

STORY

KENTUCKY HAS ONE TO TELL.™

BLIND AMBITION

PERRYVILLE CRAFTSMAN LOSES HIS SIGHT,
NOT HIS EYE FOR DESIGN

FARMERS: THE NEXT GENERATION

THE NEW FACES OF KENTUCKY'S
LOCAL FOOD MOVEMENT

ONE GIANT STEP AGAINST CANCER

KENTUCKY GIRL KICKS HER DISEASE WITH BRAVERY



DISPLAY UNTIL MARCH 7, 2014

YUCATUCKIAN

by Steve Hacker photos by Steve Squall

Bruce Ucan looks out from underneath a battered Boston Red Sox cap, onto the broad expanse of Louisville's East Market Street. Just a few steps from his restaurant, Mayan Café, businesses offer craft beer, custom barbering, quirky-above-all-else kitsch and other products, all part of Louisville's thriving NuLu area. It's a big change from 1996, when little more than empty buildings and a Christian mission lined the street. When, as Ucan says, "I was forced to open a restaurant here."

At the time, there were none of NuLu's gourmet food trucks, just trucks delivering quick eats to construction sites. After emigrating from his home near Merida, the capital of Mexico's Yucatan province, Ucan began life in Louisville as one of those workers who had to eat what the "roach coach" offered. "[The food trucks] around here only had prepackaged, processed food ... which I don't see, personally, as food." Before long Ucan decided cooking suited him better than construction, and he began working at Louisville restaurants. But he kept thinking there might be an opportunity in cuisine for construction workers.

Ucan bought a small, stove-equipped panel truck "in a rough neighborhood," painted it blue, added Mayan-themed artwork and searched for customers. Initially he tried what he thought would "appeal to people around here," serving meatloaf, mashed potatoes with gravy and other solid fare. He wasn't sure he would make it, until "a guy came out and asked if I had tacos. I said I would have them tomorrow." The next week, business took off. Word began to spread that some of Louisville's best Hispanic fare was on wheels – though some Louisvillians were still unclear on the "food truck" concept. "They were afraid of the van with its bright colors and 'Gypsy' name," says Ucan. "They

thought we were real gypsies, or a circus."

His growing popularity, along with a need for fresh ingredients, led to relationships with local farmers and farm markets. Once again Ucan found himself setting a trend—serving freshly prepared local food at Louisville's farm markets.

"Bruce came to the [Bardstown Road] market when it was just starting to grow" says Ivor Chodkowski, whose Field Day Farms enterprise now includes not only the popular Saturday market but also another East Market restaurant, Harvest. "He made this great food. To have something good made out of food you helped grow ... it's phenomenal."

"We would sit there, Ivor and me and a couple of farmers," Ucan recalls. "I remember thinking, 'This is not going to work.'"

Then the health department caught up with the quick-moving Mayan Gypsy. ("The clientele wanted to hang around and enjoy it, but I had to keep things moving," Ucan explains. "Stop, do 15 people, then go.") His mother-in-law's garage was not good enough for food prep – he had to rent a commercial kitchen. That's how Ucan came to open a restaurant on East Market Street before the idea of NuLu had barely been thought of. "I had to pay rent already, so I thought, 'Why not use the rest of the space?'"

When he opened Mayan Café, Ucan continued his connections with local farmers, allowing him further exploration of culinary ambitions born in Merida's resort

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From Mayan Gypsy to Mayan Cafe, chef Bruce Ucan has brought Hispanic cuisine to the forefront.

NEIGHBORS

**"EAST MARKET STREET
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kitchens where he had worked. “I worked with a lot of international chefs in Yucatan,” Ucan says. “Brazilians, Argentinians, Germans, French ... you learn things from chefs.” He gestures to one side, then the other, and finally to the middle. “I have seen it done this way, and this way, so maybe we can do it this way.”

At Mayan Café, Ucan has developed a unique fusion of Mayan influences with Kentucky ingredients. “After being here 25 years, he’s assimilated ... he almost lost his Mayan roots in the seasonality,” says Ucan’s business partner Anne Shadle. “We’re trying not to let him get too sucked in to the local foods ... we’re the Mayan Café!”

Ucan agrees that in “doing farm-to-table, I lost a bit of what Mayan was. Broccoli, cauliflower ... we’re now trying to go back and concentrate on the Mayan.” To prove his point, he insists I try a plate of Mayan papadzules, a slightly coarser enchilada of shredded chicken and cheese, strewn with chunks of hard-boiled egg and surrounded by a piquant pumpkin seed molé. It’s delicious and authentically Mayan. However, I’m almost equally charmed by a simple salad of seasonal greens, jicama, queso fresco and a chili-honey vinaigrette, a shining example of Ucan’s ability to blend his cultural influences into something original and interesting.

“East Market Street keeps growing,” Ucan says. “There’s people from other states, big cities ... people from other countries.” As the restaurant rustles with the sounds of servers preparing for the daily lunch rush, Ucan tells me he sometimes considers retiring to his parents’ home in the Yucatan, where he returns at least twice a year. “Merida, the big city next to my village, is growing very fast ... there’s all kinds of food there, but not much Yucatec.” Then, outside, he notices new development starting down the street. “If I go back to the Yucatan, I’ll miss this place,” he says. “I may still have one more restaurant in me.” ■

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