

# Melting Pot

A young Macedonian founded a restaurant in Miami Beach that's become his American dream.

By John Finotti

As a teen-ager in his native Macedonia, a part of what was then Yugoslavia, Klimé Kovaceski dreamed of becoming a rock star, studiously mastering the licks of guitar idols Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton. When New Wave music became popular in the late 1970s, he and his bandmates were huge fans of Iggy Pop, the American avant-garde performer whose shirtless, frenetic stage presence embodied a freedom absent from their communist country.

But with prospects dim that he could make a living performing protest songs in Eastern Europe, Kovaceski decided to cook rather than rock. He attended a culinary school in his hometown, Ohrid, a resort town on a lake, and served as executive chef at the Skopje Hotel there for several years before taking a job at a restaurant in Amsterdam.

When the owner decided to open a Yugoslavian restaurant, Jama, in North Miami Beach in 1984, Kovaceski jumped at the opportunity to work in the U.S. He arrived in south Florida with a small suitcase, a few hundred dollars' worth of clothing and no work permit. "I didn't speak any English. Zero. Nada," he says.

In 1994, Kovaceski decided to strike out on his own, opening an upscale restaurant, Crystal Cafe, on Arthur Godfrey Road. One early lesson: After installing a fancy awning at the front entrance for curb appeal, he soon realized most of his customers preferred to enter the restaurant from the rear. He painted the back of the building and spruced up the back entrance.

More than six years later, the path to Kovaceski's back door is well-worn, and he's beating the brutal odds that prevail in the restaurant business. Kovaceski and his wife, Huguette, who serves as maitre d', work six days a week and haven't taken a vacation in six years. "This is the

toughest business I know of," says Alan Rosenthal, a Miami attorney who has represented many restaurateurs over the years, including Kovaceski.

Operating from a tiny, cramped L-shaped kitchen, Kovaceski, 40, has made a name for himself both for his cooking — salmon, sea bass, seafood osso buco and goat-cheese-filled chicken Kiev — and his restaurant's attention to detail. As executive chef, Kovaceski oversees the entire kitchen process, setting the

