

# FUSION

Norman Van Aken © 1988

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In the early morning, the old Cuban men sit on the shady side of White St. in front of the Goodyear Tire Store with their long thick cigars and their short plastic cups of sugary espresso. They argue amiably about politics for a few hours and then they float away, mystically rising with the thick clouds manufactured by their own smoke only to reemerge on the other side of the street in front of the pawn shop and laundromat in the late afternoon, sipping cold "cervezas" until the long shadows finally send them to their little wooden homes.

These days are bleached white with this summer's heat and the sky is jammed with those extraordinary towering castle-like clouds known as thunderheads.

I have no idea of where or of what those men eat these days. The "Fourth of July" eating establishment, is closed and for sale. The American flags and plastic tablecloths put away. The once grand and social "Cuban Club" has burned to the foundations. Regrettably, almost all the remaining sandwich joints and restaurants that dot the Island serve pale and chemical imitations of the mother country's pre-Castro fare. It would be difficult to cook *truly* traditionally even in private homes without the fresh raw products commonly available in years gone by.

There are countless parallel situations that have been endured by so many cultures, through so many periods of time. As we've relentlessly seen, immigrants or refugees are washed into the mainstream of a larger populace, their variegated colorful customs and appetites fragmenting amazingly quickly into the American fabric patchwork quilt. In the beginning, they are the bright clusters of either urban or rural neighborhoods, but ultimately they slide into the muddy blurred facelessness of wall-to-mall urban sprawl. Like that once vivid bastion of macho/icon graphic Taylor St. drenched in Italian romance or the staccato sensuality of the Latino barrios of LA, the tiny Island of Key West has begun to drift her moorings.

She is spinning slowly, but ominously into the "*courants*".

On the other side of Key West another scene is staged at the gentle waters edge of the Gulf of Mexico.

A tight, tall cluster of new hotels and restaurants stands waiting. The huge cruise ships have now arrived and are parked regally, almost mythic, like Trojan water horses, in quiet repose a few miles out in the deeper blue.

The passengers within will soon ferry over in anticipation of what they suspect will bring some novel island flavors. Many of the menus offered now tend to reflect a type of culinary response based on our proximity to the Caribbean. What they will find, however, is what one finds all over here for now; the picturesque postcard fantasy image of tropical charm and simple fresh food sadly co-opted by fast food thinking and imported corporate greed.

But wait, hope glimmers, *the fires of fusion* are coming.

I am a chef. My interest and my intent is on diving deeply back down in time to salvage the golden treasures and vibrant calypso flavors of old Key West and *fusing them* with a contemporary sensibility and an individual personality. The foundation, must be the bedrock honesty of Conch, Black, Spanish and Cuban regional cooking. Like myself, other chefs across the globe are finding that there is a combined power in what (to borrow from the jazz vernacular) I now call ... "*fusion cooking*".

American Southwestern chefs like Mark Miller, Dean Fearing, Robert Del Grande and John Sedlar have done it with that region of the country. Frank Stitt, Emeril Lagasse and Elizabeth Terry are accomplishing it in the old South, while Jasper White and Lydia Shire have examined it in the Northeast. Jeremiah Tower and Alice Waters fused Californian produce with French ideology and gave birth to a restaurant movement that has rippled back like a wave from West Coast to East these past ten years. It is only natural that we work similarly in the Floridian-Caribbean Southeast.

I have been reading a fascinating book entitled "Culture and Cuisine ... A Journey Through the History of Food" by Jean François Revel. The work is a masterful account on many subjects. One is how civilizations routinely accept and reject naturalism. As ever, the biggest mistake is to think that there's anything new under the sun. Revel tells us of the man, Guillaume Tirel *a.k.a.* Taillevent. He can probably be called, Revel says, the first "star" of Christian gastronomy. His cookbook, written sometime in the 1300's was considered the great document of its kind and especially noteworthy for synthesizing Medieval cuisine. (Modern readers might be startled to find a recipe in Taillevent of his calling for tuna with pears, lemon and oregano!)

**"and 'round and 'round we spin in a circle game".**

Ms. Mitchell's words could easily apply to the recent attitudinal shifts being experienced by the world of "foodies". That once possibly naive, but positively energetic circle is hardening into more of an arena lately. The cooks are like some modern day gladiators and the coliseum is packed with opposing voices shouting their deeply felt opinions. In many ways it is the best of times and the worst of times. The challenge to grow is before us, but the road is not always easily found. If more of those in the grandstands would read historically what has occurred, their sense of déjà vu would dramatically be heightened. Perhaps the most dramatic date in this cross-pollination of ideas and technique occurred in 1533 when Catherine de Medici of Florence wed the future Henry II of France. Catherine transported her chefs with her, when moving to the throne, and French Cooking was never the same.

In broad terms we have regional food that is deeply steeped in tradition. It is, by definition, not meant to be changed or invented upon. Then we have a restaurant styled cooking that changes purposefully and even theatrically. As a chef I have been exposed to the arguments for a return to regionalism and another applauding invention. Unlike many others that find the decision a heads or tails one, I find my interests in the spinning juxtaposition of this culinary coin.

In my cooking, I am seeking to create an interplay, *a fusion*, between regionalism and restaurant technical know how. My fusion cooking is the result of coupling our native regional foodstuffs like conch, black beans, plantains, mangoes, coconuts, grouper, key limes, snapper, shrimp and the folk cooking methods intrinsic to the preparation of these goods, *with* a self-taught type of classical cooking. One of the dishes that exemplifies this "fusion" cooking would be my "Pork Havana Nueva". The standard Cuban composition is prepared with a whole pork roast that has been marinated for a number of days in such things as sour oranges, garlic, onions and pepper. It is then roasted and served with side dishes of black beans, plantains and yellow rice. "*Nueva*" style the dish is served with the components synthesized. The meat can be prepared the same way but the typical side dishes are integrated instead as a sauce (black bean sauce) and a starch-vegetable combination (fried plantains). The extra starch of rice is omitted. Each foodstuff is given equal weight, so you don't end up with an excess of meat, fat or starch, which is important in light of modern dietary considerations. Also, I find there are dishes and foods with clear parallel taste affinities that cross time and distance effortlessly and work in harmony with what may be considered the typical traditional Key West flavors. They could be termed crossover flavors that bridge correctly with the tempo and temperature of our Island.

An example that demonstrates this crossover variety would be "Chili Spiked Veal Adobo with Corn Relish, Garlic and a Spanish Sherry Wine Vinegar Reduction". The "Adobo", which is of Mexican derivation, is a spice rub that marries chilies, cinnamon, vinegar and/or stock. Although it is not of this specific region in origination it works here in a very appealing way. The bracing power of the chilies awakens the senses when the tropic's heat might have induced somnolent torpor. And if you're wondering "Where's the classical?" The methodology I employ when making the sauce for the veal draws from classic Franco/Italian roots. It is called a "stratification" sauce and its consistency and flavor relies upon a somewhat complex series of separate reductions of stock, vegetables, vinegars and/or wine and spices.

Whether it is called classical, fusion or crossover is not only a matter of semantics. It is a matter of strength and precision. The gussied up fussiness of nouvelle cuisine needs the raw sensuality and primal qualities of a more time tested cuisine, yet appetites and life styles change and the cook must work to respond intelligently to change.

## **“out of the cradle endlessly rocking”**

Walt Whitman was probably the first poet to leap forth with a distinctly American voice. To many he did not seem European enough in cadence or manner.

He sang, "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)"

Whitman was an object of passionate scorn by these traditionalists. In the end, his mark was made, because he *fused* the ancient and revered body of poetry with the radically new “body electric”.

The mark will also be made for those whom are daring enough to meld the good and old cooking with the good and the new cooking.

But, of course, the disputes will rage on and I might add *they should*.

Finally, Revel states, "there is gastronomy when there is a permanent quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns and when there is a public both competent enough and rich enough to arbitrate this quarrel".

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*(Written Summer of 1988 while living in Key West ... and subsequently delivered as a speech in Santa Fe at a symposia on American Cuisine that year when I spoke alongside Charlie Trotter and Emeril Lagasse. Many were in the audience that day including journalists who got copies of “Fusion” and soon one in particular broke the story nationally. That person was Ms. Regina Schrambling.)*