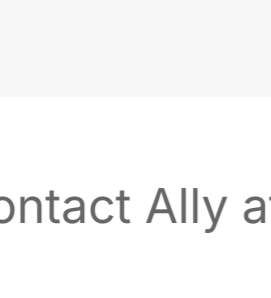
Aitana, in particular, is a special project of Vargas, and the most personal of his restaurants. It's the culmination of years of experience, personal memories, and a deep-seated passion for food. "I like action. I think I just love being creative. I love showing myself, honestly. I love to think about new ideas and how to make anything better, especially when you're opening a new restaurant... But as you open and evolve and you just refine and refine and refine, I would hope that even some of the dishes that we showcased [at the preview], in a month from now, people will come back and they're better than the first time they had them, you know? You learn a lot of new things."

The industry isn't always easy, but for Vargas, it's clearly worth it and rewarding. "This is the ninth restaurant that I've opened, and every time I open one, I tell myself I'll never do it again, but here I am yet again. But, you know, I think it's just refinement and always just trying to be better than your last dish. I know it's cliché, but it's very true."

The restaurant is a reflection of his culinary philosophy: to elevate traditional dishes, infuse them with modern techniques, and create a dining experience that is both comforting and innovative. Aitana is his canvas to express his creativity, pushing the boundaries of classic cuisine to create something new and share his love of food with others. His goal is simple: create a good experience and have people leave happier than when they arrived.

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Ally is on the digital team for Restaurant Hospitality, Nation's Restaurant News, and the Supermarket News, contributing to all three. Versatile in multimedia, she trained as a copy editor at New York...

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