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'Chopped' and 'Guy's Grocery Games' celeb chef Demetrio Zavala reteams with Gary Rack for menu makeovers

By Rod Stafford Hagwood
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Cucumber hummus at Gary Rack's Farmhouse Kitchen in Boca Raton and Delray Beach. (Gary Rack Restaurant Group / Courtesy)

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They are getting the band back together.

Celebrity chef Demetrio Zavala is back home in South Florida again, teaming up with restaurateur Gary Rack to launch new menus and a new culinary approach at [Farmhouse Kitchen Delray](#), Farmhouse Kitchen Boca, and, later on, Racks Fish House & Oyster Bar Delray.



The dynamic duo first worked together 17 years ago when they opened [Coal Mine Pizza](#) in Boca Raton back in 2005. Now, Rack has enlisted Zavala as culinary director for his dining brands.

“Demetrio and I have been friends for 17-18 years,” Rack says. “I knew his kids when they were babies ... Our worlds went in different directions, but we always maintained our friendship. We’ve been talking about this close to a year. We want to give the people of South Florida something that they never had before, rethinking our process in the Farmhouse concept.”

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Their new mission is to focus on a zero-waste philosophy, incorporating virtually every piece of food into a final dish without discarding any remnants. As a sort of field test, Zavala says they've already added a few such dishes to summertime menus including a cucumber hummus.

“You know how the round tip of the cucumber is [usually] chopped off ... we're using this piece,” explains Zavala, who is now living in Coral Springs. “Instead of trimming it off, we emulsify it with basil and add it into a hummus base with chilis and jalapeño olive oil. [And the] watermelon salad has pickled rind until it's almost translucent. It has a really crunchy texture to it. It holds its texture. We add a little olive oil, feta cheese and olives that have marinated in basil instead of regular olive oil.”

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And they plan to refine Rack's signature use of clean ingredients and farm-to-table methods by working solely with local purveyors (regional farms and fishers).

Dishes on the summer menu now at Farmhouse Kitchens (Racks Fish House & Oyster Bar Delray will be rolled out later) include:

- Roasted Homestead Eggplant with whipped lemon goat cheese and burnt honey (\$12)
- Florida Green Tomatoes with guajillo aioli and peach jam (\$12)
- Choppy Chop salad with quinoa, beets, goat cheese, peaches, sunflower seeds and wild greens (\$18)
- Burrata and Melon Tartine with grilled bread, arugula pesto, pine nut agrodolce (\$16)
- Peach & Summer Greens with greens that are grilled and topped with pickled peaches, pine nuts, currants and Champagne vinaigrette (\$12)
- ZLGT sandwich with grilled zucchini, basil pesto, goat cheese, green tomato and arugula (\$16)

Zavala, who grew up in Delray Beach, is a foodie fan favorite through his star-making turns on [The Food Network](#), appearing a record-making 17 times. On “Chopped,” he took home the

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Since opening Coal Mine Pizza in Boca Raton together back in 2005, restaurateur Gary Rack and celebrity chef Demetrio Zavala have been looking for an opportunity to team up again. Now the dynamic duo are rebooting the menu at Rack's eateries in Boca Raton and Delray Beach. (Gary Rack Restaurant Group / Courtesy)

grand prize twice and also competed in spinoffs “Chopped: Grudge Match” and “Chopped: Beat Bobby Flay.” Then there were appearances on “Guy’s Grocery Games,” “Beat Bobby Flay” and — in a rare decampment to Bravo TV — “The Real Housewives of Potomac.”

Also known for executive chef stints in Washington, D.C., and California, Zavala says that they will start full-fledged seasonal menus around Sept. 26 with the debut of fall-themed dishes.

“South Florida’s palette is progressing, and we’re designing these restaurants from anew with Demetrio to lead that progression,” says Rack. “What’s coming this fall is not something the local market will be used to, but something they’ve been craving and will really enjoy. With the constant influx of new residents to South Florida, the palates of our guests are

changing, and the time is now to introduce this type of educational eating to the Rack’s brand.”

Here is more about the new direction of the Rack restaurants in excerpts from a telephone interview with Zavala and Rack.

Q: Chef, I understand you had a near-death experience recently. Can you talk about it yet?

Demetrio Zavala: My appendix and my intestines. I collapsed and had to go in for emergency surgery. They say I passed away during surgery, though I was unaware of it.



I had pneumonia in the hospital for a month. It kind of changes your perception on things. The first thing I thought was: Am I going to be able to cook again? I love cooking. Cooking is not a job to me.

Cooking is my way of life. It's my way of touching people's heart through food.

Florida Green Tomatoes at Gary Rack's Farmhouse Kitchen in Boca Raton and Delray Beach. Restaurateur Gary Rack and The Food Network celebrity chef Demetrio Zavala are rebooting the menus at both the Farmhouse Kitchen eateries as well as RACKS Fish House & Oyster Bar in Delray Beach. (Gary Rack Restaurant Group / Courtesy)

Q: You're [in] Los Angeles now instead of your new home here in SoFlo, so are you on that coast doing something new for The Food Network?

Zavala: I've been in L.A. doing something right now for a network. Until that [is announced] and airs, I can't really say who it is or anything.

Q: What tastes and flavors do you guys plan to bring to the Gary Rack Restaurant Management Group properties?

Gary Rack: We want to elevate the food ... simple ingredients, local ingredients ... and also keep in mind inflation and everyone's discretionary income. So the summer menu is designed to cater to your local who keeps coming back to us year-round. It's important that we keep [the dishes] properly priced to encourage families to come dine with us ... maybe two or three times.

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Tomato Salad at Gary Rack's Farmhouse Kitchen in Boca Raton and Delray Beach. (Gary Rack Restaurant Group / Courtesy)

Zavala: We're doing a seasonal menu. And we're going to have a separate menu that is a farm menu, locally sourced from Florida. It's all about freshness ... a lot of different items. I'll use a lot of French techniques from my culinary background [and] mix some Latin flavors in there, you know, use my Cuban background. I'm interested in layers of flavors, not just one dimension. I want to introduce themes of lightness and brightness, you know — not hit your

stomach so hard ... I want them to dine, not just eat. Take a second and enjoy different plates of food. The [latest] thing is to use acids to speed up the digestive system with your food so you don't feel so full. The acids, they create a lightness when you eat — some vinegars, citric

acids, mostly lemon for me. Sherry vinegar is my go-to. I like to use rice wine vinegar and red wine barrel vinegar where the oak barrels give the vinegar a simple nuttiness.”

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Q: It's been 17 years, so Gary, how has Demetrio changed? Demetrio, how has Gary changed?

Rack: Demetrio has evolved not only as a great chef, but also evolved on the business side. In the beginning, he was already a great aspiring chef, but he didn't really understand the business side of it. That's where I came in. But now he has evolved, and [I see it when] he's working with our chefs and our culinary team theoreticals, putting master manual systems that will be in place throughout.



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Zavala: I remember him saying that the [important] thing is “You got to open or own a restaurant.” And he did it. And now he's evolved on the food side. He was already a good businessman. The business acumen he already had, and now, after years of watching what the customers want and interacting with the customers, he's immersed into all aspects of the restaurant business.

Q: Can you explain “clean ingredients” and “zero waste” to the non-foodies out there?

Zavala: It's the idea of using everything ... from the roots up to the leaves, from the bottom to the top. I use the roots, the flowers, the stem. Even everything from onion peels, carrot peels, beet tops. You can kind of make a vegan tartar. You know the celery root that gets discarded usually, well you can create tabbouleh flavored with celery root or a guacamole. What we are doing is appreciating and making use of what a farmer grows and makes from start to finish. We are trying to appreciate it as much as possible and not letting their hard work go to waste.

Q: Demetrio, what makes returning to SoFlo attractive to you now?

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Zavala: I was raised in Delray Beach. Well, I was raised in Miami first, but yeah, I grew up in Delray, right off of Linton Boulevard. Atlantic, Seacrest — I used to play football there. I know it like the back of my hand. Florida's starting to get a better food scene. It's like every place out there is pushing the envelope. There are better proprietors, better chefs, and people are going to be looking at that area very closely and with a lot of interest. I can't wait to show what I've learned, to share that with Floridians and the people who come there. I want to share my experience with Florida and especially Delray because it's really home to me.



Chopsy Chop salad and a Vegan Caesar salad at Gary Rack's Farmhouse Kitchen in Boca Raton and Delray Beach. (Gary Rack Restaurant Group / Courtesy)

Q: Gary, what's next for Gary Rack Restaurant Management Group?

Rack: We're in negotiation for a couple of spots that I'm not able to discuss because of the agreement I have with the people who are working on it. We're looking at three or four [additional] locations, as we speak. We want to roll out the new concept in new areas. We're looking everywhere from North Palm Beach to Coral Gables.

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[[RELATED: Review of Farmhouse Kitchen in Delray Beach. FROM THE ARCHIVES.](#)]

If you go info

- Gary Rack's Farmhouse Kitchen Boca is located at 399 SE Mizner Blvd., Boca Raton; 561-826-2625; FarmhouseKitchenBoca.com
- Gary Rack's Farmhouse Kitchen Delray is located at 204 E. Atlantic Ave., Delray Beach; 561-266-3642
- Racks Fish House & Oyster Bar is located at 5 SE Second Ave., Delray Beach; 561-450-6718; RacksDelray.com



Burrata and Melon Tartine at Gary Rack's Farmhouse Kitchen in Boca Raton and Delray Beach. Restaurateur Gary Rack and The Food Network celebrity chef Demetrio Zavala are rebooting the menus at both the Farmhouse Kitchen eateries as well as RACKS Fish House & Oyster Bar in Delray Beach. (Gary Rack Restaurant Group / Courtesy)

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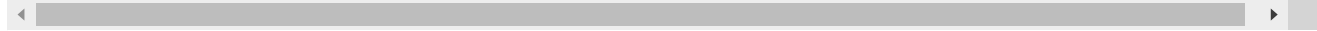
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