



## Open to the Sea

An Interview with  
Deborah Yager Fleming, Chief Executive  
Officer, Acqualina Resort & Spa



**EDITORS' NOTE** Deborah Yager Fleming joined Acqualina Resort & Spa on the Beach in March 2004 after having served as Vice President, Sales & Marketing at Island Outpost, where she managed marketing campaigns for 12 boutique hotels, including The Tides in Miami. She also garnered valuable experience in New York at Leading Hotels of the World where she held senior management positions and implemented the design of worldwide sales strategies and innovative marketing programs.



Deborah Yager Fleming

**PROPERTY BRIEF** Acqualina Resort & Spa on the Beach ([acqualinaresort.com](http://acqualinaresort.com)) is a place where the charm of a Mediterranean villa meets elegance on the beach. Located in Miami's pristine Sunny Isles Beach, the resort is situated on 4.5 beachfront acres with 400 feet of stunning Atlantic Ocean coastline. Acqualina features 188 residences, 98 impeccable guests rooms and suites, a 20,000-square-foot ESPA oceanfront spa, three oceanfront restaurants including the acclaimed Il Mulino New York, three oceanfront swimming pools, and an innovative marine biology-based AcquaMarine children's program. It is the recipient of the coveted Forbes Five Star Award and the AAA Five Diamond Award.

### What has made Acqualina so special?

We are a place that evokes a Mediterranean lifestyle. We're Florida's only hotel that is completely open to the sea with no barriers between the building and the shoreline. The resort can be described as a peaceful retreat, just steps off the pristine sand into the Atlantic.

There are many special aspects to what we've created beginning with the name. Acqualina translates to being on the water's edge and, therefore, when we designed the facilities, we were very purposeful in making sure there was a water element or water view throughout all of our spaces, be it public space or in the guest rooms.

We've crafted the experience to include special things such as intimate beachfront dinners right on the sand that are available every night of the year.

We provide a very relaxed environment but there is an elegant sensibility here.

In addition to this beautiful facility, we have a host of team members who are genuinely caring, and that comes across to those who visit from the moment they set foot on our property.

We have a set of standards that we abide by, but it's the personalization provided by the caring personalities of our team members that really goes over well with our residents and guests.

Visitors from the U.S. can visit Acqualina and feel as if they are in the Caribbean and Mexico, but they don't need a passport to get here.

**You also have a strong food and beverage offering. What is the secret to being successful in this area?**

We are a very upscale offering. Given that, we need to have a food product that co-exists at the level of the room product and that lives up to the guests' expectations.

We have had a partnership with Il Mulino New York since we opened 10 years ago, and they're our signature restaurant. They provide fine dining in the evening and, while it's a specific offering, it's very consistent. This has allowed them to delight our guests but also appeal to the local market.

We also have AQ, which is operated by Il Mulino but it's more of a relaxed trattoria environment. The offering is simple yet elegant. Within this, we also have a partnership with Hiro Yakko Sushi, so we have a sushi corner of sorts.

The average length of stay for customers is four nights, so we achieve a greater capture rate by having more variety.

In addition, we operate Costa Grill, which is the restaurant that sits on the sand. We offer many seafood dishes there, and it has a very Mediterranean feel in keeping with our environment. We're constantly changing the menu and we offer specials since 60 percent of our business is repeat, which is remarkable given our geography. Because of that, we're able to operate the establishment based upon a population we know well when we do forecasting.

What's important to us is to offer something unique but that is constantly being changed so people feel they're getting something new, but

at the same time, we want to operate it as a solid investment.

Also, the location of Costa Grill is such a special environment. Guests have the full Atlantic Ocean view while dining.

The food is very fresh, be it a beautiful piece of fish or veggie options. We have many salad offerings that can be customized as well as a lovely selection of wines.

We've been successful because we are operating something that is very manageable for us. We know the customer very well, and we partner with a restaurateur with a strong craft.

**How critical are standards from a service point of view, and how important is it for the high-level guest to have a customized relationship and for you to maintain the staff that knows that guest?**



Acqualina Resort and Spa fountain and ocean view (top left); pool and exterior (top right); and Costa Grill (above)

Very important. One-third of our workforce has been with us since the beginning. We have carefully positioned ourselves in this market as family-centric. We are very engaged with our team members and recognize that happy employees mean happy guests.

Retention is important to the brand and helps us as we're building. In terms of consistency, it's important to have standards for new and old team members.

We hire people who are capable of performing and we have leaders that are disciplined. When we bring in new people, we look for people with great hearts who care and are passionate, and who want to serve and be part of the story, rather than just receiving individual praise. ●