

## Scholarship eased way for chef

Contributed by CAROLYN GUNISS

Chef Jouvens Jean fulfilled his dream in November to run his own restaurant.

He was appointed as executive chef of SAWA, a new Mediterranean restaurant that also serves sushi, located at the Village of Merrick Park, Coral Gables.

"I always knew I wanted to do something in business," Jean said. "Now I get to do that and still cook."

Jean is one of 200 students who received a Visitors Industry Council scholarship, (now known as The Black Hospitality Initiative of Greater Miami). The scholarship is issued to black students who major in hospitality, tourism or culinary education at either Florida International University, Miami Dade College or Johnson & Wales University.

The scholarship, which covers tuition and books, was one of several concessions arising from the 1990 Boycott Miami initiative launched after city leaders snubbed South African President Nelson Mandela during his visit to Miami.

"The VIC scholarship helped me to graduate faster," Jean said. "I was taking one class per semester. At the rate I was going, I would have graduated in ten years. Because of the VIC I was able to graduate in a little over 2½ years."

When Jean started his college education at Miami Dade College in 2002, he was taking courses to lead to a path of International Business. By the time Jean switched to Florida International University's School of Hospitality and Tourism Management program in 2005, he had significant experience working with different types of cuisines, and learning the building blocks of the trade.

He started out in an Italian restaurant in 1997 on the grill station; then fine dining as a fry cook; and then American fare as grill cook. He has worked as a sushi helper at a Japanese restaurant, and brings those skills to SAWA, making sushi. He has worked in a Greek restaurant and a French Bistro. At all these restaurants, Jean mastered each station, and sometimes was promoted to new positions.

He has worked in kitchens at the Hyatt, Prime 112, Atrio at the Conrad, Solea at the W South Beach, and Baleen, which is now Gibraltar in Grove Isle.

He finished his hospitality management program in 2008, while serving as a teaching assistant in FIU's culinary program in China.

Jean didn't always want to cook. His love affair with food started when he used to visit his childhood friend David Destinoble on the Johnson & Wales University campus in North Miami. Jean read some of the culinary books in the school's library while he waited for his friend.

"I told him to get a job in a restaurant," Destinoble said. "You will always have a job. People have to eat."

But, at the time, Jean did not understand the concept of a man in the kitchen. He threw up a few blocks to his progress.

“I can’t be cooking, that is not a man thing to do,” Jean said he remembered telling Destinoble. “ I am from the Bahamas; cooking is for women. Besides, I couldn’t even afford Johnson & Wales.”

By the time he was invited to a “food party” on campus, however, he was hooked.

“Then we started having fun with food,” Jean said. “Food parties, where people bring something, cook something. It was amazing. I said ‘How do I start doing this thing?’ David introduced me to the chef at the Italian restaurant, and look where I am now. God has blessed me.”

In the five months since he has been at SAWA, he has developed a menu of kebabs, salads, small bites such as foie gras pita sliders with goat cheese and morcillo, and entrees such as fennel-dusted, free-range chicken with truffle chorizo chickpea ragu.

He oversaw the complete renovation of the space, formerly occupied by Grape, putting colorful 3-D art on the walls, and contrasting dark wooden furniture with white chandeliers. He supervises 32 employees.

SAWA opened March 29. It has seen some repeat customers and has added more seating. So far, the owner, Ramzi Zahr and the wait staff are happy.

“We clicked,” said Zahr, of his relationship with Jean. “In five months, we haven’t had our first fight — yet.”

Jean has infused some of his Caribbean culture into his dishes at SAWA. He said the sea bass ceviche suggests flavors of a Bahamian conch salad. In the kebabs, seasonings such as celery salt and cayenne pepper are added to the traditional Lebanese seasonings.

The 29-year-old single chef, whose parents are from Haiti, is the first in his family to go to college. He is amazed at how glamorized his profession has become because of TV stars. To succeed, Jean said it is about working hard. Today, he describes himself as a cook.

Forget about the passion in the beginning, he advises. “Work two jobs. Sometimes I worked three. Then if you feel like you are going to burn out, you will know if you want to stay in the system,” said Jean. “After you pass the grinding and burning, then it is rewarding.”

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Photo: Executive Chef Jouvens Jean