

# Kitchen cousins: Chefs nurture growing careers

By Sharon Sanders

If Ernest Hemingway had become a chef instead of a writer he would have cooked like Norman [Van Aken]—passionate, electric, vibrant," said chef Charlie Trotter over a morning cup of filtered coffee in the dining room of his namesake restaurant at 816 W. Armitage.

After a long night of work and celebration, Trotter wasn't fully awake but as he spoke about Van Aken his thoughts proved more stimulating than the caffeine.

The Hemingway analogy was apt, since Libertyville native Van Aken, 38, now lives and cooks on Key West, Fla., where Hemingway often hung his hat. Hemingway searched for big marlin. Van Aken cooks fish of a different sort at two island restaurants, Louie's Backyard and MIRA.

If Van Aken is the Hemingway of chefs, then Trotter, 29, could easily assume the persona of Hemingway's friend F. Scott Fitzgerald, who was as elegant and refined a writer as Trotter is a chef.

Unlike the famous authors, however, Trotter and Van Aken's relationship appears untroubled by professional rivalry or petty jealousy.

The pair first met and worked together seven years ago at Sinclair's restaurant in Lake Forest when Van Aken headed the kitchen and Trotter stuck his foot in the door as a wannabe cook.

Throughout the ensuing years, the pair worked together again at Sinclairs Grill in Jupiter, Fla., and at Louie's Backyard, the eclectic multi-ethnic restaurant where Van Aken presides as chef.

In less than a decade, Trotter has pulled alongside his former

mentor in the national culinary spotlight. "I knew that [Trotter's success] would happen but the speed with which it happened was amazing," Van Aken said.

"At Sinclair's, he was trying to take over from the very beginning," said Van Aken, laughing. "In the dictionary beside the word irrepressible, there's a picture of Charlie."

"I told him I had never worked in a kitchen before in my life," Trotter said, recalling his promotion from busboy to pantry cook at Sinclair's.

"He didn't know which end of the knife to hold," Van Aken said. "We literally sent him to the hospital a couple of times. He would cut himself. Blood would flow."

Trotter prefers to recall the more inspirational aspects of his apprenticeship.

"More than anything, Norman showed me what a chef could be. He didn't have to be a heavyset, overbearing, brow-beating Frenchman," Trotter said. "He was completely different. Young, self-taught, very well read. He made literary references in the kitchen. When he explained something, it was in beautiful, full living color."

This pair may not be blood brothers but they are, indeed, brothers in food. So, it's not surprising that to celebrate the second anniversary of Charlie Trotter's restaurant, Van Aken dropped everything and came to town laden with exotic ingredients such as annatto seeds and Cuban bananas, ready to create a "Feast of Sunlight" (also the title of his recently published cookbook.)

The menu was resplendent with innovative island fare: cracked conch; seared sea scallop



**Chef Norman Van Aken's Cuban banana split—made with tropical fruit ice creams and baby bananas—raises the classic childhood treat to a new level of sophistication.**

with plantain; paella nueva (new-style paella with black beans, yellow rice, rabbit loin and black truffle presented in corn husks); ceviche intermezzo with fresh Gulf shrimp and roasted chiles, and veal Havana with fire roasted peppers, sweet corn and a reduction of Spanish sherry.

A closer of Cuban banana split raised the classic kiddies' dessert to a new level of sophistication. With the artistic aid of Trotter's pastry chef, Lisabet Summa, Van Aken presented ninos (baby bananas) topped with a trio of tropical fruit ice creams, garnished with toasted nuts, toasted coconut, Sauternes-simmered pineapple and bittersweet chocolate sauce infused with cinnamon.

A suave, 20-year-old Matusalem rum, ripe with vanilla over-

tones, perfectly complemented the dessert.

Although the Caribbean theme is just one element of Van Aken's sunlit repertoire (Mediterranean and Oriental also figure prominently), both chefs agreed it would be an appealing calling card for a chef visiting Chicago from the Florida Keys.

Van Aken's cuisine "is reflective of the global sunbelt," Trotter said. "There's a purity and vitality to his food. Lots of people who are cooking Southern or Southwestern are cooking food that's out of control. It's a blitzkrieg to the senses. He uses elements of some of these cuisines with the steadying influence of refined Italian and French. It's controlled."

When asked what he likes about Trotter's food, Van Aken was

quick to return the compliment.

"What do you like about jazz? It's real. It's honest but it's so unique. I can't say I taught Charlie anything he's doing now. It's completely his own thing. When I think of Charlie's food I think of Miles Davis. It's extraordinarily realized and disparate," he said.

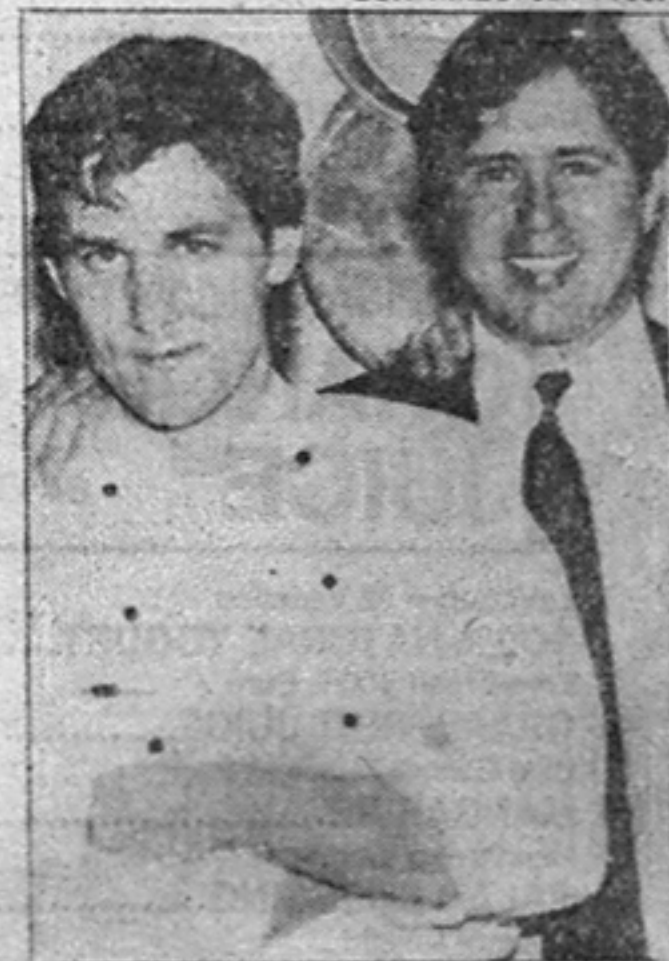
"Norman is here sharing the stage. I don't think we would have stayed friends and colleagues if I didn't love his food," Trotter said.

Van Aken concurred, saying, "Our relationship is now one of mutual admiration.

"Everytime we get together we see evolvment, an interchange beyond cuisine," Trotter said.

Here is Van Aken's recipe for a taste of sophisticated Key West fare.

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**Young chefs Charlie Trotter (left) and Norman Van Aken consider themselves brothers in food.**