

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

CONDÉ NAST

OCTOBER 2016

Traveler

EATING OUR
WAY AROUND THE WORLD
TOKYO · TEL AVIV
JAMAICA · MIAMI · IRELAND
AND OF COURSE ...
ITALY



Plantain Pizza,» Sorrel-Marinated Pork, Jerk Conch, Roast Breadfruit, Lamb- Coconut Stew, Mulberry Sorbet...

by Lucinda Scala Quinn
photographs by Mikkel Vang

HOW DID JAMAICA BECOME THE MOST EXCITING PLACE TO EAT



IN THE CARIBBEAN?

“Is

it too early for Scotchies?”

The text from my old friend Blaise Hart pinged as my plane landed one morning last summer at Montego Bay’s Sangster International Airport. We were soon roaring in Blaise’s pickup along the coastal highway, until he swerved into the restaurant—a chill, thatched-roof institution beloved by islanders and knowing tourists. My feeling is that so long as the pits have been fired up to slow-cook the pimento-smoked meat known as jerk, it’s never too early to pick up some chicken and

pork—chopped and wrapped with roast breadfruit—and wash it down with a Red Stripe. In Jamaica, time is a loose concept.

I’ve been visiting Blaise for decades, since our moms (mine Canadian and his Jamaican) became fast friends on vacation, each corralling her own quartet of kids at the beach. During our family’s regular visits to their house in Montego Bay and later at Good Hope, an eighteenth-century estate set amid pineapple fields along the Martha Brae River, Jamaica’s backcountry rhythms imprinted themselves on me: diving into the cool river to swim across a rushing current until the eddy pulled us back upstream, or walking through citrus fields and estate ruins, the air thick with the scent of orange blossoms.

But what really hooked me was the food. For a kid used to her mom’s Italian family cooking, eating fried red snapper “Escovitch-style” in Scotch bonnet pepper and cane vinegar sauce for breakfast was a revelation. As a teenage cook, I’d try to tease apart Jamaica’s unusual flavors, traced to an array of ethnic influences. In addition to cassava cake (bammy) from the Taino Indians, there’s pimento-flavored jerk, which originated with Jamaica’s Maroon (runaway slaves), pickled fish from the Spanish, East Indian curries, and sweet-and-sour Chinese preparations that infuse domestic dishes such as ackee and saltfish, oxtail and butter beans, and pumpkin soup dotted with small dumplings, or “spinners,” made with dough rolled

between your palms and spun into the liquid. (“You know the dumpling is ready when ‘im learn how to swim,” Myrtle Chambers, a home cook in Trelawney, once taught me.) I loved, too, how the local patois lives in the food: Mackerel Rundown is pickled mackerel boiled in coconut milk until most of the liquid evaporates; a crisp coconut biscuit is called Jackass Corn after the sound a donkey makes chomping on its feed. I learned a good deal at the apron strings of women like Myrtle, whose intuitive approach to flavor inspired my first cookbook and influences my ease around the kitchen to this day.

While cooking techniques haven’t changed much since I started visiting, Jamaican food has never been better. The island’s varied microclimates yield an explosion of coffee, sugarcane, cacao, and psychedelically flavored fruits and vegetables, and now a wave of local food activists and farmers are bringing unheard-of quality and variety in ingredients to everywhere you can grab a bite. Meanwhile, Jamaica’s authentic food scene, long concentrated in its roadside shacks and home kitchens, is being reinterpreted by chefs with access to a global-flavor playbook, so you’re as likely to find yam croquettes with cilantro chimichurri in a mountain café as you are gungo pea gnocchi in an upscale restaurant. For proof that Jamaica’s food is having a moment, look no further than last year’s inaugural NyamJam Jamaican Food & Music Festival, which drew Mario Batali and April Bloomfield to the island. The upshot is

that Jamaica has become a singular destination for the food-obsessed tropical vacation-goer looking to experience the kind of roots-y realism that typically stops at the gates of high-end resorts.

To catch this vibe, you could start at Stush in the Bush in Free Hill, St. Ann, a hilltop bungalow overlooking the north coast near Ocho Rios and run by farmer/chef duo Chris and Lisa Binns. Chris went to university in Canada but, like many in his generation lured home by new opportunity, turned his family land into a community-based sustainable farm. The fresh, mostly vegan multi-course meals from their 15-acre Zionites Farm—dasheen chips with their Blow Fyah sauce, plantain pizza, and mulberry sorbet—belie the modest surroundings. Likewise, across the island in the lush Blue Mountains above Kingston, Robyn Fox and her father, Michael, started EITS Café to serve the organic produce from their Food Basket Farm. Their operation includes the eight-room, rustic-chic Mount Edge Guest House, where the kitchen turns out dishes like barrel-roasted chicken and eggs Florentine with smoked marlin.

“YOU KNOW
THE DUMPLING IS
READY WHEN
‘IM LEARN HOW
TO SWIM.”





© Previous page: Grilled plantain and basil pizza at Stush in the Bush. This page, clockwise from top: A cabin at GoldenEye resort; Lisa and Chris

Binns, owners of Stush in the Bush, at Zionites Farm (stush means “stylish” in the local patois); Escovitch-style fish at Jakes Treasure Beach.



©

From left: Local organic baby kale, Swiss chard, arugula, and fennel blossom; a view of the Blue Mountains from Strawberry Hill resort, outside Kingston.

Simultaneously, a couple of the island's most influential names in hospitality are scaling organic homegrown food for both locals and tourists. Every full moon or so, Jakes Hotel Villa & Spa founder Sally Henzell and her son, Jason, host a farm-to-table dinner at Dool's organic farm, on Jamaica's least-developed south coast near Treasure Beach. Guests who score a ticket sit down to dishes like peas and mint salad and lamb-coconut stew; the event, held at long tables set with linens and lanterns, brings attention and income to the handful of local farmers left in an area where 70,000 of them once worked the red soil. And last year, Island Records founder turned hotelier Chris Blackwell opened Pantrepant—his 2,500-acre organic farm and estate on an eighteenth-century sugar plantation in Trelawney Parish—to visitors; the farm also supplies produce to two of his Island Outpost hotels, GoldenEye and The Caves. The breakfast I had on my last trip to GoldenEye, a chic oceanfront resort that hosted last year's NyamJam Festival, was a delicious expression of his utopian vision: farm-fresh poached eggs over sautéed callaloo (a chard-like green), and green banana and coconut porridge drizzled with the property's honey and Blackwell's eponymous raisin-vanilla-scented rum.

Of course, many of Jamaica's most defining flavors remain gloriously unchanged by trends and times. At the coffee estates in the Blue Mountains, the high altitude bakes a sweet creaminess into the beans. The result is an elixir, as unique to its *terroir* as a Burgundy wine, that visitors can drink with a *gizzarda* (coconut tart) chaser after a sunrise hike through the dense forests. Then there are the seaside soup shacks (try the fish tea or peanut soup), patty shops (the "hamburger of Jamaica"), jerk joints, and rum bars dotting the island.

But the secret ingredient in all of this is the intangible grip of your surroundings: the mountain air rustling the tree canopies; the scents from simmering pots or clouds of pit smoke; the tinny strains of reggae music in the background. As Blaise once told me, "Real Jamaica lives in the food." Or, to inevitably quote Bob Marley, "Who feels it, knows it."





How to Eat Your Way Around Jamaica

On an island slightly smaller than Connecticut, the new North-South Highway between Kingston and Ocho Rios has made it easy to get virtually anywhere in a couple of hours. Most visitors stay in one of the following three areas; I tell friends to choose a base—beach or mountains—rent a car (Island Car Rentals is Jamaica’s largest agency), or hire a driver through their hotel, then follow their cravings into sandy parking lots or up rambling dirt roads.

THE NORTH COAST

A well-traveled stretch from Orachebessa to Montego Bay.

Start with the Island’s Best Jerk and Seafood

With locations in Montego Bay and Ocho Rios, Scotchies chops up Jamaica’s most memorable jerk chicken, pork, and fish. In Ocho Rios, try the home-style curried goat or shrimp rundown at Miss T’s Kitchen. A half hour away, farm-to-table vegetarian Stush in the Bush is hands down the most unexpected food experience in Jamaica. (Reserve ahead so Chris can meet you in Free Hill and get you up to the farm in his all-terrain vehicle.) Wash down peel-and-eat shrimp with rum cocktails at the HouseBoat Grill, moored in Montego Bay Marine Park; or eat whatever Derby, the owner, caught that day at his Lobster Trapp in Hopewell. And even if you’re not a guest at the

Half Moon resort, it’s worth dressing up a little for its Sugar Mill restaurant, which does modern Jamaican dishes like crayfish bisque and ackee flan.

Then Retreat to Your Estate House

The best way to experience the countryside is to stay at the Coach House Villa at Good Hope, a 2,000-acre citrus farm where the six-room eighteenth-century villa is staffed by one of my favorite Jamaican cooks, Barbara Murray. Or book a room at GoldenEye, once the home of James Bond author Ian Fleming and now an unshowily luxe resort with 26 new beach huts, a pool, and restaurants supplied with produce from Pantrepant farm.

THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

The lush region between Kingston and the beaches of sleepy Port Antonio.

Go for More Than the Coffee

Gloria’s Rendezvous is a laid-back 44-year-old institution beloved by prime ministers and musicians for its grilled fish and bammy; stop in after exploring the vast Caribbean art collection at Kingston’s National Gallery of Jamaica. On Hope Road, close to the Bob Marley Museum, Devon House has utterly unique ice cream made with dark stout. EITS Café, above Kingston, serves eclectic meals that mix European ingredients with Jamaican dishes like smoked marlin or oxtail. After lunch, drive to Belcour Lodge, an eighteenth-century former coffee estate known for its tea and ginger cake. Or hike Clifton Mount coffee estate, above Newcastle, then fuel up with country fare like brown stewfish at Crystal Edge, a roadside “cookshop” locals call Winsome, after the owner.

Bunk Down in the Sky

The Woodside Villa, a five-bedroom colonial 4,000 feet above sea level, has 360-degree mountain views, a spring-fed pool, and a fantastic cook. Chris Blackwell’s cottage resort, Strawberry

From left: Clifton Mount Estate; their coffee and coconut gizzard cake.



Hill, has a bird’s-eye view of Kingston from its infinity pool. If you want to day-trip to the mountains but stay by the beach, book Geejam, a rustic yet refined hotel in Port Antonio, near the white sand Frenchman’s Cove.

THE SOUTH COAST

From unspoiled Treasure Beach to the thronged resort town of Negril.

Do the Seriously Local Thing

For the best breakfast in Treasure Beach, hit up no-frills Smurfs, where the owner, Dawn, roasts her own coffee to go with the ackee and salt-fish. At lunch, try the Mannish Water (goat’s head soup, said to make a man more “mannish” on his wedding night) at Murray’s Fish & Jerk Hut, on the Kingston and Ochi roads heading southwest. Each month, Jakes Full Moon Dinners, on an organic farm in Pedro Plains, showcase local produce; reserve through Jakes Treasure Beach. Have your hotel book a fisherman to ferry you to Floyd’s Pelican Bar, a quarter mile out to sea on a sandbar near Treasure Beach, for lunch and

dominoes. En route to the unmissable YS Falls, the Middle Quarter Shrimp Ladies sell bags of heads-on Black River shrimp boiled with supersonic hot pepper. My favorite place to eat in Negril is Cosmos Seafood—come for a swim and stay for a lunch of Escovitch-style fried fish. Catch sunset cocktails at Rockhouse, on the island’s West End, where the Pushcart rum bar draws local families, artists, and chefs.

Avoid the Spring Break Crowd

In Negril, Tensing Pen has treetop bungalows, a pool, and phenomenal swimming and cliff diving. But I love the remoteness of Jakes Treasure Beach, where Jason and his mom have created their own out-of-the-way beach town with colorfully painted cottages and villas. L.S.Q. ♦

MEK
WI
NYAM!