

# The Miami Herald

Posted on Thu, Nov. 03, 2011

## New Miami restaurant features award-winning chef Van Aken

By Ana Veciana-Suarez  
[aveciana@MiamiHerald.com](mailto:aveciana@MiamiHerald.com)



PATRICK FARRELL / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

One long look out the eighth-floor window of Miami-Dade College's new building and award-winning chef Norman Van Aken knew this was the place. Stretching before him: the Freedom Tower, the Arsht Center, American Airlines Arena and the promising expanse of downtown skyline and blue Biscayne Bay.

"I saw the broader picture," said Van Aken, a founding father of New World cuisine, the gastronomical fusion of Caribbean, Latin, Asian and American flavors. "Not only could I affect the people who come to eat but I could also affect the students who come to

study here."

Van Aken has returned to his old stomping grounds and, as executive chef, is once again presiding over what he hopes will be recognized as a world-class restaurant. The 60-seat Tuyo, which means "yours" in Spanish, opened in late October on the top floor of MDC's new Miami Culinary Institute. Serving dinner and the occasional private lunch group, it hopes to "be the place you come for the night. The next big spot," says Wolfson Campus President Madeline Pumariega.

Unlike Van Aken's past Miami restaurants — his eponymous Norman's and Norman's 180 — Tuyo is more than a business or a cuisine philosophy. It's a mission statement, as much Van Aken's as it is the college's.

"I want locals who bring visitors here to say, 'This is what South Florida tastes like,'" Van Aken says.

Institute founding director and chef John Richards agrees: "We want to create an experience."

Van Aken and Richards have kept Tuyo true to the institute's message of local, sustainable cuisine. The décor is green — the floor, for instance, came from reclaimed lumber. The featured dishes carry Van Aken's signature flair, what he calls the "patois of immigrant people." And the ingredients are local, local, local, from South Florida fishermen and farmers, even the college's organic garden. A peek at the menu: Brazilian creamy

cracked conch chowder, hamachi tiradito, pan-cooked fillet of Key West yellowtail, pork Havana and guava cheesecake.

“What we’re about is soil to soil,” says Richards, referring to the emphasis on local and sustainable food that begins with an organic garden and ends with composting. “And in Miami we’re lucky enough to get an amazing array of products.”

Richards, Van Aken and MDC officials talk about Tuyo as the “crown jewel” of the Wolfson Campus’ new \$22 million, eight-story complex. A café and bakery, run by students, occupies a corner of the first-floor lobby. A gleaming commercial kitchen, a food and wine theater and kitchens and baking labs fill the rest of the building.

Though there are several private culinary schools already in the area, MCI became the only public culinary program in South Florida when it opened early this year. More than 300 students, representing 38 countries, are currently enrolled. Richards says most, if not all, are likely to land a job when they graduate with an associate of science degree in culinary arts. The demand for trained cooks — and the interest in cooking schools — is high because of the popularity of TV cooking shows, Miami’s growing culinary scene and people switching careers because of the economy. (Most students are in their late 20s and 30s.)

Unlike the lobby coffee bar, Tuyo doesn’t have students on its staff, though several have been known to hang around to observe and rub elbows with the professional kitchen staff. “We’ve already had students spend six hours peeling Muscadine grapes on their off time,” Van Aken jokes.

Pumariega hopes to launch a clinical rotation — much like the ones common for healthcare students — at top-ranked restaurants, including Tuyo. “The question we’re always asking,” she adds, “is how do we inspire the one student in the class who’s the next Norman Van Aken but also the 39 others who want to be in a business they love and that needs them?”

In addition to the 64-credit associate degree that focuses on environmentally sustainable food practices, MCI also offers continuing education for culinary professionals and a food and beverage enthusiast education series called Culinarium. Some of the offerings for the enthusiast program: To Russia with Love!, Building a Gingerbread House and The Nuts and Bolts of a Sustainable Garden.

“We could’ve gone and created any culinary program,” Pumariega says. “But we wanted to do more. We wanted to create an experience that was supportive of students as well as one that engaged the community.”

Before being approached to oversee the restaurant, Van Aken was already familiar with MDC’s culinary institute. He serves on its advisory Chef’s Council and teaches some of its enthusiast classes. Tuyo seemed a natural extension of his growing role with the college. He also wanted “this city to have a restaurant that speaks to it again.”

For some of its early diners, Tuyo certainly does that.

“Spectacular in every sense of the word,” said Maria Alonso, senior vice president and South Florida market manager of Bank of America, one of the community leaders invited

to sample the fare. “The views are spectacular, the ambience is incredible — and then you have the cuisine. It’s so us. It’s so Miami.”

---

© 2011 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.  
<http://www.miamiherald.com>