

INTERVIEW

Urvin Croes —
Chef-Owner

“ A JOURNEY TO PERFECTION

[by — TIMOTHY DUGDALE
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Sitting in a lounge chair outside the doors of White, situated on the second floor of the Palm Beach Plaza, you could be forgiven for feeling that you were in suburban Miami. Palm trees flutter and well-heeled shopaholic ladies of Latin America sashay and strut. But this is Aruba and White is the island's paragon of cutting edge food and drink waves that may have already crested in America and Europe but have yet to reach maximum velocity here. White is an impressive place. The room is beautifully minimalist in design and décor with low slung tables set against glass walls that surround a lovely central bar. I had the great pleasure to chat with Urvin Croes and Denyse Fingal, the executive chefs at White, one afternoon before dinner service began.

TD: There are many dishes on the White menu with interesting ingredients. What do you do for sourcing?

UC: We used to work with local ingredients, especially flowers, tomatoes and cucumbers. It's difficult on this island because there's no consistency. Especially the flowers because there is so little rain. At White, we source everything from Europe and the United States. We've tried to use local products from local farmers but it's very difficult. The first two years at White were really an effort to engage local farmers. We even went to meetings with the local

agriculture and wildlife board and told the farmers that they had to come to the restaurant to sell their products.

TD: Well then, what about local protein suppliers like fishermen?

UC: Local meat is impossible on this island because there is no grading system or certification. I could get some very nice chicken and pork but there's no health controls on the slaughtering process. So if a guest became ill, it would all be on the restaurant and we would have no way of tracking it back. We use some local fish. Other fish we bring from Panama.

TD: What is White trying to communicate on the plate?

UC: The goal is to make everything as fresh as possible – sauces, mayonnaise, all of it – so that everything you make has a distinct flavor. Our philosophy is that the meat has to taste like meat, the chicken has to taste like chicken. Now we do sous-vide the vegetables with butter and thyme but nothing else. We marinate proteins for a very short time too. Just to infuse flavor but it still goes into the pan, nice and firm.

DF: The guest takes a culinary journey. We are really the only restaurant that tries to put “art” into the cooking and presentation. There is a harmony between how the plate looks and the dish tastes.



UC: Denyse and I both went to the same school here on the island. She went to the States and I went to Holland. And when we came back. The goal of the restaurant, then, was to bring what she had learned and what I had learned to life at White. That fusion was great immediately.

DF: I went to university in North Miami and worked in the Biltmore Hotel and a top Japanese restaurant. I learned a lot there. I am very inspired by Asian flavors.

UC: When I was in Holland, I learned classic French-style cooking. I worked for five years at a Michelin-starred restaurant in Utrecht. It was classic but with modern moves as well, a lot of Dutch colonial flavors from the Caribbean and Indonesia. I learned all about chemical gastronomy there, you know the El Bulli thing. I'm not too fond of it but what we did was take a bit of that and combine it with a strong classic base.

DF: For example, we have a duck on the menu and we use a peanut butter powder to accompany the dish only.

UC: The duck is the best dish here. It's been on the menu since we opened.

TD: Tell me something, every menu that I've seen on this island says that there is a “Caribbean twist” to the dishes. What's yours?

UC: That is a good question. One dish we thought of was a Mediterranean Sea Bream with a bell pepper succotash. The peppers were sautéed so it tasted like a Creole sauce. Denyse made a dumpling filled with keri keru, our national salt fish, and a bit of curry.

The thing about most restaurants on this island is that they cook for the tourists. If you go to a really good, really authentic local restaurant, you'll get curried goat, curried chicken. Gostoso is like that. The guy is Portuguese but it's real Aruba food.

TD: With your concept and your cuisine, what steps do you have to take to ensure great service?

UC: It's very difficult, particularly in the front of the house. It's the attitude. When we were kids, my generation, they taught us that Aruba was one happy island. When tourists come, you have to be nice to them. You have to smile, you have to respect them for them to come back. They don't teach that anymore at school. So now you have kids with an attitude against the tourists and companies that do business with them. It has a major effect on service nowadays.

TD: What do you see as the future for White?

UC: We have a contract here in the mall. We will finish the contract and then find somewhere else and build a new White. My goal is a full open kitchen where we serve only 30 people a night, à la carte or a chef's tasting menu. That's where I want to go with White.

TD: When you do remake White in a new location, do you have plans to include more of the native cuisine?

UC: One of the meetings we had with the wildlife board of the island was to start a certification program. For example, we have a rabbit farm on this island with beautiful animals. This year or the next, they said they will start this program and then I can use local meat. Same thing goes for the farmers. There are some out there who can provide consistent product and who don't use pesticides and they want to build a program of farming sustainability for the island.

TD: That might revolutionize dining on the island because you would get very small restaurants serving great local food at a low price.

UC: I think the future is bright. You now have chefs who are doing research before they finish school. They have connections with other chefs, they know trends, innovations. That said, we have kids who have come here and they're barely out of school and they want salaries of a chef. For me, before you become a chef, you have to become a cook. You become a very good cook, then a sous-chef, work hard at that and then maybe become a chef. That's why restaurants open and close in three months flat because nobody has any discipline or work ethic. The main struggle in the restaurants here is labor. The politicians promise everyone fewer working hours and more pay and people expect that. But in a kitchen, it's the opposite.