

A WORLD OF PURE IMAGINATION

BY NICO CASSANETTI
PHOTO DAN CELLA

Unveiling the Mystery of EmKo



FOR ALMOST TWO years, the air surrounding the three-story building on South Dixie Highway in West Palm Beach was reminiscent of Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory: Its papered-up windows featured a rotation of visual images and text, changing from one month to the next. Brightly colored floral sculptures made from industrial objects randomly appeared overnight around the perimeter, and the abstract, manmade trees – with their sleek geometric branches – seemed to have grown from the pavement without reason. The stark white exterior of the venue (the former location of Ragtops Antique Motorcar Museum) offered no explanation other than the four black letters emblazoned on the buildings' north façade: *EmKo*.

Prior to its public debut, I was afforded the chance to visit EmKo and meet “the creative masterminds” behind the still very hush-hush project. I was skeptical at first, and moreover I was completely unsure of what I was about to see. But skepticism quickly turned to curiosity, sparking my excitement for the chance for the nostalgia of childlike wonder. So in true Roald Dahl fashion, I traded in my metaphorical “golden ticket” for a chance to go inside. Yet even after my visit I’ll admit I had trouble defining what EmKo really is, finally landing on a culinary and cultural multiplex.

The ground floor of the 24,000 square foot main building houses what EmKo calls their Culinary Art Gallery. The space is comprised of four main venues: The coffee shop and organic juice bar *Untitled* (whose seating area



“THE SPACE FEELS LIKE AN ODE TO MODERN ART, ENCOMPASSING SENSIBILITIES FROM ABSTRACTION TO COLOR THEORY TO NEO-GEO.”

and newsstand doubles as a bar lounge after hours), the *Market* storefront (which offers artisanal goods and other carefully curated gourmet items sourced from small-batch producers around the country), the in-house floral sculpture design studio *Koel Flora*, and their bar and restaurant *JEREVE* – EmKo’s answer to fine dining. “The objective is not to operate merely another new restaurant, but instead to focus on creating a dining experience within a restaurant that reinvents itself over and over again.” *Jereve*, which stems from the French for “I Dream”, is the keystone of EmKo’s culinary art space, and is a visual triumph.

THE SPACE FEELS like an ode to modern art, encompassing sensibilities from abstraction to color theory to Neo-Geo. Custom-made light fixtures hang from the beautifully restored wood ceiling of the original structure, illuminating the yellow wall of identical triangles above the dark wood and crimson upholstery of booths. The perfectly square tables are handcrafted out of salvaged wood from the original structure, each accented with a cylindrical vase of water containing a single green stem.

A wall of wine casks, backlit in blue and violet, juxtaposes the white walls that partition the restaurant from the other “culinary

galleries,” as well as the open-air dining patio and sculpture garden.

The modern, state-of-the-art kitchen is the new home of Nick Martinkovic, former executive chef of *Blood & Sand and Death in the Afternoon*, who is already demonstrating EmKo’s commitment to imagination on each plate. The inspiration for *Jereve*’s dishes range from traditional American to modern European. From the chef’s intricate re-imagination of Manhattan clam chowder (dubbed “market chowda”) that features a whole soft-shell crab atop pillows of gnocchi and clam broth, to the vivid colors and rich textures of the three-beet salad, the food at *Jereve* is as delicious as it is visually stunning.

Hidden just behind the main building in a narrow alleyway decorated in graphic slogans like “Use Only What You Need” and “This is Modern Street Art,” is the *B.A.B* (or Back Alley Bakery). Inside *BAB* you’ll find pastry chef Arielle Curasi creating a symphony of sweets. Curasi’s menu consists of everything from artisanal breads to classic European pastries and nostalgic American desserts, with a rotating menu of buttery croissants, pain au chocolat, fruit-studded muffins, moist coffee

cakes, and savory breakfast sandwiches. In the afternoon, a daily selection of seasonal fruit tarts, pies and cakes are artfully displayed alongside freshly baked cookies, squares and bars. BAB also provides Jereve and Untitled with fresh baked breads, pastries, petit fours, and desserts.

However, in true EmKo fashion, Curasi is already thinking outside the box. Coming from a country club kitchen, Curasi has embraced her freedom for creative expression and fabricates unique and delectable desserts for Jereve, including her “fruit soup” which combines fresh berries and kumquats bathed in a hibiscus consume and served with a sheet of edible paper made from pressed spun sugar and lavender.

THE MULTIFACETED CULINARY studio is just the beginning of EmKo’s artistic vision. Sitting just above Jereve is A.I.R, the Artist Independent Republic. A modern, New York style art gallery intended to revitalize the local art scene with the young, creative talents of emerging artists within the community. A.I.R. intends to support unknown artists, hosting a variety of mediums including fine art, fashion, music, and performance pieces, by providing a venue and an audience for them to

“CREATING A PLATFORM TO REINVIGORATE THE SOUTH FLORIDA ART SCENE IS LONG OVERDUE, AND WITH A.I.R’S 3,000 SQUARE FOOT SPACE, PROFESSIONAL LIGHTING AND CHELSEA-ESQUE LAYOUT, IT PROMISES A UNIQUE AND HIGH QUALITY EXPERIENCE FOR ARTISTS AND ART LOVERS ALIKE.”

exhibit their work. Creating a platform to reinvigorate the South Florida art scene is long overdue, and with A.I.R’s 3,000 square foot space, professional lighting and Chelsea-esque layout, it promises a unique and high quality experience for artists and art lovers alike.

The word “creativity” is embedded in every aspect of EmKo, and the space is truly the manifestation of a world of pure imagination. EmKo’s creative team has only begun to fulfill its promise to challenge our sensory perception, but they are undoubtedly up for the task. Like Willy Wonka, EmKo has instilled a sense of whimsy, vibrancy and joie de vivre in those who pass through its doors, reminding us that “what you imagine, sometimes comes true...” ■

