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KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL From top: SBW&FF honoree Emeril Lagasse. A vintage shot of the Triangle: Lagasse, Norman Van Aken and Charlie Trotter.

Foodie Network

Chefs Charlie Trotter and Norman Van Aken dish on their early days with friend, colleague and SBW&FF honoree Emeril Lagasse

| By Margit Bisztray |

Chefs Emeril Lagasse, Charlie Trotter and Norman Van Aken formed a bond in the late 1980s that earned them the nickname "The Triangle." In anticipation of the upcoming South Beach Wine & Food Festival tribute dinner for Lagasse, the Triangle look back on their shared history.

CHARLIE TROTTER: In 1983, no one would hire me. I was working as a busboy. Finally chef Norman Van Aken let me cook.

NORMAN VAN AKEN: Between then and 1988, Charlie Trotter became a superstar. He came to work with me at Louie's Backyard in Key West, and meanwhile met Emeril in New Orleans.

EMERIL LAGASSE: I'd read Norman's book—he had an incredible reputation for his infusion of Cuban and South American flavors into regional American. And he was great friends with Charlie.

CT: In the 1980s, the important chefs were French, other than a few in California. Then Emeril, at age 25, took over the most important, historic restaurant in the country, Commander's Palace, and revolutionized it. He introduced line-caught fish, lettuces from local farmers. He got rid of cans. He cured his own tasso [ham]. He gave fishermen cell phones and told them to call when they caught snapper. He was all about purity of product. When we met, I was already in awe.

NVA: Emeril fetched you in his black Porsche when you visited New Orleans, and took you to places like K-Paul's, right? But the three of us first got together in Santa Fe in '88 at a chef's symposium. Emeril was having a cocktail, nervous about public speaking.

EL: I still am! Then came years of us three doing dinners, meeting places.

CT: Norman, the first time you made gumbo around Emeril, you said it was like getting undressed in front of Sharon Stone.

NVA: Charlie was always inviting six to seven chefs to his restaurant. There was a lot of wine involved. Lots of "holy shit!" moments.

CT: And we'd meet in New York City, have first lunches, second lunches, early and late dinners.

EL: A 12-course lunch at Le Bernardin and with barely time to change clothes, 14 courses at David Bouley's, and the next day, lunch at Le Cirque. Charlie turned us on to Yuet Lee, a Chinese seafood restaurant in San Francisco. It's open like 24 hours a day. I remember someone reaching his hand into the fish tank and pulling out a Dover sole. It was 2AM; we'd been somewhere cooking all night.

CT: We wanted fresh fish.

EL: These guys are two great chefs and friends who have inspired me.

NVA: The three of us fax each other menus and call each other in the middle of service. Charlie tells the hostess he's Paul Bocuse. Emeril tells her he's Billy Joel.

EL: We inspire each other to live. It's been a great ride. **M**