

Introduction:

NORMAN VAN AKEN: There was no Internet and almost no cookbooks on the subject of Latin and Caribbean cooking so I began to go to the little restaurants that I'd known for a number of years - eating the food, enjoying the food but now "food sleuthing." (Laughs).

MARION KANE: You're a fellow Food Sleuth®.

MARION KANE: The late Anthony Bourdain called him "the big dog of Florida cooking." I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth® and welcome to "Sittin' in the Kitchen®". Self-taught chef Norman Van Aken came up with New World Cuisine to describe the flavours of the Sunshine State. He's a reader, a thinker and a great talker. I met with Norman at the cooking school adjacent to his second newer restaurant called Three in the gritty district of Wynwood in Miami. Please listen to the end of this podcast. There's a heartwarming anecdote.

Interview:

MARION KANE: I'm here with chef Norman Van Aken. Your trajectory as a chef had humble beginnings.

NORMAN VAN AKEN: Mmhmm.

MARION KANE: Your memoir is called "No Experience Necessary."

NORMAN VAN AKEN: Well Marion, I had been working a lot of odd jobs trying to figure out what I was doing with my life and I'm sure my mother was very concerned as well.

MARION KANE: Were you a hippie?

NORMAN VAN AKEN: I was an aspiring hippie. (Laughs).

MARION KANE: (Laughs). I've seen pictures of you.

NORMAN VAN AKEN: Yes, in the early 70s this was certainly something to aspire to was to be a hippie. I had long hair, a long beard and a dazed expression probably too many times. But I was working after college – that didn't work out for me and actually after the threat of going to Vietnam faded, so I was doing things including factory work. I was cutting grass on the golf course near where I was brought up. I was selling flowers in Honolulu on the street – no shoes required.

MARION KANE: That's being a hippie.

NORMAN VAN AKEN & MARION KANE: (laugh).

NORMAN VAN AKEN: I also worked in a carnival which was an exciting interlude where we went from town to town and put up the rides and I got electrocuted one night on our Ferris Wheel. After falling to earth I had a wake-up call and decided to look for another line of work. I took a job as a hot tar roofer and I was working on top of the roof of a high school and a major thunderstorm came along - a beautiful thunderstorm in the

middle of summer – and, all of a sudden because the thunder and lightning were there, we had to get off the roof because we were targets up there. So me and the motley crew that I was working with all zipped down the ladders and they all ran to their cars and trucks but I decided to roll around in the grass and exalt in the cleaning of the tar off my body and all of the dust and all of the feeling of the oppression of the heat and the work and the grittiness of it all. I was just loving nature and rolling around in it. Suddenly my hands hit a human object. I looked up from the ground where I was lying, and I had hit the legs of my boss who was standing over me with a very upset look on his face. To which he said, “Van Aken, we don’t need your kind here”.

MARION KANE: (laughs). Immortal words.

NORMAN VAN AKEN: It’s not the only time I heard them in my life. I was happy for the first 20 minutes and then as I got in my \$100 car and drove to the rented house that I lived in with seven other miscreants, I realized that rent was going to be coming up soon and I needed to get income going quickly because I had no savings. I saw this ad that said, “Short order cook. No experience necessary.” I circled that and kind of went, “What the hell, you know, I’ll try that.” The next day I got in my \$100 car and went over to this diner called Tom and Jerry’s Fireside. I tied my long hair behind my back and talked to the man that owned the place. He said, “Yeah, you can start tomorrow. \$3.25 an hour.” I started off as a breakfast cook, short order cook.

MARION KANE: Mainly eggs?

NORMAN VAN AKEN: Oh yeah. Eggs and hash browns and French toast and pancakes and chipped beef on toast and roast beef hash and all that stuff. From that it went right into lunch and that was burgers and grilled cheese and Sloppy Joes, roast beef sandwiches, turkey sandwiches – all the diner stuff.

MARION KANE: Did you love it?

NORMAN VAN AKEN: It was a totally different experience. Work up until that point for me was drudgery, especially in the factories. I would look at the clock and couldn’t believe how slowly it was moving. But within the restaurant world, I was scared. I was overwhelmed. I was like, “Oh my God, the pace is just crazy” and people are in a frenzy all the time – “I need this food, I need this food, I need this food.” I also just loved the smell of the food and I loved the language of the restaurant. The ladies who were the waitresses were pretty much my mom’s age. They were kind to me and there was a half-hour break and, on my break, they let me have something from the menu to eat and that was a bonus.

MARION KANE: Many chefs have told me that their first experience of a family was in the kitchen, professional kitchen.

NORMAN VAN AKEN: I think that’s very true. It is a kind of family, maybe a circus family or a carnie family but it suited me. Just like working in the carnival suited me. I think I was looking for that. I think I was looking for throughout my life something that would be family to me. I had a family but my family was... divorce was a problem.

MARION KANE: Your father left your mother.

NORMAN VAN AKEN: My father was playing around on my mother. My mother left.

MARION KANE: Okay. Good for her.

NORMAN VAN AKEN: Yeah. She was a strong woman and actually she was in the restaurant world. She raised us kids to be happy, full of love, inquisitive. She's the biggest teacher I've ever had as far as inspiring me.

MARION KANE: Nice. I got goosebumps. You've been called "the big dog of Florida cooking" by the late, great Anthony Bourdain. He's endorsed two of your books at least. Did you know him?

NORMAN VAN AKEN: Oh, yes. I got to know him before he went on television when he first wrote *Kitchen Confidential*. He and his partners opened up a sister restaurant to the property they had in Manhattan. Tony did a book-signing very close to the original Norman's. I had become aware of the book through my mother. My mother visiting us in Florida as she did many winters. She came down as a snowbird. She would be sitting in her chair with her ashtray nearby and I heard her laughing about something. I was like, "What are you reading?" And she goes, "I'm reading this goddamn funny book by this guy. He's crazy but I love him."

MARION KANE: That was in the year 2000.

NORMAN VAN AKEN: That sounds about right, yeah.

NORMAN VAN AKEN: I began to read it and, like everybody, I felt he hit a nerve so perfectly as far as the restaurant world, our world and he captured it. He did say a couple of things about a friend of mine that were not positive - Emeril. He decided that Emeril was like – I think he compared him to an Ewok out of the *Star Wars* series. This day came where I heard that he was going to be signing his books. Now this is before TV so people didn't know him yet. He was not the person that he became as far as being known globally. We went over to the restaurant and we walked in and he was sitting at the table, his knees almost cresting the height of the table because he was so tall. He looked at me and he goes, "Uh oh man. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Don't be mad at me." Probably more like, "Don't be pissed at me." And I'm like, "Me and the Emeril thing?" And he goes, "Yeah. I know you guys are friends." And I'm like, "Yeah." He goes, "Oh man, I hope you're not mad." I said, "Yeah, well, you know what? I'm going to buy a case of your books because I want all the people in the kitchen that work with me to have the joy of reading it."

MARION KANE: Did it reflect your experience of the professional kitchen?

NORMAN VAN AKEN: It was certainly the closes thing I'd ever read that did. I eventually felt the need to write my own version of it, my own memoir of it because I wanted to bring to life the characters that formed my trajectory up and these were people that were not famous chefs. As anybody who reads the book will see, these were the cooks that I worked with and it seems like almost each one of them I was fated to learn a certain thing from philosophically or a technique. There's 20-some chapters in the book, 21, 22 chapters. Each one of the chapters is a restaurant that I worked at and the experience that I got, that's why the title of the book is ironic. Actually, it says "No

Experience Necessary” but all I got was experiences. It’s a love story because the very first place I worked I met the girl that I married and that’s still with me now.

MARION KANE: Anthony Bourdain also said of you, “He is the Jimmy Page of his profession. A man who was there at almost every important moment in its history.” What are those moments that stand out for you?

NORMAN VAN AKEN: Tony, I believe in heaven and thank you for that amazing quote. Of course, meeting him and working with him and doing a couple of television shows with Tony – one in Key West and one off the coast of Venezuela were certainly great moments, but you know Marion, in the very early part of my career I hired a person who was a busboy and I was asked if he could get a job in the kitchen. That busboy was Charlie Trotter. I said, “No, we don’t need anybody,” not knowing that Charlie would become Charlie Trotter. Who would? Nobody can see into the future like that. It was through then getting to know Charlie, becoming great friends, the best of friends with Charlie and then subsequent things that we did together. He introduced me to Emeril. He introduced me to other people. We travelled around Europe. He worked with me in the Midwest and then he worked with me in Jupiter, Florida. Then he came down and worked with me in Key West and that was just before him opening up Charlie Trotter’s. The world just continued to evolve into a place where American gastronomy became so much different, became so much more – we began to hang out, do events with the people that were getting written up in magazines from California, Texas, New Orleans, New York. It was a time – and I think it remains – a time of great camaraderie, of Americans becoming much more confident of their own voice and finding out the differences between the voice of a chef working in Hawaii or New Orleans versus a chef working in Key West or Miami and what that meant. We did so many events together and Charlie was so central in some of the greatest events I ever did working with Daniel Boulud and Ferran Adrià.

MARION KANE: José Andrés.

NORMAN VAN AKEN. José Andrés. The first time I met José Andrés he came to a book signing I did on my first book tour. He was a thin, young whippersnapper from DC who was just getting started. I got to see him before, like I saw Charlie before he became Charlie Trotter, I saw José before he became José Andrés.

MARION KANE: You have something in common with José Andrés. You both refuse to cook for Trump.

NORMAN VAN AKEN: Yes.

MARION KANE: Last year you refused.

NORMAN VAN AKEN: Has it been that long? I would refuse him even more so today because I think his policies are so antithetical to what it means to be an American. We celebrate our ethnic diversity. We don’t condemn it. We don’t fight it. We don’t cage it. I am glad to tell you I am doing a gala with St. Jude’s this coming Saturday in Orlando, making good on my hopes to do something for the charity.

MARION KANE: It was for the charity you would have cooked for Trump.

NORMAN VAN AKEN: The charity asked me if I would do a dinner at the home Mar-a-Lago. I knew what would happen was there would be a photo time, shaking hands and all that, and I felt like, “You know what? I have a granddaughter, I have a son, and I don’t want them to be confused by me being someone that’s going to be looked at like, “He did this for a fee. He did this to be near the powerful.” That’s not me, that’s not the way I was raised. There have been people who said, “Well, you should have done this because you make money for the children.” We’ve done countless charity events. We will do countless more as long as I am standing. We will do countless more.

MARION KANE: Amen. You’ve been called the godfather of New World Cuisine. Please explain what New World Cuisine is.

NORMAN VAN AKEN: There was a period of time, Marion, when people began to talk about the various geographical cuisines. It was in the magazines primarily that I would have known about it because there was not the television Food Network or Netflix or things like that. In reading *Food Arts Magazine*, or *Food and Wine*, or *Bon Appétit*, or *Gourmet* – the ones that were then out there – began to see the distinctions between the Southwestern food movement, the Hawaiian food movement, the food that was historic in New Orleans and how it was. I knew I was somewhere special being in Key West. I came up to Miami to do a couple of events and there was a particular gentleman who was a director of operations for a big hotel that we did events with for a few times. He said, “You know, what you’re doing is different from anybody else in the United States and you and a few other fellas and ladies that are here in South Florida are doing something unique. You should come up with a name for it.” And I was like, “Wow, I hadn’t thought about baptizing it with any kind of a name.” I just was cooking every day. I was trying to find my voice and cook. I didn’t think about it being something to do with public understanding market relations or something like that.

But he got me thinking and I’ve always been a reader, always been a student of history. I began to think about the 500th anniversary of Columbus discovering, if you can call it that, America – was coming up. I began to think about what it meant to cook in Florida. I’d been reading a couple of books on history and one of them really was about the Columbian exchange, of what it meant when Columbus came to these shores and then the quick exchanges that began to happen between – across the Atlantic. Transoceanic. Across the Pacific too. Because by 1550 there were traders who were trading goods between Europe through the Philippines and back. I was looking at a map of the globe or something like that and thinking, “What we do is New World.” With Columbus coming here, we began to see this dialogue and this exchange that was different than what it was before. In Florida, we kind of stuck out. We were the pier that stuck out in the water in such a way that we were the first place that much of this was going on. I had to tear myself away from the expectation of Continental cuisine that would have been found in the fine dining restaurants in the 80s in Florida. If you were going to do a white tablecloth restaurant, it would have been more Continental. What did that mean? That meant more like Maine lobster and Scottish salmon and Dover sole and filet mignon and all of that. It would not have been something that would have embraced the Afro -Caribbean cultures that were surrounding me in the small restaurants and bodegas of Key West. I had this vision one day. I was sitting on the porch at Louie’s Backyard, right on the water. I did this often in the morning. Some quiet

time, I spread some books spread out on the table in front of me. The table the guests would be sitting at in the afternoon, and there were books from Spain and books from Morocco and books from Mexico and France. I was going through them and thinking about the specials I would make. Then I saw this ship going out on the horizon, almost beginning to go out of view and I thought, "Where are they going?" I realized they're probably going to Cuba. I wondered, "What are they eating? What are they going to eat when they get to Cuba? What will that be like?" I realized that me cooking the foods of the other countries was no longer going to be my goal. I realized that my goal now was to cook where I lived. For a period of time, I closed all the books. There was no Internet and almost no cookbooks on the subject of Latin and Caribbean cooking so I began to go to the little restaurants that I'd known for a number of years, eating the food, enjoying the food, but now "food sleuthing".

MARION KANE & NORMAN VAN AKEN: (laugh)

MARION KANE: You're a fellow Food Sleuth®.

NORMAN VAN AKEN: Yes. I became a fellow Food Sleuth®. I would take my notebook and sit down and I would talk to the waitress or the cop sitting next to me on the stool and ask what this was and that was and the other thing was. There's a little grocery store, actually two grocery stores in town and I would go up and down the aisle and see these goods – Spanish and Caribbean goods. I began to think, "How could I insert my understanding of cuisine but now begin to integrate that with where I lived?" And that became my script for New World Cuisine.

MARION KANE: So the elements of New World Cuisine are Caribbean, Latino and American?

NORMAN VAN AKEN: Interestingly enough, also Asian, because there has been a great amount of people that have been part of this history for coming here for huge things like building railroads. The sugar cane industry that came almost on after the ebb of slavery finally was going away. The work that was done by the immigrants once again. You could walk through the graveyard in Key West and see the names of people with Chinese last names and so you see the thread of history and you still see it with Peruvian food and the influx of how Japanese and Chinese are very historically involved with Peru but also with Cuba. Another thing is not just history but also weather. The weather we have in South Florida being as warm as it is it works beautifully with the food that comes to us from Southeast Asia. There's a sound reason for cooking the dishes that would come from there as well.

MARION KANE: And you are heavy in "mojo".

NORMAN VAN AKEN & MARION KANE: (laugh)

NORMAN VAN AKEN: I was once criticized – a critic from New York said, "I'm not sure this man is capable of creating a menu without three or four mojos on it." I was like, "Well, I'm sorry that sticks in your eye lady but..."

MARION KANE: What is a mojo?

NORMAN VAN AKEN: Mojo is a word that comes just from the Spanish which essentially comes from the verb “to wetten”. Mojo is a sauce. Predominantly mojo is a particular sauce or vinaigrette or marinade. It’s just as often used – probably more often used as a marinade than as a sauce but it’s used interchangeably. It comes to us from a place where olive oil didn’t exist and so they used lard to make this stuff and to have lard being capable of being used as a marinade you needed to heat it up. A magic act happens when you do that. When you heat the lard and you combine that with garlic, cumin and chilies. It sizzles and cooks the garlic and cumin and chilies and makes it more powerful and fragrant. Then you add in acid in the form of citrus juices and Spanish sherry wine vinegar and that’s the classic mojo. There are many ways to go at a mojo. So I began to make different kinds of mojos as well.

MARION KANE: You’ve been called a “poetic soul.” I know now why talking to you. You wrote the foreword to the vegetarian cookbook by Miami author Ellen Kanner called “Feeding the Hungry Ghost.” That is taken from Eastern religions applied to restless souls. Why did you write the foreword?

NORMAN VAN AKEN: The author of this book is a lovely human being who I’ve gotten to know over the years of working together in our respective ways in Florida and Miami. She asked me if I would consider writing the foreword to it and when I read the story behind “Feeding the Hungry Ghost” I was touched by its poetry. I guess that’s maybe the quickest way to get to me.

MARION KANE: It’s used in addiction terms for a person who has addictions, filling the hole in the soul with addictive substances. Do you relate to that?

NORMAN VAN AKEN: This life could be said to be analogous to an addiction of sorts but a chosen one.

MARION KANE: Cooking?

NORMAN VAN AKEN: Yeah. Cooking. Making plates. The writer Annie Dillard, one of my favourite writers of all, was asked about what it took to be a writer and she said, “First off you must be in love with making sentences.” I look at the way it is for me. I am in love with the moment where the ingredients are before me whether they’re raw ingredients or ingredients I’ve cooked and the blank plate is before me and then there’s that mind click where you go, “I’m going to plate this now and here’s how I’m going to do it.” I’ve loved doing that since I was a very young man.

MARION KANE: Amen. Thank you, Norman. It was a pleasure interviewing you.

NORMAN VAN AKEN: My pleasure as well. Stay here in the warm weather for a while.

MARION KANE: Yes.

Conclusion

MARION KANE: That was my conversation with chef Norman Van Aken. Learn more about him, his books and his restaurants at normanvanaken.com. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth®. You can find more stories like this one at marionkane.com and in Apple Podcasts. Thank you for listening.