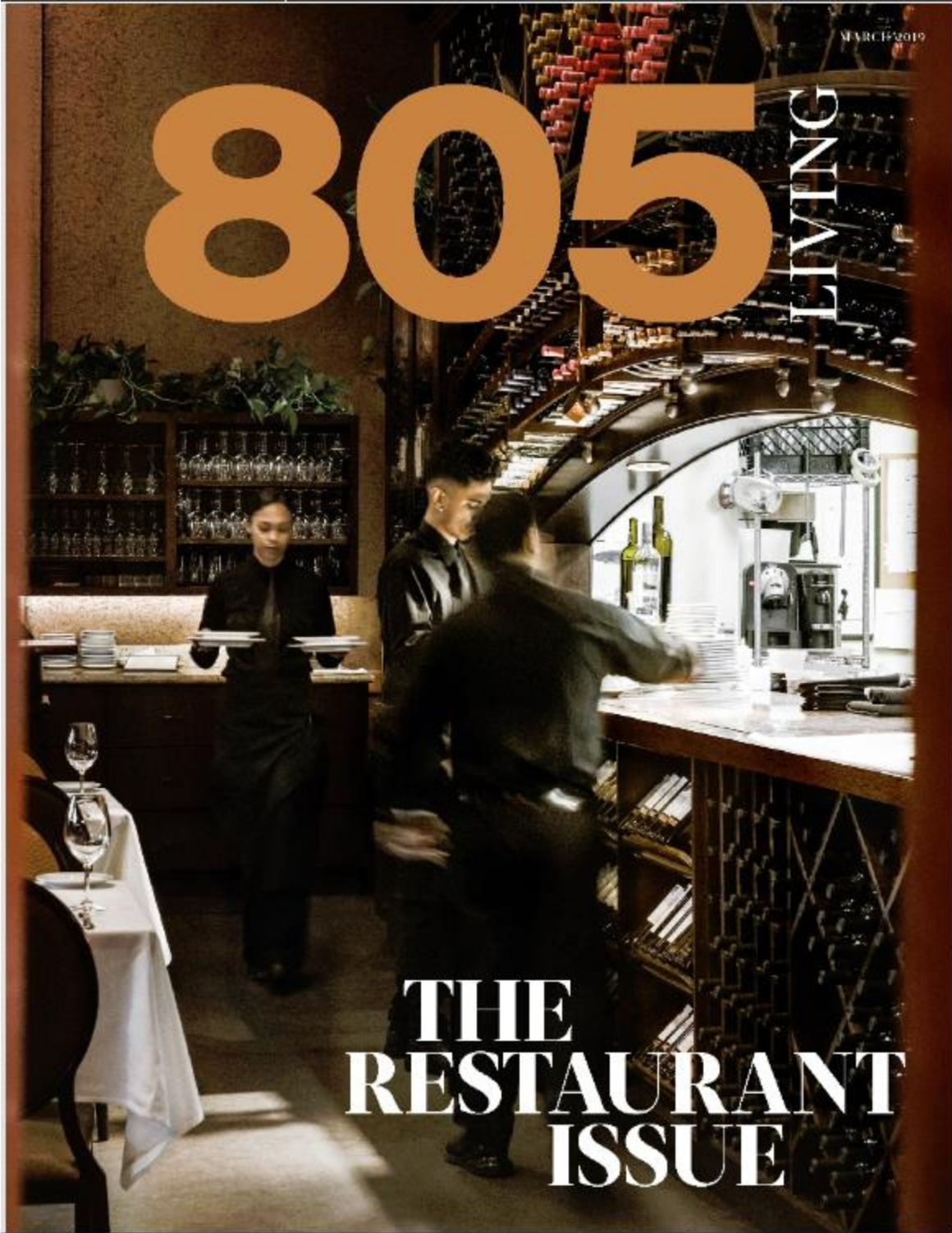


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By Erin Rottman

## GETTING PERSONAL IN LAGUNA BEACH



Only hotel guests can eat at Saline, the Mediterranean restaurant at the new Hotel Joaquin ([hoteljoaquin.com](http://hoteljoaquin.com); from \$300) in Laguna Beach, and chef Leandro Bongarra revels in the prospect of serving just 40 diners a day. It's "the ultimate place for a chef," Bongarra says, grateful that he can focus on smaller menus to make each item stand out, interact directly with guests, and accommodate special requests.

The homey feel extends beyond the restaurant. An ambassador contacts guests in advance to ensure that the type of music they prefer is waiting

next to the room's record player, and when they arrive they can enjoy a spritzer-style cocktail on a couch near a book nook. Rooms are light and airy, with exposed white beams on the ceiling, billowy curtains, and natural-weave area rugs. The hotel is a two-minute walk from the ocean and supplies gear and a guide for adventures like surfing sessions and bike rides.

End the day back at Saline, where Bongarra plays with flavor combinations like tahini and turmeric and star anise and smoked paprika. Don't miss his octopus carpaccio with harissa aioli and marinated artichokes, which is light enough to leave room for a nightcap.



At the new Hotel Joaquin (top, left) chef Leandro Bongarra (top, right) finesses Mediterranean flavors at Saline restaurant. An airy guest room with a vaulted ceiling (above) opens to a private balcony overlooking the ocean.