

# Back at the Helm

Norman Van Aken and his New World cuisine return to Coral Gables.

BY ZACHARY FAGENSON

One would be hard-pressed these days to find a restaurant that can't, in some way, be called fusion. In Miami alone, Richard Hales smashes together Korean food and burger-shack fare at Sakaya Kitchen, while at Phuc Yea's Cesar Zapata cooks Viet-Cajun cuisine and has done so since long before it was featured in an episode of David Chang's Netflix series *Ugly Delicious*. At Bradley Kilgore's Alter, it would be shocking to find elements of any fewer than three countries' cuisines on a single plate.

While fusion, for centuries, has resulted from the collision of peoples and cultures (think Peru's Nikkei cuisine or Italy's beloved pasta via China's egg noodles), the recent freedom of chefs to do nearly whatever they want stems from one man: Norman Van Aken.

The story of Van Aken, now 67 years old and still cooking, is legend. The Illinois-born kid odd-jobbed and vagabonded his way across the country until he crossed paths with Key West and, enchanted by its azure waters and pristine ingredients, made it his home and identity. He rose to fame in the kitchen of Louie's Backyard, where he launched his New World cuisine. The James Beard Foundation's award for best chef in the Southeast came in 1997, and it was only the beginning. The years that followed were filled with enough accolades, awards, and restaurants that listing them all here would be impossible.

What's most important is that through it all, Van Aken remained the standard-bearer of fusion cuisine, continually defining it in its proper form as its popular spread.

So it was both unusual and exciting to learn earlier this year that Van Aken would take over the kitchen at 50 Eggs Group's **Ad Lib** (2415 Ponce de Leon Blvd., Coral Gables; 305-504-8895; [adlibgables.com](http://adlibgables.com)) following the departure of Jamie DeRosa, whose short-lived tenure kicked off the reimagining of the Swine Southern Table & Bar space with lighter, airier décor and pricey, refined cuisine.

Helmed by John Kunkel, who earned his fortune selling his Mexican chain Lime for \$24 million in 2012, 50 Eggs has delved into everything from ambitious, chef-driven cuisine to humble burgers and, now, a burgeoning global fried-chicken empire. Earlier in the 50 Eggs story, the company partnered with high-profile chefs such as Jeff McInnis and Piyarat Potha Arreeratn, better known as Chef Bee of NaiYaRa, to widespread acclaim, followed by high-profile separations. Now, 50 Eggs is forming partnerships



Photo courtesy of Dana Gidney

with chefs around the globe who have a stake in their respective restaurants, hoping to cement more stable relationships and ultimately better food for lengthier periods. The company also purchased Mark Soyka's iconic eponymous restaurant in 2018.

If Ad Lib is a pilot, there's reason to be optimistic. The food is classic Norman, decked out with pastries by Hedy Goldsmith, created with inspirations from around the globe, and reconvened on elegant, simple plates presented in a light, welcoming space with service that is so unusually refined and effortless it's disarming. It also comes at a critical juncture following the recent announcement that his long-standing restaurant at the Ritz-Carlton in Orlando will close, though Van Aken is looking for a new location for his eponymous eatery.

The 80-seat space has been recast from a Southern hipster motif with exposed brick and Edison lights to something more befitting fine dining. The walls have been covered in white

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and decorated with tall pastel-painted panels that seem to depict flowers sprouting from the veining in marbles. Geometric chandeliers with dangling orbs of light, all arranged in line or at right angles to one another, along with a big, heavy white marble bar, help give the space a modern feel.

The menu here presents just as simply with eight appetizers and eight entrées. Some are holdovers from the former chef and have been modified to fit Van Aken's sensibilities.

"My responsibility is to be true to my vision of cuisine, and that vision has been formulated first by Key West and later Florida, along with Mexico, the Caribbean, the American Southwest, and Latin America," he says.

One update of a classic is the Brazilian conch chowder (\$17) that seems founded on a creamy mussel soup, a recipe for which

appears in his 1988 cookbook, *Norman Van Aken's Feast of Sunlight*. Here, heaps of mussels and clams are steamed to create a pungent seafood broth that's spiked with fresh orange juice, star anise, and saffron and then combined with coconut milk to create something deeply satisfying and just barely tropical. The tableside presentation makes for a delight in which the yellow-orange soup is poured around a heap of tender fried conch, minuscule orange segments, sweet corn, and toasted coconut slivers. Van Aken also adds an elegant touch to some holdover dishes, such as crispy zucchini flowers filled with house-made ricotta cheese (\$16). Though such a presentation has become as ubiquitous as *cacio e pepe*, the addition of preserved kumquats and a punchy ginger reduction adds a balancing spiciness and sweetness to each bite while layering on some complexity. The surf-and-turf tartare (\$21), however, seemed unworthy of the New World treatment. The combination of caviar on top of beef and buttery sea urchin atop finely diced raw tuna was a crowd pleaser, but it could have used a pinch of salt.

Lately, Van Aken has said he's been enamored with Mexican cuisine "as it exists in Mexico," and this manifests itself in a crisp-skinned fillet of Florida snapper atop a bed of roasted pattypan squash and sweet beans accented with a savory, sweet, and piquant green mole and toasted pumpkin seeds. Some bites of the fish proved overly salty and borderline inedible. Ones with proper seasoning fared far better and took beautifully to the subtly earthy flavors of the vegetables and the assertive sauce.

Other dishes restate classic notes such as a Rohan duck breast perfectly seared and sliced in half, with one side painted with a nutty plantain crema and the other lashed with an ancho-guava barbecue glaze. The two sauces, Van Aken says, are the ones most often replicated by former cooks who've since moved on from his kitchens. The best parts of the duck are those cooked close to rare and boast an acute balance of delicate gaminess and the rich savoriness of red meat.

## The desserts are dazzlingly fun.

A trio of fat rum-and-pepper-painted sea scallops (\$32) shows off perfection in both technique and composition. The bivalves are cooked just to the point of creaminess and arrive atop an aggressive cod brandade whose salty seafood notes are smartly pared back with sweet corn, wild mushrooms, and a delicate konbu broth to tie everything back together and to the sea.

Of course, Goldsmith's desserts, which were greatly missed when she decamped to Los Angeles in 2015, are a must and somehow still dazzlingly fun while also fitting for this more refined mold. A collection of petits fours (\$16) arranged on a plate's circumference includes olive oil cakes, house-made strawberry marshmallows, champagne and strawberry macarons, bittersweet chocolate ganache squares, and strawberry candies that re-create the delight of digging through Halloween spoils. A brown-butter semifreddo (\$14) is more formal, but the frozen rectangle seated on a moist financier, accented with the North Africa spice *ras-el-hanout* and surrounded by pistachio-studded squares of the sesame candy *halvah*, strikes the perfect balance of savory and sweet while keeping in line with Van Aken's global mindset.

Though the menu should hold its format, it should also begin to exhibit more of Van Aken's trademarks as time passes. Alongside a recent fascination with Mexican cuisine is a nod to Asia, as evinced by those scallops with konbu broth. Such elements will surely appear as he swaps out older dishes for ones that combine seasonality with his constant eye on the horizon. One dish in testing is a morel mushroom-studded tamale with sweetbreads and Serrano ham. If there's anything to learn from the past, it's that Van Aken's New World cuisine will continue to surprise the world by shedding tropes like mango salsa in search of ingredients in combinations that few would dare to try.