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## For Miami chef Norman Van Aken, it's been a long road to the top

By Lydia Martin

[LydMartin77@gmail.com](mailto:LydMartin77@gmail.com)



Peter Andrew Bosch / Miami Herald staff

This is Norman Van Aken, for Lydia Martin, out to lunch, he is a member of the famed Mango Gang who helped put South Florida on the culinary map. This was shot Tuesday, September 3rd, 2013, at the W hotel, on Miami Beach.

Before Norman Van Aken, the founding father of “New World Cuisine,” flipped his first egg at his first kitchen job in his early 20s, he was a college dropout with long hair and a penchant for hitchhiking who had worked as a factory stiff, carnie, house painter, flower vendor, roofer.

After he got fired from the roofing gig for being a tad too gleeful when a downpour halted work, he answered a help wanted ad for a short-order cook in Libertyville, Ill., near his hometown of Diamond Lake. The idea of working in a restaurant had never even crossed his mind, but the ad was motivational. “No experience necessary,” it read.

“It was kind of a calling,” Van Aken says over half a burger at The Dutch, in the W Hotel on South Beach. “But I worked at seven different restaurants before I actually heard that calling.”

He went on to put South Florida on the culinary map with his unique fusion of “Floribbean” flavors and classic technique and to win endless accolades, including a prestigious James Beard award. In fact, he’s the only Floridian inducted into the Beard list of Who’s Who in American Food and Beverage. But first he did all the kitchen grunt work imaginable, training himself as he inched along but never imagining he’d one day be called chef. Much less that he would become a nationally acclaimed culinary figure who has influenced endless others and counts superstars such as Charlie Trotter and Emeril Lagasse as his homeboys.

“I eventually learned to never trust that a pot handle hadn’t spent an hour in the oven before I reached for it,” he writes in a new memoir, *No Experience Necessary*, to be released in the fall by Taylor Trade Publishing.

The book breaks down the vast experience Van Aken ended up with, burn by burn, kitchen by kitchen. It opens with a yarn about a dinner honoring Julia Child that he cooked

alongside Lagasse and Trotter at Turnberry Resort in Aventura. After the stressful cooking and plating was finally over, the three chefs were invited to knock back a few at the hotel's exclusive bar. They were celebrating a job well done when Van Aken clocked the restaurant's maitre d' putting a hand on his wife's bottom.

That's when Louis XIV-style chairs started flying. Van Aken smashed one against the bar, just missing the maitre d's left side. Lagasse smashed another, just missing his right side. The chefs retreated to their rooms. One nightcap led to another, and somehow, Van Aken woke up next to Lagasse the next day.

Tom & Jerry's Fireside, where Van Aken flipped his first eggs, happens to be the place where he met his wife Janet, then a spirited high school girl working part time as a waitress. She's at The Dutch today, sitting at his side and eating the other half of that burger.

"My father was a hunter. He wanted to go after Norman with his gun," she says. They've been married since 1976. They have a son, Justin, 33, who followed Dad into the kitchen, and a granddaughter about to turn one.

Van Aken worked endless sweltering hours in the trenches before there was such a thing as a Food Network, before there was an Iron Chef or a Top Chef or even the concept of chef as celebrity.

"People are going to culinary school now because they want to be rich and famous. When I started out, if anybody said they were going to become famous by cooking, they might have been locked up. "

In late August he celebrated the 10th anniversary of his Orlando restaurant, Norman's at the Ritz-Carlton, with a sold-out, \$1,000-per-plate dinner cooked by his chef buddies, including Lagasse, Jeremiah Tower and Dean Fearing. Trotter, who got his first kitchen job from Van Aken at Sinclair's in Lake Forest, Ill., planned to be there, too, but he had to cancel due to a health issue, Van Aken says.

"Today's obsession with celebrity is a distraction for young chefs," says Van Aken, 62, director of restaurants at the Miami Culinary Institute, part of Miami Dade College, which is also home to his celebrated Tuyo restaurant. "I always tell young people who want this career to just float in it, absorb it, spend the time it takes. When I had Norman's in Coral Gables, I was always telling my staff to slow down and focus on learning. I'd say, 'Here's how old I was before I made my first hollandaise. This is how many restaurant jobs I worked at before I made my first beurre blanc. ... ' "

It was at his eighth kitchen, at the Pier House in Key West, that Van Aken even started thinking of cooking as more than just a way to pay the rent. The sous chef tossed out a culinary term and Van Aken had no idea what the guy was talking about.

"The Pier House was the first time I had been around all of these people my age or younger who had all of this knowledge. When the sous chef said 'veal veloute,' I said, 'Man, how the hell do you even know that term?' He said he went to the CIA [Culinary Institute of America]."

But Van Aken was making about five bucks an hour. There was no way could afford that kind of education. The sous chef suggested he start reading instead.

"I left work that day and I went to this book store on Duval Street. I don't even know how I had enough money in my wallet, I know I didn't have a credit card, and I bought Theory & Practice of Good Cooking by James Beard. It was a breakthrough time for me. I read and read and read."

After the Pier House, he bounced around some more, working at other kitchens in Key West, then Illinois, then Jupiter. In 1985, he returned to Key West to take over the kitchen at the waterfront Louie's Backyard. That's where he had his culinary aha moment.

"One morning I was sitting on the afterdeck with a bunch of my cookbooks, drinking coffee and trying to decide on specials. I saw this boat coming into view on the horizon. I wondered where they were going and what they would eat when they got there. I surmised it was Cuba. I started thinking about where I actually was."

He put away his French, Italian, Asian, Southwestern and California cookbooks, picked up a notepad and started investigating Key West's own flavors.

"I went to the tiny restaurants and bodegas trying to understand the Cuban, Haitian, Bahamian and other influences around me and thinking about how I could work those influences into dishes at Louie's Backyard. Plantains were the thing that dropped me down the well. I was at a restaurant with these carpenter buddies of mine and they were serving roasted pork with black beans and rice and maduros. I thought, 'Why are there bananas on my dinner plate?' But then I tasted them and I went, 'Holy s---!'"

Soon, Van Aken's career was skyrocketing. He has run a series of other restaurants since Louie's Backyard. Some went strong for years. Others fizzled quickly. But today he's exactly where he wants to be, he says. And his work at Miami Dade College's culinary school has triggered fresh inspiration.

"I'd like to convince Miami Dade that I can take the culinary program to national heights. And I'm looking at a spot in Coconut Grove to start teaching cooking classes for anyone who wants to learn. I can imagine setting up outposts in Costa Rica, Key West, the Hamptons."

Wherever his career takes him, South Florida will remain his home base and his muse, he says. He has a special passion for Key West, where he keeps a home.

"It's like being in love with a woman. Sometimes circumstances will tear you apart. But whatever else you go in search of, nothing quite compares. Key West has kept pulling me back from the first time I hitchhiked into town as a kid. Here's a town that embraced artists and renegades and dreamers. And it's where I became my culinary self."