



2018 Zest winners, presenters, and judges
Courtesy Laine Doss

Ralph Pagano Celebrated for His Courage at JWU's Zest Awards

LAINE DOSS | APRIL 12, 2018 | 9:00AM

Last evening, Miami's top chefs, bartenders, and restaurateurs gathered at the Carillon Miami Wellness Resort in Miami Beach for the seventh-annual Zest Awards.

In 2012, Johnson & Wales University founded the awards to pay tribute to the most gifted professionals in Miami's culinary community. Today, winning a coveted Zest is considered an honor, with many chefs likening it to a local James Beard Award.

The Zests, hosted by Veritage Miami's Lyn Farmer, were presented in nine categories (Best Bar/Lounge, Best Wine Program, Baking & Pastry Chef of the Year, Chef of the Year, Best New Restaurant, Best Boutique Restaurant, Best Restaurant, Readers' Choice — Food & Drink Influencer, and Readers' Choice — Food Reporting).

In addition, JWU North Miami Campus President Larry Rice presented a special community leader award to the Education Fund for installing the first "food forest" in a public elementary school in the United States. Today 16 of 51 elementary-school gardens are edible landscapes, making Miami-Dade County Public Schools a national leader with the highest number of food forests compared to every other school district in the nation.

A new award — Changing the Way the World Eats — was given to Plant Miami for the restaurant's commitment to promoting health-conscious initiatives and strengthening the community through culinary efforts in South Florida.

The most heartfelt honor of the evening was presented to Ralph Pagano. The chef won the special Courage Award in recognition of his excellence in the culinary field, his dynamic personality, and his extreme act of courage. Last year, Pagano pushed an employee out of harm's way when a violent explosion occurred during a training session at Naked Taco at Resorts World Bimini. Pagano received serious injuries and was airlifted to Miami's Ryder Trauma Center for treatment, where he remained for 50 days before being released. The Bimini restaurant was not opened after the incident, while Pagano continues his road to recovery.

The 2018 Zest winners are Sweet Liberty (Best Bar/Lounge), Upland (Best Wine Program), Jason Morale of the SLS South Beach (Baking & Pastry Chef of the Year), Sergio Sigala of Cecconi's (Chef of the Year), Stubborn Seed (Best New Restaurant), Macchialina (Best Boutique Restaurant), Zuma (Best Restaurant), Miami Chef (Readers' Choice: Food & Drink Influencer), and SoFlo Taste (Readers' Choice: Traditional Media).

Congratulations to all the nominees and winners.