

'I express my love for people through the dishes I prepare'



As original as it's name sounds, so too does the food in this restaurant take you by surprise. Yemanja, as a concept, is completely out of the box. The dishes, the presentation, the vibes, and even the head chef and owner are downright daring. "I want to reach people through my food. Make them sit up and take note; cause a sensation. Yes, I like to push the envelope, and leave customers wanting more," says head chef and owner Joyce Hüsken. "I don't like to be the center of attention in my restaurant; instead, I prefer to express my love for people through the dishes I prepare. This is my way."

The premise of restaurant Yemanja, is to offer healthy food and delicious food. Hüsken strives to make pure and honest food, and have customers be aware of what they are putting in their mouths. "That's my personal approach, and I'm convinced that it's the only way to be successful. 'From Farm to Table': that's my ideal concept, but it's not yet possible in Aruba. 'Fully organic' is another goal." Yemanja is best described as a healthy surprise. The restaurant has a woodfire grill -fired up with Venezuelan wood- and a Health Food section. "The grill fits perfectly with our healthy approach. Minimal to no fat is used, and it's slow-cooking process. Indirect heat brings out the full flavor of the meat and the fish, at the same time retaining the juices." She mans the grill herself every day, except on her days off. "From here, I have an overview of the kitchen, the bar and the restaurant. I set the bar high, and that carries through to everything else." The result is consistent quality, and a loyal, growing customer base. "My dishes are full of flavor. I am bold in my use of herbs. I'd rather be bold than boring."

Applause For The Kitchen

A salad full of antioxidant superfoods such as blue berries, chia seeds, and pumpkin seeds, with a dressing of carrot and ginger; a vegetarian burger on a sprouted bun; stuffed portobello mushrooms or zucchini ... these are all examples of vegetarian

dishes that count. "I want to expand the vegetarian menu, as well as the vegan dishes." That does not mean that Yemanja will ban meat and fish from the menu, as it will always have a place. "We are known for our grilled meat & fish." Joyce is thrilled with her customers, the regular locals as well as the tourists. "I am proud of our large group of regulars. They are great people. As you may have noticed, our concept fits a certain lifestyle; it's not just about the food, but about the whole sensation." Americans make the staff at Yemanja occasionally feel like rockstars. "They come over after dinner, stand by the open kitchen, and clap – such fun. Americans like to express themselves, and it's touching. It's a boost for the boys working in the kitchen, and occurs almost daily. Who doesn't like to be complimented?" Aruba is a vacation destination, which means happy customers. "You are a part of their stay. They are happy and relaxed, and it adds a different dimension - compared to, say, running a restaurant in the Netherlands. They sometimes make a reservation with us a year in advance, as part of their pre-vacation fun." Each nationality has it's own character. "Americans are very aware of what is happening in the world, and of what they want; including in terms of food. They like to spend money if something is considered good, and they are more daring. They see possibilities. The Dutch, however, are very safe and predictable. They tend to always choose the same. For Latinos, meat is still the highest priority. But more and more, we seem to be changing things with our vegetarian dishes, and that's nice to see." She has no desire to turn Yemanja into a vegetarian restaurant, but instead strives to show people that you can go without meat or fish once in awhile. "Just look at what it does to your energy, when you go about your day with either a large piece of meat, or a vegetable dish in your stomach."

Club Yemanja

Hüsken has a group of 18 employees who are eager to work every day. "Eight people, including myself, in the kitchen; one manager, and nine people

waiting tables. We have space for 80 customers, and are turning around 2 seats a night." She's very hands-on, and likes to be in control of everything that goes on. "Cooking is in my blood; I can not live without it. It's a part of me. If you join our team, you must understand that it's about the big picture. You have to want to do your job with a passion, and that should come across to the customer. I always say: this is the Yemanja train, and we are going to X destination. It's up to you to get on, or stay at the bus stop." The head chef gets her inspiration from a mountain of cookbooks. "I think Amazon.com is going to give me a prize soon, as I think I have about 10,001 cookbooks at home," laughs Hüsken. "I can read for hours, but I never copy recipes. I take away my own bits & pieces here and there, and to fit my own puzzle. When I'm reading, I can already taste it. I can see it, feel it."

A Suitcase Full Of Ambition

She came here ten years ago, carrying a suitcase, a dog, and a small purse, but head chef Hüsken has been able to fulfill her dream. "I already knew that the kitchen was the place for me when I was 8 years old. Back then, I would bake cakes with my aunt, and later I chose to train as a chef. I wanted to create, work with my hands, and do what I like best." Joyce learned everything on the spot, and this has certainly done her no harm in the Netherlands. "I was giving orders at a young age, and before I came to the island, I worked as an executive chef for a group of several companies." Here on the island, her dreams have taken her even further, and to her Aruba is a plate full of happiness. "If you are good, you can achieve a lot here."



Yemanja Woodfire Grill

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