

Worldly Delights: Norman's Miami



A roadside stand in **South Florida's** farmland country proclaims "Robert Is Here" in bold red letters. I'm told this is the go-to place for tropical fruit and for Robert's famous milkshakes. My husband and I choose a sapodilla (a fruit that tastes like a pear with brown sugar) and banana shake made with fruits from nearby farms. The result is a sweet, antioxidant-enriched 'meal in a glass' that reminds us of how glorious tropical fruit tastes at the source.

Minutes later, chef **Norman Van Aken**, 'the Founding Father of New World Cuisine,' his wife Janet and son Justin meet up with us for a culinary tour

of some of his favourite **Miami** eateries. It's Norman who suggests we meet here, as it was (and is) his love affair with South Florida's bounty of raw ingredients that first seduced his palate when he was a young cook. Today, this culinary icon and author of four books, including *The Great Exotic Fruit Book* (1995), is known for celebrating Latin, Caribbean, Asian, African and American flavours in harmonious balance. He coined the term 'fusion cooking' in a speech he gave in 1988 to a Santa Fe audience and his take on that term is clear.

As we're about to sample our way through mounds of fresh fruit, I notice

Mary Luz Mejia spends a day in Miami with chef Norman Van Aken and discovers the city's hidden culinary gems.

a beautiful young lady walk up next to Justin. "This is my fiancée Lourdes," the young pastry chef proudly proclaims. A new round of hugs and congratulatory smiles ensues; Justin proposed to her outside the fruit stand under the canopy of a massive tree just an hour before we met! In a celebratory mood, we slurp just-picked red lychee, fragrant papaya slivers and admire craggy Asian guavas, sugar apples, mamey and passion fruit – all of which have never felt the chill of refrigeration and taste like distilled sunshine!

Our spirits high with fructose and the infectious giddiness of the newly engaged couple, we head to a South Miami staple for lunch – **El Palacio de los Jugos** ('The Juice Palace,' 5721 W. Flagler St., Miami). This is where locals come to take a bite out of Cuban favourites like *lechón asado con mojo* (Cuban roast pork with sour orange and garlic sauce), *conгри* (black beans and rice) and *ropa vieja* (shredded beef in a tomato sauce) to name a few. Inside a multi-coloured, canopied food court with huge fans whirring above to keep diners cool, curious palates are invited to wander from the juice bar (try the *maracujá* or passion fruit juice) over to the sandwich lady or perhaps to the hot food table, where we order lunch.

As we tuck into the luscious *lechón* and *conгри* with a side of *mojo* and little fried corn cakes, Norman tells us, "I discovered this place when I was working in South Beach for a crazy Cuban guy in '92. Let me put it to you this way: When Al Pacino needed a character study for *Scarface*, I have zero doubt he used my former business partner from Cuba," says Norman, adding, "What I love about this place is its raw energy. This isn't some North American temperature-controlled homogenized place. This is part of Miami's history."

Spanish buzzes around the room as families, businessmen and students dive into hearty Cuban fare – food that Norman observes hasn't changed much since the 1950s, with the understanding that perhaps Cubans here don't want it to because it gives them comfort and a taste of their beloved island pre-revolution.

With this in mind, we drive off to **El Brazo Fuerte** ('The Strong Arm,' www.ebbakery.com) in **Little Havana**,



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WHAT ELSE TO SEE AND SAVOUR IN THE GREATER MIAMI AREA

Delicias de España (www.deliciasdeespana.com) – for the finest selection of Iberian treats including cheeses, cured meats, oils, wines and even homewares. It's like being at the El Corte Inglés department store without leaving Miami. Don't forget to stop by the shop's café for a Spanish lunch or a piece of *Soufflé Delicias* – its version of a *tres leches* cake studded with chocolate shards and crowned with baked meringue.

Henry Morrison Flagler Museum (www.flaglermuseum.us) in West Palm Beach offers a sumptuous glimpse into America's Gilded Age. When business titan Henry Flagler built Whitehall mansion as a wedding gift for his bride, he spared no expense in creating their *beaux arts*-style winter retreat. State-of-the-art technology from the early 1900s coupled with furnishings, silks and handcrafted floors from Europe and beyond speak to an age when men like Flagler were self-made and built homes meant to inspire future generations.

The Breakers Palm Beach (www.thebreakers.com) down the road from Whitehall is one of South Florida's most beloved jewels. Built by Flagler as a destination resort, this 540-room, Italian Renaissance-style hotel sits majestically on 140 acres of oceanfront property. Its **Seafood Bar** offers freshly caught mahi mahi, conch fritters and produce from its own organic gardens. If you stay overnight, be sure to book a concierge-included cabana for the day by the relaxation pool, a stone's throw away from the warm turquoise waters of Florida's Atlantic. You'll swear you were in the Caribbean, with every amenity and thoughtful detail at your disposal.

where Justin orders a round of flaky pastries and *cortaditos* – strong shots of sweet Cuban coffee topped with steamed milk. He suggests taking alternate bites of a guava pastry and a white cheese pastry to achieve sweet/savoury balance. I'm only too happy to oblige. Next, a *pastelito* (little pastry) warm from the oven, filled with soft, rich coconut. These are Cuban/Latin American favourites at their best – flaky and decadent, just the way they should be.

We say our goodbyes to the newly engaged couple, off to share the news with Lourdes' parents, and get a few more recommendations from Norman and Janet, who are on their way home to **Key West**. Anthony Bourdain calls Norman "the big dog of Florida cooking," but to me he's a culinary pioneer who has influenced a generation of chefs and respects the boundaries he doesn't mind pushing once in a while – all in the name of good food. ▣