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A Southernmost Cookbook To Warm You Up

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TASTY TRAVELS

by Brette Sember

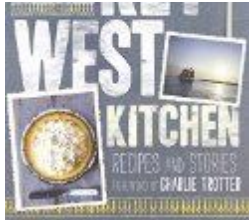


Key West beach scene from My Key West Kitchen, p. 97

Destination: Key West, Florida



Book: *My Key West Kitchen: Recipes and Stories* by Norman Van Aken and Justin



Van Aken (NEW November 2012)

I've got a thing for islands. Throw in a palm tree and I'm sold. But there's something special about Key West, even as islands go. It's got a personality and a vibe that wraps its arms around you.

It also is rather insistent that you sit down and have something cold to drink and by the way, there might be a drag queen seated next to you or maybe a tourist from Iowa. And you're probably hungry too, but service can ebb and flow, so make sure you order your drink first. Key West feeds your mind and your body and *My Key West Kitchen: Recipes and Stories* by Norman Van Aken and Justin Van Aken (Kyle Books, 2012) is the perfect reflection of this very special place.

Chef Norman Van Aken fell hard for Key West after visiting from Illinois. He couldn't stay away and eventually landed a job cooking there. He sent for his then girlfriend (later his wife) and put down roots (co-author Justin is his son, born on the island) and never left. Key West sang to him in a way it does to many. This is more than a place. It's an attitude. It's about eccentricity, acceptance, community, the influx of tourists, a slower pace, tropical flavors, and the joys and challenges of living on a 7.4 square mile island that is the southernmost point of the 48 states.

If you've been to Key West, you'll recognize the names of some of the restaurants in this book that recipes come from: **The Green Parrot**, Blue Heaven, **Sloppy Joe's**, The Pier House. Others are from Key West's past, as Van Aken cooked his way from 70s to the present. The mix gives you a taste not only of Key West's food history, but of how big a role food plays in this glorious setting.

The book is organized geographically (hint: the inside of the book's cover is a map of the island), which is a really fun and unique organization for a cookbook. Each chapter features recipes from restaurants in specific areas of Key West, such as Duval Street, on the water, in the hood (Bahama Village), etc. Van Akin introduces each chapter with lively tales of his experiences cooking, dining, and living in those areas. Quirky is the word I would use for this cookbook! It's fun, it's relaxed, and it's non-traditional, just like Key West. The chapters are like a walk through the different parts of town, allowing you to visualize the locals you're introduced to sitting on barstools or eating the food at outdoor tables. If you want to find recipes by category, the book also lists them by appetizer, side, dessert, etc.

Each recipe is introduced by a story that brings it to life – how Van Aken got canned for switching out the *Bisquick* in a fried shrimp recipe for his own ingredients, how the lady who made the key lime pies could only make two at a time because her bike basket couldn't hold more than two, or how the chef he hired showed up buzzed with a bag of mangoes and made daiquiris. The recipes feel as authentic as the stories:

- Conch & Grits with Salsa Rosa
- Oven-Roasted Mojo Chicken
- Georgia Peach and Pecan Crisp
- Tamale Scramble
- Honey Mango Ice Cream
- Sunset Celebration drink
- Conch Fritters
- Jerked Hogfish

- and more.

Everything in this book is real Key West food, served and eaten there, so think Hispanic influences, tropical fruits, booze, glorious seafood, and hangover sandwiches.

The food pictures, are of course, mouth-watering. Most of them are close-ups, showing clear images that let you know exactly what the food is going to look like on your plate. Sprinkled among the pages are photos of the island itself – the cemetery, the grocer's, the neighborhoods, the piers, and of course, the sunset. (*Note: for some retro photos of Key West see yesterday's article [here at A Traveler's Library](#).*)

And if you find yourself in Key West (and I hope you do), an appendix lists where to dine, while another appendix defines some of the unique Key West terms used in the book (like *Coconut Telegraph*, *Duval Crawl*, and *Mile Markers*). And if you can't get yourself to Key West any time soon, this cookbook will virtually take you to the Conch Republic, at least while you are cooking and enjoying the flavors within.

There is no food that makes me think of Florida more than stone crab, and this soup combines the sweetness of crab with the cool, refreshing flavor of gazpacho.



Stone Crab Gazpacho. From My Key West Kitchen

STONE CRAB GAZPACHO

Serves 4 to 6

4 large ripe tomatoes, peeled, seeded and coarsely chopped
1/2 red onion, diced
1 yellow bell pepper, diced
1 European (hothouse) cucumber, peeled, seeded and diced
1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
3 cloves garlic, minced
1/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
2 cups tomato juice
1/2 teaspoon freshly toasted and ground cumin
A few dashes Tabasco sauce
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 1/2 cups cubed bread, toasted or sauteed in olive oil until golden brown
2 cups cleaned stone crabmeat or other crabmeat

In a large bowl, combine all of the ingredients, except the croutons and crabmeat, cover, and refrigerate until thoroughly chilled, 2 to 3 hours.

Working in batches, if necessary, place the chilled soup in a blender and quickly but very briefly pulse the soup. Gazpacho is best when it retains some nice texture.

When ready to serve, taste to adjust the seasonings; you may need some salt. Ladle into chilled soup bowls, top with the croutons and crab and serve.

Ingredient Note: We prefer a variety of heirloom tomatoes that have almost no seeds and are brilliant red.

You will get superior results if you can make this during the peak tomato season.

*Photos are from **My Key West Kitchen** by Norman Van Aken & Justin Van Aken (Kyle Books; 2012) Photo Credit: Penny de los Santos, used by permission of the publisher. The recipe, straight from the book, is also used by permission of the publisher. It is the policy of A Traveler's Library to disclose affiliate links. We hope that it will be useful to you to use the Amazon links here, but you need to know that if you shop through the links on this page, it will benefit Brette Sember. Thanks for helping.*

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About Brette Sember

Brette writes often about travel, food, and home arts and is the author of more than 40 books about food, law, health, family issues, business, finance and textbooks. She blogs at Putting It All on the Table and her personal web site is Brette Sember. View all posts by Brette Sember →

7 thoughts on “A Southernmost Cookbook To Warm You Up”



May 23, 2013 at 9:16 pm

This book seems to be very nice.As it says like visualize the things sitting on barstools or eating the food

Ryan Zanui



February 7, 2013 at 11:44 pm

I've never been to Key West. That is the most interesting collection of recipes I've ever seen, though. Conch fritters? Jerked Hogfish? I'd have to try those if I visited. Not sure I could replicate at home, though!

Kris



February 5, 2013 at 8:21 pm

Hmmm... maybe in lieu of actually going to Key West – which would be my husband's dream right about now – I'll pick up this book and at least we can have the *flavor of Key West here in snowy Michigan.

Jane
Boursaw



February 5, 2013 at 7:25 am



Kerry Dexter

your story makes me really want to read this book, and try some of the recipes. I grew up about as far away as you can be from Key West and still be in Florida — up near the Georgia line in Florida's far northwest — but still some of these flavors and stories from the keys resonate. thanks, Brette.



February 4, 2013 at 9:13 am

This recipe looks heavenly, can't wait to try it.

Living Large



February 1, 2013 at 8:50 am

There are lots of Spanish-influenced dishes, but I don't think there is a Cuban sandwich. There is flan and ropa vieja.

Brette
Sember



February 1, 2013 at 8:35 am

My favorite kind of cookbook! STORIES! Plus I loved the food in Key West. Does the book include Cuban recipes, because I remember the Cuban food, probably because it was my first introduction to Cuban cuisine.

pen4hire

Well, now you've done it. Just when I had sworn off buying any more cookbooks, I MUST have this one!

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