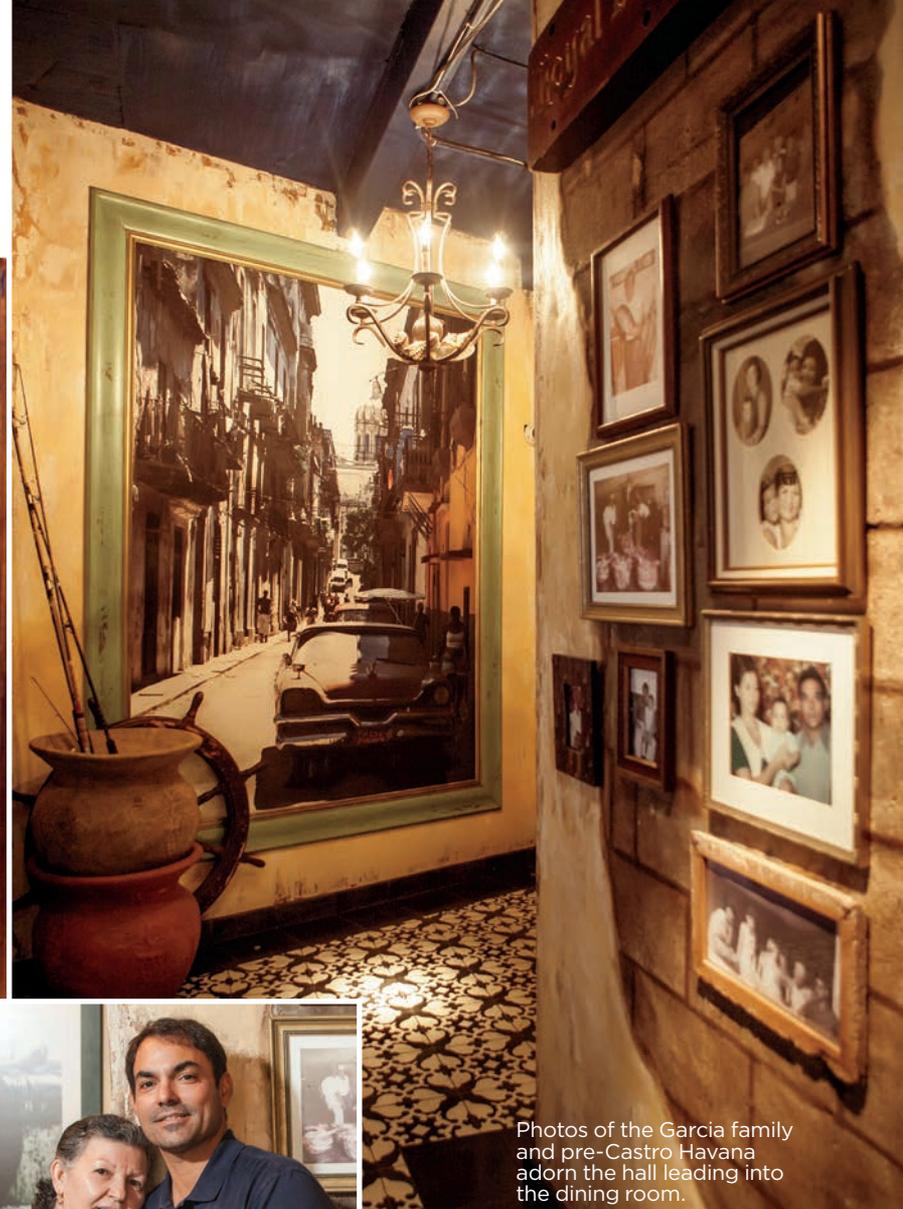




Appetizers include oysters on the half shell.



Photos of the Garcia family and pre-Castro Havana adorn the hall leading into the dining room.

## a real catch

GARCIA'S EARNS ITS LOYAL FAN BASE WITH DECIDEDLY FRESH SEAFOOD AND OLD FLORIDA CHARM. BY ARIELLE CASTILLO

The history of Garcia's Seafood Grille & Fish Market, an institution on the Miami River, runs parallel to that of the city itself. Since Esteban Garcia turned his fishing business into a public restaurant in 1975, the establishment has weathered everything from riots to catastrophic hurricanes to multiple global recessions.

Yet in the face of events that would leave lesser restaurants shuttered, Garcia's has not only survived but thrived. What started as a wholesale business with one restaurant fryer has bloomed into a two-story, 60-employee affair, with hungry hordes packing both floors seven days a week. Garcia's is the rare restaurant that stays bustling but still feels like an oasis even amid a lunch rush. The décor is part old Havana, part old Florida beach shack, with an upbeat salsa soundtrack.

Then there's the view: Situated on the northern bank of the river, both the upstairs and downstairs patios provide a rare vista of the city. It's at once natural (the river), industrial (the freight boats chugging by), and futuristic (Brickell and the urban construction on the horizon). "It's a locals' spot and very authentic—a totally different scene," says customer Kyle Davis, owner of Parallel Marketing. "It gives you a real Miami, relaxing vibe."

Of course, none of this means much without the food, which Garcia's turns out with reassuring familiarity, no matter how many plates leave the kitchen each week. The centerpiece here is locally caught seafood that can't get any fresher. Garcia's 15 fishermen snag each day's catches at 4 AM, the



Maria Garcia and her son Luis.

*"Garcia's is a locals' spot. It gives you a real Miami vibe."*

—KYLE DAVIS

staff starts filleting at 6 AM, and the first lunches are plated at 11 AM.

During lobster and stone-crab seasons, these are natural picks, but whole-grilled yellowtail and snapper are good year-round. For a less common main, try the conch steak, barely adorned, perfectly grilled, and finished with a hint of blackening spice or butter.

Sides, meanwhile, span that same old Florida/old Havana divide—tangy coleslaw alongside yellow rice, or firm, parsley-dotted new potatoes with fried sweet plantains. All of these come with a free bonus. "The dip they give you with the saltine crackers is insanely good," says frequent diner Manny Marrero, owner of Subliminal Pixels Lab. "I could eat that all day."

The old standby of the place, though, is the dolphin sandwich, starring a slab of meaty mahi-mahi on a pillowy bun. "We sell thousands and thousands of dolphin sandwiches a week," says Luis Garcia, who helps run the family business alongside his older brother, Esteban Jr., and his mother, 65-year-old Maria.

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Grilled twin lobster tails.

The casual upstairs bar.



Anthony Bourdain featured Garcia's on his show *The Layover*.

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The fact that the thousandth dolphin sandwich stays as high-quality as the first year after year is something Luis Garcia attributes to his family's "immigrant mentality." The Garcias' seafood business stretches back to 1950s Cuba. There, Luis's father, Esteban Garcia, and grandfather Ramon Garcia ran a successful fishing outfit until Fidel Castro's Communist revolution. The new regime seized the business, forcing the family to flee in exile to Miami.

Here, Esteban Garcia picked up fishing again. "His work ethic was such that he knew he was going to provide for his family or die trying," says Luis Garcia. (The wholesale business opened in 1966.) Esteban Garcia passed away eight years ago, but operations remain strictly a family affair. With Luis, Esteban Jr., and Maria as regular faces, there's a keen eye on service. Food arrives quickly—making the place particularly attractive to Miami's power lunchers. "It's predominantly a business crowd. There are a lot of executives, secretaries, police officers, firemen, even city commissioners," Garcia says.

But professionals aren't the only ones flocking to Garcia's. It has long been a low-key staple for four-star chefs in town; Garcia says he's humbled to serve Michelle Bernstein, Michael Schwartz, and Timon Balloo. The eatery has also appeared in the Food Network's *The Hungry Detective* and Anthony Bourdain's Travel Channel show, *The Layover*.

With the restaurant riding on this velocity, Luis Garcia says they may be close to achieving one of his father's great dreams. There's talk of expanding Garcia's to a luxury hotel, and eventually to a city beyond Miami. "Obviously, we're thinking about the evolution of our brand," he says. "Maybe, just maybe, we're doing something right." 398 NW North River Dr., Miami, 305-375-0765; [garciasmiami.com](http://garciasmiami.com) **OD**



Garcia's famous dolphin sandwich, a meaty slab of mahi-mahi served on a pillowy bun.

## STATUS SANDWICH

This deceptively simple dolphin dish never loses its popularity.

There's little, outwardly, that betrays Garcia's dolphin sandwich as one of the city's—if not the country's—best. But it's the time from ocean to table that clinches it: just a few hours. And even with a side, it rings in under \$10.



The upstairs deck lends the best views of the Miami River.

## BEST SEAT IN THE HOUSE

It's not just the view that determines the preferred spot at Garcia's.

Garcia's has two types of "best table" at the restaurant. For the most sweeping city and river panoramas, head upstairs to the two-top in the northeastern corner of the outside patio. Longtime regulars, though, stay downstairs, says Luis Garcia. "That's the oldest dining area we have," he says. "People like to sit where they sat 20 years ago."