

At Yemanja

Restaurant

Chef Joyce de Cuba is cooking without borders

If there's anything we know about time, one for sure is that it doesn't stop for anyone. Chef Joyce de Cuba knows this very well. Ten years have passed since she took over Yemanja Woodfired Grill in the heart of Oranjestad and like a fine wine, it just keeps getting better. But what is it like to navigate a male-dominated industry? How does a woman leave her mark? Chef Joyce gets candid with us.

"I started working in a restaurant in Holland at a very young age. When I reached eighteen, I was already in a managerial position. At the time, the men in the restaurant tried to be very helpful, they didn't want me to grab heavy things, they wanted to assist me in every way possible. But I never allowed that, as it was a barrier I had to cross, especially in the beginning. I needed my surroundings to know that I could pull my weight in the kitchen as well as anyone else and it was important that I learned to assert my authority right away or else I would not be taken seriously. I didn't want to alienate my co-workers, but I could not be too friendly either; they had to see that I meant business. My knowledge in the kitchen was well respected by those noticing what I was doing. Then gradually, you can evolve more into yourself", she explains.

Pushing it

Yemanja is known for being a restaurant where the dishes are cooked on a woodfired grill. There is something about cooking on wood that enhances the flavor of food, it genuinely makes it better. However, that's far from being the only unique thing about Yemanja. Chef Joyce tells us that she likes pushing it in the kitchen. She is daring in her approach to flavors and delivers dishes that surprise the senses. So, there is no way to categorize her cuisine but simply calling it what it is: innovative.



“While we have many wonderful meat dishes, it’s true that Yemanja also has a lot of vegan dishes. I think it’s because vegan cooking triggers my creativity, it peaks my interest to find ways to make the most of what we have on the island. Aruba has its limitations when it comes to fresh produce. So, you’re forced to work with what you have and it’s within the limits that you become most creative. Vegan cooking also took hold of my interest because I saw a demand for new ways of eating. It didn’t happen just because it’s trendy, but because the human body is actually going through a food evolution. For years the human body has been fed toxins and it’s getting to the point where we can see and feel the signs that the body is rejecting these. This is also why so many people are showing signs of food sensitivities or allergies. When you come to Yemanja, you can count on being served something deliciously flavorful and

nutritious, even if you have dietary restrictions. You won’t be made to feel bad about them”, she says proudly.

The future

Yemanja is here to stay. It has taken years of hard work and dedication to get her restaurant to where it is now and chef Joyce intends to keep challenging herself in order to keep the bar high. She has a staff that she has grown with and invested in, and her presence and a keen eye for details ensure that quality is paramount.

Does she have plans of opening another restaurant? “It can be a bit of a challenge to find the qualified staff on the island. It’s not that they do not exist. On the contrary. But with so many hotels and restaurants on the island, the demand is very high. At the same time, immigration restrictions limit our ability to hire new

foreign talents, even for a limited time, to support our local staff during peak season, broaden our perspective and enhance our service level. It’s as if the entire hospitality industry on Aruba had to find all its personnel in only one small town. It’s a reality we have to cope with, but since I’m a perfectionist and I simply cannot be at two places at once, I do not see myself opening a second restaurant in Aruba any time soon”, she explains.

As a woman in a male-dominated industry, she is very happy to have accomplished so much. We asked Chef Joyce what would be the ultimate icing on the cake for her. “Of course it would make me proud to maintain the level of quality that Yemanja has accomplished, but beyond offering consistency in our quality, I would like to venture out into the world, soaking up new influences to keep innovating and keep surprising my guests for many years to come”, she says.

