

# MIAMI NewTImes

Norman Van Aken's star still gleams in South Florida's culinary firmament.

By Jen Karetnick

# Tropical Trailblazer



He plays a supporting role in the new Charlie Trotter documentary, but **Norman Van Aken**'s star still gleams in South Florida's culinary firmament.

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**S**o you watched *The Menu*, cackling at all the “breadless bread plate” and “broken emulsion” scenes. And then, since you had viewed one food-driven movie, your streaming service suggested that you also screen *Love, Charlie: the Rise and Fall of Chef Charlie Trotter*.

Both movies are, at their essence, about tasting-menu culture. But unlike *The Menu*, a satirical thriller about consumerism and pretentiousness in the hospitality industry, *Love, Charlie*

is a documentary about how multiple James Beard Award-winning Charlie Trotter's ideas — and ideals — were pivotal to American fine dining in the late '80s and early '90s. And while Trotter's signature restaurant was in Chicago, and most of his story stems from there, much of it is set in Miami.

You'll learn a lot about Miami's dining history by viewing it. That's because the first person to hire the innovative Trotter was Miami's own James Beard Foundation's “Who's Who in American Food and Beverage” winner Norman Van Aken, back when he was a first-time chef helming a restaurant in the Windy City. Mentor to Trotter until the Chicago chef's untimely death from a stroke at age 54, Van Aken appears throughout *Love, Charlie*, recounting memories of menu-swapping every Saturday night and other rituals of their culinary brotherhood.

Even after moving to Key West and then Miami, Van Aken played such a fundamental role in Trotter's career, not to mention Miami's development as a food city, that some of the advertising from the movie even features him. For example, the Rotten Tomatoes review shows a picture from Trotter's 2012 South Beach Wine & Food Festival tribute dinner at the Loews Miami Beach Hotel, displaying (in order from the left) Van Aken, Anthony Bourdain, Trotter, and Emeril Lagasse, all of whom shared



Chef Norman  
Van Aken

Photo by Castaldo Studio

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a great friendship. That particular dinner became legendary when Bourdain grew furious at the \$\$\$-per-plate guests who wouldn't stop chatting throughout Trotter's speech.

During his heyday, Van Aken was a force in the Miami dining scene, helming the kitchen at a Mano, which opened in 1992 at the Betsy Ross Hotel, now called the Betsy South Beach. His namesake Norman's debuted in Coral Gables in 1995 and was a finalist for the James Beard Foundation's "Best Restaurant in America."

*Smithsonian* magazine credits Van Aken as the inventor of "New World Cuisine," introducing the word "fusion" to the culinary community, and making it common to combine Asian, Caribbean, African, and American ingredients on the same plate. And you may recognize him as part of the Mango Gang, which formally included Allen Susser, Doug Rodriguez, and Mark Militello.

However, if you're new-ish to Miami or born after the millennium, you just as quickly might not know who Van Aken is. His last Miami establishments, Three Restaurant and No. 3 Social in Wynwood opened in 2017. Van Aken didn't enjoy the experience there, which was right about when traditional restaurant criticism began to transition. As a poet and writer at heart, as much as he is a chef, Van Aken, like many chefs, didn't grasp the role social media would play with clientele. "We didn't know there would be bloggers and influencers and 18-year-olds with cameras," he says. Three Restaurant folded. And while No. 3 Social lasted for a while as a lounge without Van Aken's involvement, the spaces are now Pez Loco Restaurant & Tequila Bar and Copal Rooftop Bar.

Before that, his other Miami comeback had been at Tuyo in 2012, the restaurant for the Miami Culinary Institute at the Wolfson Campus of Miami Dade College.

But chefs, even those he may not have worked with directly, certainly know him; He was immediately spotted at Patio Isola. At a recent dinner, James Beard Award-nominated chef-owner Jose Mendin came over to pay his respects. "Chef," he said, "when I saw you sitting here, I just had to say hello."

Max Santiago. Van Aken's executive pastry chef at Norman's and Tuyo, and a consultant at Three, recently opened Max'd Out Donuts and credits Van Aken with proper mentorship. "He expected nothing but the highest level of ingredients, final product, and service. I had to learn to make everything in-house from scratch, even peanut butter!" Santiago says. "I take this with me still to this day with the way I now operate my own businesses. If I cannot source something, I know how to create it myself. I understand where and how it's made and where it comes from."

Likewise, Michael Beltran, whose Ariete is nominated for a 2023 James Beard award, famously calls Van Aken his "culinary godfather." In 2016, right before opening Ariete, he told *New Times* that he had made it a personal goal to work for Van Aken after reading one of his cookbooks. And so he did, taking all the influence with him that he could — which clearly has held through the years. "Norman's food forced you to think outside of the box but still keep it honest," he said back then. "I believe in that."



SOBEWFF photo

**Norman Van Aken, Anthony Bourdain, Charlie Trotter, and Emeril Lagasse posed for a photo during a tribute dinner for Trotter at the 2012 South Beach Wine & Food Festival.**

In addition, Santiago says, Van Aken, who'd committed to team efforts for fundraisers for Hurricane Andrew and 9/11 relief early on, schooled him about collaboration. "He taught me to be well-connected with the right people in the industry. Collaboration dinners with other big-name chefs and chef organizations like charities, the James Beard Foundation, and Rising Star Chefs. It's about working with the right people to advance in this industry," Santiago says.

Understanding how important such rela-

chefs like Nina Compton, another James Beard Award-winner for her restaurant Comptère Lapin in New Orleans, how Van Aken's cooperative spirit provided the framework from which they also operate.

"Working with Chef Norman was aces in my book. The kitchen was very professional and chill at the same time," Compton says. "He really opened my eyes to using the ingredients I grew up with in St. Lucia and how to incorporate them into fine dining. It was an aha moment for me and definitely helped shape my career. I am excited about his new restaurant and to see his knowledge being passed down to another set of kitchen pros."

That's right: You can also experience Van Aken's food again. Just more than three decades years after he opened the original Norman's and two decades after he debuted its sibling in the Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes, you can drive up to 7924 Via Dellagio Way in Orlando. Van Aken has reopened Norman's with longtime partners Kim and Tom Wood this month.

Van Aken is calling it "Norman's 3.0." But don't expect him to wander around the dining room only talking to people, he says. Even though he's in his early 70s, he has the urge to create for creation's sake. "People ask me, 'Why do you want to do this anymore?' I just still want to make plates," he says. "It's very cool that we're getting a chance to come back and showcase it all again and work with my young team as a mentor."

Mentorship is something that Trotter never really understood. *Love, Charlie* is about bad kitchen behavior as much as it is good and how a chef can destroy his own legacy before he's even left it. Trotter created a culture of fear in his kitchen. Even young chefs who wanted to work there and were willing to withstand the abuse, such as Grant Achatz, who would go on to receive three Michelin stars at Alinea, were seen as potential rivals. Indeed, by the time the Michelin

Guide got to Chicago, Trotter was in decline both restaurant-wise and health-wise and was only given two stars — a blow that he never really recovered from, Van Aken says.

By comparison, Van Aken, who has suffered similar career highs and lows, is proud of his former chefs and staff. He celebrates their achievements, along with those of his colleagues and friends, such as Emeril Lagasse. While Lagasse, also featured heavily in *Love, Charlie*, went on to have a successful television career, Van Aken and Trotter didn't score regular series — or come up with catchphrases.

"We started so young," Van Aken says. "We just wanted to feed people and hang out with each other. We didn't know there would be articles and television shows." Still, there would be multiple cookbooks and the highest of awards.

Van Aken still grieves over the loss of Trotter, whom he considered more of a brother than a friend and mentee, and who he urged, toward the end, to let go of his ego and enjoy life a little bit more. "You don't have to continue to be Charlie Trotter," he told him. Trotter didn't listen, and the result was documented in newspaper articles: erratic behavior at awards shows, his restaurant closing, and finally, the stroke that killed him.

Yet Van Aken is also satisfied, despite initial reservations, with how *Love, Charlie* represented Trotter as a complicated man who was fierce with his passions, wildly intelligent and astoundingly creative and also driven by his demons. "I didn't want to leave his memory on the dust heap, but I also didn't want to sell him down the river. So while I initially had a lack of comfort of anybody doing a documentary on Charlie, I really think the director is a very astute human being, and we were all very pleased with the outcome."

In the end, you couldn't ask for more than that kind of tribute from your first mentor.

[Editorial@MiamiNewTimes.com](mailto:Editorial@MiamiNewTimes.com)

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tionships are both personally and professionally to chefs makes it almost mandatory to watch *Love, Charlie*. Sure, you can read countless reviews and articles about Van Aken's foundational cuisine and his memoir, *No Experience Necessary*, to get a sense of who he is and what he expects in his kitchen. Just ask