

# HOSPITALITY DESIGN

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# Alma de Cuba

By Michael Adams  
Photography by Paul Warchol

## One of the newest

additions to Philadelphia's ever-blossoming hospitality scene, Alma de Cuba has also emerged as one of its most distinctive and stylish. A townhouse that was once an Indonesian restaurant, Alma de Cuba is the product of three powerhouse restaurant names—owner Stephen Starr (Tangerine and Pod in

Philadelphia), chef-owner Doug Rodriguez (Manhattan's Chicama, the late Patria), and New York-based design firm The Rockwell Group. According to the project's senior associate, Diego Gronda, "The whole idea of Cuba can be politically charged these days. Given the name of the restaurant—which had already been chosen—we took it as a cue to go to the soul of the country."

That means, on the first-floor lounge, photos of Cubans who, says Gronda, "will be there long after Castro is gone." For those images, the designers commissioned a photographer who traveled to Cuba to capture faces of character and dignity. These black-and-whites are dramatically projected onto whitewashed walls. The room is also dominated by a 6' x 6' ottoman upholstered in red pony skin, where, he says, "you can imagine stretching out horizontally and sensually." The rest of the furniture—custom-made, as was the seating throughout—is white.

The second floor houses the main dining room, marked by embroidered leather banquettes, a communal mahogany dining table, and carpets whose patterns evoke colonial Cuban tile. Cast resin and glass tile creates a bar die that glows red onto patrons' faces. Along with wrought iron grill work, it creates an effect



Above: Black-and-white photos of Cubans are projected onto whitewashed walls in the lounge at Alma de Cuba.

Opposite page: The main dining room, seen from mezzanine level.





Gronda calls “incredibly sexy.”

On the third level—used primarily for private dining—light boxes project views of seemingly endless tobacco fields, allowing guests to feel a part of the Cuban countryside.

“If you look at a lot of images of Cuba,” says Gronda, “you’ll find that those elegant rooms are really very simple. They use light and shadows and textures, playing with the movement of the people. Like those, Alma de Cuba comes alive with people.” ■

**Top:** The glowing red bar. **Right:** Private dining on the third level.



**Alma de Cuba Philadelphia Owner:** Stephen Starr **Interior Design:** Rockwell Group, New York **Project Team:** David Rockwell, Principal; Diego Gronda, Senior Associate in Charge; Jun Aizaki; Tonya Rife **Architect of Record:** Arthur Hall Adams Architects **General Contractor:** Turner Construction **Structural Engineer:** Elton Engineers **Lighting Consultant:** Focus Lighting **SOURCES: ALL WROUGHT IRON AT BAR DIE & CAST RESIN:** SANSEI BUILDERS **ALL WALL & CEILING PAINT:** JANOVIC PLAZA **ALL CUSTOM UPHOLSTERED FURNITURE:** JLF CONTRACT FURNISHING THROUGH JC FURNITURE **ALL FABRIC FOR UPHOLSTERED LOUNGE FURNITURE, DINING ARM CHAIRS, SETTEES, & BANQUETTES:** MAJILITE **ALL CUSTOM PENDANT LIGHT FIXTURES, CUSTOM RECESSED LIGHT FIXTURES, CUSTOM WALL SCONCES & PENDANTS AT WINDOW NICHES:** MOORE DESIGN **BAR GLASS TILE AT BAR DIE:** BISAZZA **LUCITE LIQUOR RISERS:** PLEXABILITY **CUSTOM WOOD BAR STOOLS:** JC FURNITURE **LOUNGE/DINING ROOM CUBAN PHOTOGRAPHY:** GIAN FRANCO GORGONI **LEATHER FOR LARGE OTTOMANS:** EDELMAN **LEATHER OCCASIONAL TABLES:** QUINTO SOL **TABLE LAMPS:** AERO **MAIN DINING ROOM FROM MEZZANINE LEVEL TOBACCO LEAF GLASS WALL:** ARTWORK BY MICHAEL PALLADINO, DIGITAL FILM GRAPHICS BY APPLIED IMAGE **LEATHER EMBROIDERY AT BANQUETTES:** NUTERIORS **DINING CHAIR FABRIC:** KRAVET **AREA RUGS:** LAMONTAGE **PRIVATE DINING ROOM CUBAN PHOTOGRAPHY:** GIAN FRANCO GORGONI **LIGHT BOXES:** BIG APPLES IMAGING