

Joyce Hüsken  
 Chef/ Owner, Yemanja Woodfired Grill

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Photography Kenneth Theysen

## A CUT ABOVE — By Joanna Fox

➤ *Watching plate after gorgeous plate of food come out of the kitchen from a seat on the outdoor dining terrace of Yemanja Woodfired Grill, enclosed by a wood fence and nestled amongst plants, trees, and wild flowers, there's the distinct impression that this is a small, tropical, food oasis, a culinary refuge from the world outside.*

Experiencing this restaurant in downtown Oranjestad makes one feel very much a part of something special, like being let in on an island secret. Tucked along a side street and set in a very warm and inviting space, this exceptional restaurant is unlike any other in Aruba.

**Yemanja Woodfired Grill** is the culmination of years of hard work, of perseverance, and of a vision to always dream bigger and keep moving forward. It's **chef and owner Joyce Hüsken's** pride and joy, a restaurant that she can pour all of her energy and creativity into, and a place that serves as a constant reminder of just how far she's come and how lucky she is to be here.

Hüsken wanted to become a chef for as long as she could remember. Born in The Netherlands, she went to cooking school there and worked in kitchens through her early twenties. *"At that time I think everybody dreams of having their own restaurant, but it's so far away, you just want to become a chef and that's one of the reasons I didn't do any management schooling for myself. When I was done with school I had a job as a sous-chef, so that worked out pretty well and pretty fast for me. I was always very eager to learn a lot."*

Working her way through not only restaurants, but also other businesses that served food such as hotels and nursing homes, Hüsken experienced the many sides of the food service industry, things that she would have never learned had she remained solely in restaurants.

With the long hours and nighttime schedule, Hüsken started having doubts about this challenging and often very lonely and isolating career path. However, when her brother, who was already working in the restaurant business in Aruba, convinced her to pack up her life and move to this small island, she decided that it would be a good experience for her. *"I'm a perfectionist so to take me out of something that works, where everything is organized, and just step into something that is unknown, it's a lot. But I am so happy that I did it. I don't think I would have been as successful and living this dream life if I stayed in Holland."*

It didn't take very long for Hüsken to work her way to the position of chef at Yemanja Woodfired Grill, and seven months after that, in 2009, she took over the business. It was from this point on that Hüsken was able to throw herself into the restaurant and also where she began to



create a place that reflected not only what was lacking on the island in terms of cuisine, but the kind of food that she wanted to eat. Dishes that had bold flavours, that were adventurous, lighter, full of new techniques, different vegetables and cuts of meats; an international cuisine that was inspired from her upbringing and her travels.

*"The way I cook and the way I am a chef is because I'm a person that gets bored really easily. I think I take that into my cooking, so if you're eating one of my dishes what I think makes me different from the rest is that there's a lot going on."* Like a true culinary artist, Hüsken combines flavors, ingredients, and textures to create original dishes that keep her clientele coming back for more. And so far, they certainly have.

Unlike cooking in Europe or North America, there are a set of specific challenges created by geography that face any chef or restaurant owner in Aruba. For Hüsken, her main concerns are products, produce, and price. As with all the restaurants on the island, the suppliers are the same, so the food items everyone gets are of equal quality. There's not a lot of room for competition, so prices are non-negotiable. This means creativity is paramount, and quality and consistency are absolutely essential to surviving. *"I think that's what makes it hard to become a very, very good chef and stay a successful restaurant: you have to be consistent. Because of the fact that people only come to your restaurant once a year, they have something in mind and they'll remember that. So next year when they come and they order it again and the taste is the exact same way again, eventually that will be a form of success in Aruba."*

With an Indonesian heritage from her mother's side, Hüsken grew up accustomed to bold tastes and recipes that didn't shy away from spice. That's where her fascination was rooted, but her current kitchen team also lends their cultural influences with cooks from Venezuela, Peru, Columbia, and Haiti. The important thing about Hüsken's cooking philosophy is to never pigeonhole her style of cuisine. *"I have a Japanese item on the menu and that doesn't mean*

*I'm trying to become a sushi bar. I have a Brazilian dish on the menu but that doesn't mean I'm a Brazilian chef. I just feel that if something tastes really good, why not? That's just what it is for me, and I think that you can say that our little kitchen is international and I think we have a menu that has something for everybody."*

Another way that Hüsken has stayed ahead at Yemanja Woodfired Grill is by taking her menu in a healthier direction. Travels to food cities like Miami, Boston, and New York have allowed her to see the increase in vegetable driven dishes, lighter meals, more grilled meats, less fried foods, and an overall conscious decision to be mindful of what we put into our bodies. She's taken those concepts and adapted them to her menu. She's even included vegan items, gluten-free dishes, and raw desserts.

*"If I wake up and I want to go and have some lunch somewhere I think, 'where can I eat something that doesn't right away involve rice or frying?' That's a lot of Aruban cuisine. I'm not brought up like that and I think that a lot of people who go on vacation are not like that either. So trying to focus a little bit more on that is important. I'm just doing what I know is close to my heart and it's working."*

Despite considering herself incredibly lucky to be where she is at this point in her career, after one meal at Yemanja Woodfired Grill it's obvious that this food is a cut above. There is just so much thought, creativity, and care put into each and every item on the menu, right down to the very last garnish. Hüsken is very pragmatic about her success but she has justly earned it, along with the recognition of being one of the top restaurants on the island.

*"Thank god people do like the taste of my food and they do like the flavours, because for me, that's what it's about every single day. You just want people to leave here and think 'wow, I seriously never had such an amazing dish.' And thank god it happens every single day. It really is amazing! I think that that is the biggest feeling of being rich, more than anything else. That's being rich in life, doing something you love and being appreciated for it every single day."*