

Van Aken enlists local chefs to teach healthy cooking on a budget

By AMY DREW THOMPSON | amthompson@orlandosentinel.com | Orlando Sentinel
PUBLISHED: April 1, 2024 at 5:00 a.m.

“Get Cooking” will live-Zoom monthly from Valencia’s downtown campus kitchen



Chef Norman Van Aken, center, is partnering with local chefs once a month for a live-streamed class, during which participants from food-disadvantaged communities in town will learn to cook healthy dinners for under \$20. Some of the participating chefs joined Van Aken before the first livestream, filmed at Valencia’s Culinary School in downtown Orlando. From left to right: Wendy Lopez, Tim Keating, Norman Van Aken, Mario Pagan, Greg Richie and Michael Collantes. (Rich Pope, Orlando Sentinel)

Timing is everything, they say.

And that Orlando’s new “[Get Cooking](#)” program, a collaboration between the legendary Norman Van Aken and successful food blogger Stacie Archer, dropped the same week as news that [the cost of living comfortably here](#), for just one person, is over \$100,000 a year, is timing that can’t be ignored.



Chef Norman Van Aken at the livestream set at Valencia's Culinary School in downtown Orlando. (Rich Pope/Orlando Sentinel)

“It kills me to see people in such dire straits when it comes to having quality food for themselves and their families,” says the man behind [Norman's Orlando](#), recently named the [Best New Restaurant in Florida for 2024 in Southern Living Magazine](#).

“I feel like God gave me a gift when it comes to cooking and I like to share that gift with people besides those who can afford to eat in restaurants like this one.”

Archer launched [Get Cooking](#), a nonprofit which teaches under-resourced families how to prepare healthy, home-cooked meals for four for less than \$20, in 2020. Working with Camillus House, which has been serving the vulnerable and homeless in South Florida for more than 60 years, Zoom-coordinated classes allowed participants to cook alongside her, adding new meals to their repertoire, building camaraderie along with skills and knowledge of both prep and ingredients.



Chef Norman Van Aken and Stacie Archer prepare to go live. (Rich Pope/Orlando Sentinel)

“We actually shopped in stores in their neighborhoods, many of which were considered food deserts,” said Archer, a single mom whose [Seven Plates blog](#) drew attention from celebs like Rachael Ray for sharing tips with other parents on a tight budget.

“We went to places like Aldi and Walmart to make sure they could use their SNAP benefits, source every ingredient and stay on budget.”

A connection to Van Aken through a mutual friend brought local-chef star power to the mix. He joined Archer for a segment, then enlisted some of Miami’s best to craft recipes for their own appearances, shooting in the kitchen at Florida International University.



Chef Norman Van Aken, Stacie Archer, and Eric Fleming, Valencia College Film Production Technology program chair, on set. (Rich Pope/Orlando Sentinel)

“Every month, acclaimed chefs like Michael Beltran, Michelle Bernstein and Michael Schwartz would show up, and Stacie would be there to cook alongside them and reach out to the community,” says Van Aken. “What was a nice surprise was seeing the chefs, some of them who own very expensive restaurants, lean on their own heritage and family ties to create wonderful, inexpensive dishes.”

Its ongoing success is something they knew they could repeat in Orlando, and so this week, with sponsorships from Florida Blue and [4Roots Farm](#) that fund meal kits for participating families, Van Aken and Archer led the first class. Participants join via Zoom from the tech-forward kitchen at the World Disney World Center for Culinary Arts & Hospitality at Valencia College.

On the menu: roasted chicken thighs with cheesy grits and Coca-Cola collard greens.

Moving forward, monthly classes will be led by local superstars including Lordfer Lalicon of the James Beard-nominated Kaya (the [Orlando Sentinel Foodie Awards’ 2024 Restaurant of the Year](#)), Michael Collantes from Winter Park’s Michelin-starred Soseki Modern Omakase and “Next Iron Chef” notable Mario Pagán, whose [Chayote took Best New Restaurant](#) in this year’s Foodies.

About 40 families, which come to “Get Cooking” through Orange County Public Schools’ Community Partnerships program, took part in the first class, but Archer says that number is set to grow to more than 100.

“These are schools in the poorest neighborhoods in Central Florida,” she notes, adding that other organizations have dovetailed neatly into the mission. “Healthy West Orange is on the same path. They want to teach healthy, nutritious living and fight obesity statistics and the chronic diseases we’re seeing develop at an early age in children directly because of poor nutrition.

“4Roots is already out there, figuring out ways to teach things like farming and sustainability and bringing the truck to food deserts so people can use their SNAP benefits to buy fresh produce.”

A team of volunteers comes together to assemble meal kits, delivering them to four Orlando schools — Eccleston Elementary, Evans High School, Jones High School and OCPS Academic Center for Excellence — where they are sent home with students ahead of an evening Zoom.

In Miami, some of the families have been participating since the program’s inception. Archer says it’s a delight to get to know them, to see the kids grow, literally and figuratively.



Chef Norman Van Aken (center) amid Orlando chefs (left to right) Tim Keating, Wendy Lopez, Michael Collantes, Mario Pagan and Greg Richie. Others set to participate include Clay Miller from The Ravenous Pig, The Foreigner's Bruno Fonseca and Matt Hinckley of Hinckley's Fancy Meats. (Rich Pope/Orlando Sentinel)

“We know them by name,” she says. “We know their grandmothers by name. We know their pets. They attend month after month and can’t wait to sign up for the next meal kit.

“And it’s wonderful for the families to be live and interactive with the chefs, for the chefs to get a peek into their kitchens, for them to be able to ask questions in real time and then show off what they’ve made at the end,” says Archer, whose heart was warmed at last week’s class watching a mom and her grade school-aged son taste-testing the collards as they cooked.

The joy runs in both directions, says Van Aken.

“It gives chefs an opportunity to teach in a way that doesn’t take them away from their restaurants too much,” he says. “Like me, they just want to be a part of the positives in the world in whatever way they can.”

All classes, including complete recipes, will live online for others to access at GetCooking.org.