

PHUKET'S INIALA BEACH HOUSE

TINY BOUTIQUE HOTEL WITH A HUGE CULINARY PRESENCE

BY **RON GLUCKMAN**

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Although there are many luxurious resorts on the Thai island of Phuket, Iniala Beach House made a huge splash when it opened in December 2013. British entrepreneur Mark Weingard spent a fortune on his first property, an exquisite 10-suite boutique beach resort. Each room is the work of a different renowned designer and is filled with custom art and furnishings. The kid's club, he justifiably proclaims, "may be the best in the world."

So, when he envisioned a signature restaurant, Weingard set the bar equally sky-high. He lured Eneko Atxa, the youngest chef to ever win three Michelin stars in Spain, to Phuket to open Aziamendi, an unquestioned coup. Thailand has claimed few restaurants with a single star, and typically celebrity chefs cook in Bangkok at big international hotels.

At his first venture outside Spain, Atxa offers his unique take on Basque-ronomy (with Thai twists), delivered with the

same impeccable service and ambience. The architecture is stunning (richly golden wood, undulating panels reflecting the waves of the Andaman Sea, meters away) and the service is pampering, led by a team that includes sommelier Fabien Etienne (formerly at Capital Hotel London and Hotel du Palais in Biarritz). Bringing such a feted chef to a small beach resort in Phuket is more than a culinary triumph for Iniala. It also proves that perceived limits on fine dining needn't apply, even to small hotels in distant locations, especially when the goals and passion are shared by all the partners.

"With hotels, in my experience, they typically say 'here is how we do things. This is how it must be'," says Atxa. In contrast, Iniala offered total artistic freedom. "Everything is complementary, like two different places that fit together."

Weingard wooed the celebrated chef from outside Bilbao for years. He was bowled over by Atxa's landmark



Basque restaurant, Azurmendi, which ranked 26th on the 2014 "World's 50 Best Restaurants" by S. Pellegrino and Acqua Panna. With on-site gardens and a greenhouse, it also won the world's most sustainable restaurant award. More than the accolades, Weingard knew Atxa's passion and presentation were a perfect fit.

Initially, though, Atxa declined the invitation. "I liked Mark and what he wanted to do," he says, "but at the time, I was focused on getting my third Michelin star."

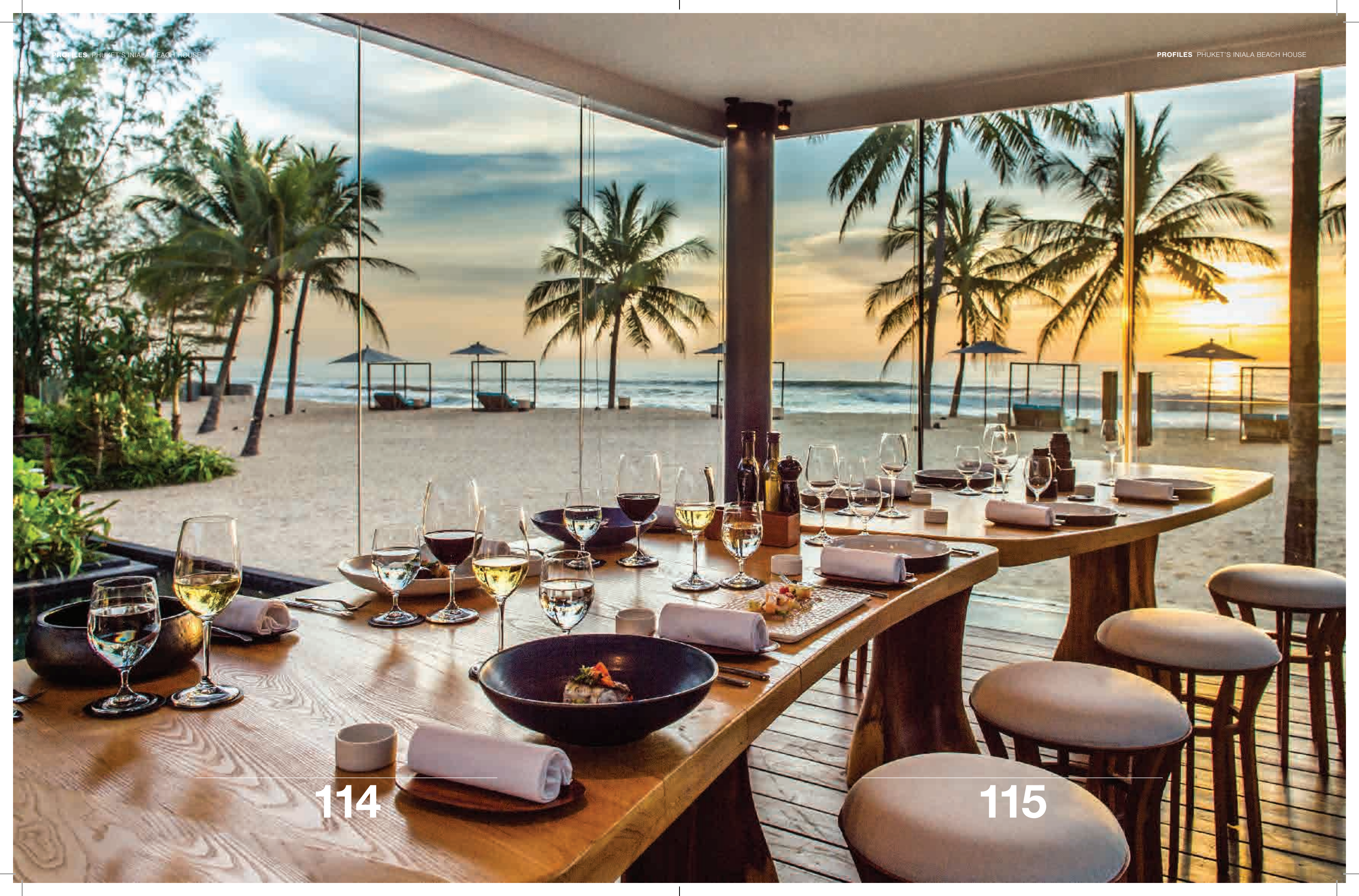
After that achievement, his partner in the kitchen, Alex Burger, took him to Thailand in 2007. Atxa, 37, grows animated describing everything: the cauldron of flavor infusing a Thai soup, his first sample of morning glory. "I just couldn't believe it — the roadside chicken rotisserie, the grilled pork," he recalls. "And the aromas, wow!"

Sufficiently inspired, Atxa and Burger traveled widely on

an eating tour of Thailand. As the idea of the restaurant took shape, they began exploring sources for produce. To Atxa, the kitchen isn't where food is created, it's the culmination of a journey beginning with fields and farmers. In Spain, he became famous for showcasing regional products, and his rooftop gardens offered tours and samples for guests.

Creating a similar atmosphere in Phuket was challenging. "We recognized coming into this project it would be very different," says Burger, who now oversees the Thai venue and is in constant contact with Atxa. "We had to think hard about what would work and what wouldn't."

Aziamendi highlights local delicacies, like edible flowers. Atxa's favorite morning glory is tucked in the ravioli. "When we make the menu, we have to think, what is available in Thailand? We try to do as much with local food and flavor as possible," he says, emphasizing such techniques as grilling, a Thai tradition.



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Chefs were also locally groomed. “For me, the most important things in a chef are attitude and a passion to learn,” says Burger, who oversaw most of the recruiting. Thai staff received months of training in Spain.

The result is an exquisite restaurant offering a menu unique to Phuket. There are two tasting menus. ‘Inspire’ offers delicacies like Pigeon with Duxelles and Cauliflower, and Oyster with Sea Foam, for \$200 per person. ‘Roots’ (\$150 per person) is more reflective of Spain, with Anchovy Mille Feuille, Mojito in Bon Bon, and Oxtail Ravioli with Garbanzos.

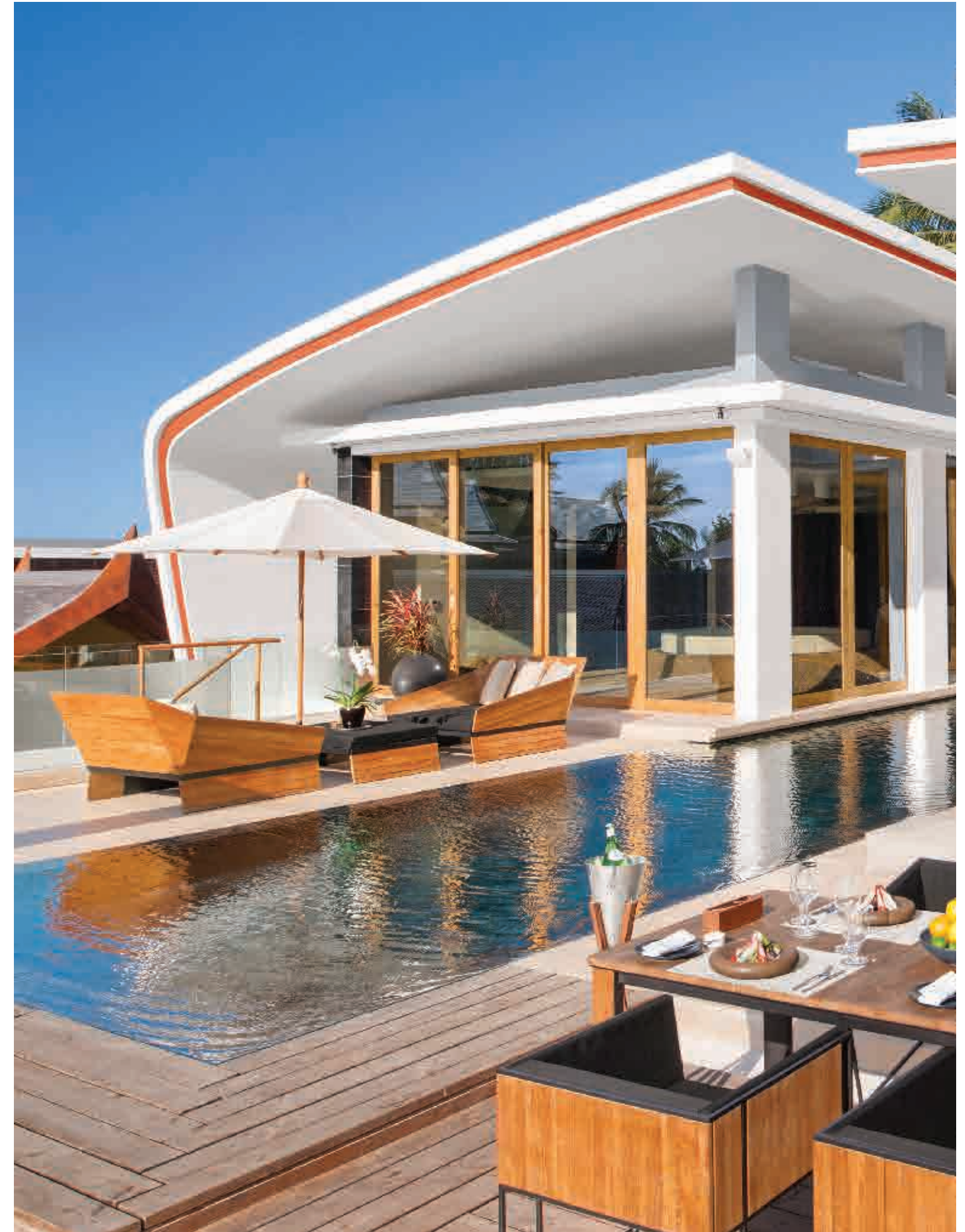
Dining is a delight that lasts for hours, each dish detailed by attentive staff. The culinary experience begins in the garden, exactly like in Spain. Cherry tomatoes with hibiscus infusion nest among bonsai trees. Guests gobble other picnic treats, then are invited into the kitchen for Aziamendi’s trademark truffled egg.

Atxa says the entire experience is designed to challenge

perceptions of a typical high-end restaurant. This makes it a great match for Iniala, a boutique resort where luxury is communicated not only in design and comfort, but through unique spaces and effusive staff.

Many questioned whether a three-star restaurant suited a small resort. “It’s all about the total guest experience,” notes Atxa, who says Aziamendi and Iniala are both equally committed to the highest standards. “This really could be a model for other boutique hotels,” he says. “You can deliver high quality. You just need people who have the same vision and passion.”

Author Bio: Ron Gluckman has been covering Asia for two decades, contributing to *Time*, *Travel & Leisure*, *Forbes*, *the Wall Street Journal*, *the New York Times*, *Discovery*, *Town and Country* and *Conde Nast Traveler*.





INIALA BEACH HOUSE

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Telephone: +66 (0)76 451 456

Address: 40/14 Moo.6, Khok Kloi, Takuatung,
Phang Nga 82140

General Manager: Mr. Wayne Milgate

Owner: Mark Weingard, via Iniala Natai Ltd.

Rack rate for a double room: Suites start at USD 2967.50/night

Number of rooms: 10 rooms in total