

Eating our way around the islands

UKTV Food has recently filmed a cooking series in the Caribbean, featuring celebrity chef Gary Rhodes, who has a restaurant in Grenada. The aim of Rhodes across the Caribbean is to showcase the diversity of food found in the region. Assisting Rhodes on his journey around eight islands were two sous chefs – Barrington Douglas and Hasan Defour – who come from very different West Indian backgrounds. Judy Bastyra recounts their experiences.

Jamaica

Barrington had previously been to Jamaica on holiday but this was a very different experience for him. This time he was introduced to a variety of different tastes and flavours that he had not encountered before.

He met up with Michael and Lesa Brown, who have a smallholding in Beeston Spring in Westmoreland. They are both great cooks and grow a large variety of produce such as pimento, bananas, sorrel, annatto, scotch bonnet peppers and they also own about 30 goats.

The Browns cooked a traditional Jamaican meal of Mannish Water and Banana Pudding. Mannish Water is a spicy soup that is reportedly an aphrodisiac and is made from goats' heads (some cooks include tripe, testicles and feet as well), garlic, scallions, cho-cho (christophene), green bananas, scotch bonnet peppers, and spinners (little spiral-shaped dumplings made from flour and water).

“I was very polite and enjoyed the dish,” says Douglas, “but I have to say I was a little squeamish about the ingredients.”

Junior Francis (executive chef at Sandals), the Jamaican mentor, continued with the traditional theme showing the chefs his version of Brown Stewed Chicken, Salt Fish and Ackee and Curried Goat.

This was Hasan's first time in Jamaica. “I love Jamaican food and I live in an area where there are 10 Jamaican restaurants in a five-mile radius,” he says. “A lot of the Caribbean restaurants in England say they are Caribbean but the dishes are mainly Jamaican. With the popularity of reggae music the food has been able to travel. When you hear the words ‘Caribbean food’ most people will say, jerk, goat curry, rice and peas, ackee and saltfish.

But we learnt that there was a whole lot more to Jamaican food. “Clifton Mount Coffee Estate up in the Blue Mountains was a real eye-opener for me. There, I learnt why coffee grown in this area of Jamaica is regarded as one of the best in the world. I even had a go at cupping, which is essentially a slurp-tasting process. It helps you identify the coffee's unique characteristics on the palate.”

They also met Iral, the Ital farmer, who doesn't eat anything with a face. He made them a nutritious peanut porridge, which kept them going all day. In complete contrast, they visited Round Hill, one of the top luxury hotels in Jamaica, where executive chef Martin Maginley showed them fine dining Jamaican style using local ingredients.

“He cooked us a coffee rubbed pork loin with watermelon chutney,” says Hasan. “The watermelon chutney was amazing; he used the white flesh cut into dice and then cooked it down with ginger and vinegar so you get the pickley effect. Then we used the red pulp, reduced it by a third so it became a jelly, with a hint of ginger coming back.”

Antigua and Barbuda

For both Barrington and Hasan Antiguan cuisine was pretty unknown. "Hasan's memories of Antigua were more to do with cricket – when Brian Lara broke his record there," jokes Barrington. "We had both heard about the Antiguan Pepperpot but it was very different from the traditional Guyanese Pepperpot. It was more of a one-pot dish, with lots of vegetables, pickled pork trotters and cheeks, and it had quite a kick to it.

"We tried another great Antiguan favourite, Goat Water. It is quite different from Mannish Water as they only use the goat meat (no intestines this time) and it tastes like a rich stew, flavoured with cloves and cinnamon."

But it was the Antiguan "black pineapple" and local honey that impressed the chefs the most. It's called black pineapple because it is ripe and ready to eat while the skin is still dark green. At the right stage of ripeness, it is very sweet and delectable. It's important to eat it from the top down, because the sweetness concentrates in the base.

Antiguan mentor Ezekiel Jackson, executive chef at Sandals Grande Resort and Spa, created a stunning pineapple, rum-and-honey dessert, which was to feature in the banquet.

St Lucia

Although English is the island's first language, you will hear kweole (the local patois) spoken wherever you go, which reflects the very strong African and French influence on the island.

One of the best eating experiences in St Lucia has to be a fish fry. The team visited the Anse le Rey fish fry, where an entire street has stalls selling different fish dishes: lobster, conch soup, fish en papiotte with a Souscaille citrus sauce and roasted bakes (a bread). It was total party time, with music pulsing and people dancing and drinking up a storm. This is St Lucian food at its best – so simple, so sweet.

Hasan cooked Pan Fried Snapper with a Plantain and Avocado Salsa, a speciality of contributor Orlando Satchell, the executive chef at Dasheene in the Ladera Hotel. This internationally known chef has spent years promoting Caribbean food all over the world, and he continues to work with local producers in St Lucia in the cultivation of organic ingredients.

Barbados

One of the culinary similarities of all the islands is the use of green seasoning, though the main herb in the mix differed from island to island. In Trinidad they use a lot of chandon bene (shadow beni), Barbados, thyme and celery, in Tobago they use Spanish thyme. Other ingredients that kept cropping up on each island were salt meat and fish, a legacy from the days of slavery, when the slaves were given salted meat and fish as part of their rations.

The Bajan cuisine has a strong English influence and, to a lesser degree, American. Indeed, here the green seasoning had more European herbs – similar to bouquet garni.

They decided to head north to get away from the more touristy areas and were treated to some fantastic food. Angela Garraway-Holland (executive chef at the Hilton), their Bajan mentor, introduced them to a simple but delicious way of

cooking breadfruit: wedges of breadfruit, mashed together with celery and onions and seasoning and then pack it back rustically into boat shapes, sprinkle cheese over it and then grill in the oven.

Another local favourite is Souse. It's traditionally served with pudding, which is a black pudding-style sweet potato accompaniment. Souse on a Saturday is an institution in Barbados. Essentially it is boiled pig's head or feet served cold with onions, cucumbers, limes, parsley and hot and sweet peppers. The dish is another relic from the old plantation days, where the slaves would be given the off-cuts of meat to use after pigs were slaughtered.

Curaçao

Barrington found Curaçao a completely different experience to the other places they visited. "Of all the islands, Hasan and I found Curaçao the most extraordinary – the buildings, the food and the landscape. For a start, the population all speak about five languages: Papiamentu, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese and English.

"The food is a mixture of African and European with a bit of South American and Indonesian thrown in. The fresh fruit smoothies in the old market were a welcome, healthy kick-start to the day but the okra (yambo) and cactus soup were, how shall I say, a little strange to look at, as they clung in gooey threads to the spoon.

"Our mentor on the island, Vanessa Tweebloom (executive chef at the Hilton), showed us how to make Keshy Yena. This is basically a stuffed Edam cheese with a mincemeat filling, seasoned with olives, capers and raisins – similar to pastilles from Venezuela."

There is a floating market that still supplies the country with much of its fresh produce from Venezuela, and in the old days before air travel and large supermarkets it was responsible for bringing in most of the island's food.

Once you are out of the capital Willemstad, which is full of Dutch-style pastel painted houses, you become aware of the desert-like landscape dotted with cactuses and see the occasional iguana lazing in the sun. The white sand beaches are stunning and it's a great place for diving as well.

"Of all the dishes we sampled my favourite was pumpkin pancakes with Curaçao cream – delicious," recalls Barrington. "As far as seasoning goes they don't use green seasoning on this island and not much, if any, hot pepper. Though there is also a strong Indonesian influence left over from the Dutch colonial days."

Trinidad

Fazil Baccus from Crews Inn Hotel, their Trinidad mentor, along with contributor Khalid Mohammed of Chaud Restaurant, soon got busy introducing the chefs to all the Trinidadian specialities such as Doubles, Shark and Bake at Maracas Beach, Roti, Bus up Shut, Pelau and Curried Duck.

For Hasan it was a trip home and gave him the opportunity to show his island to the team. On this island chandon bene, which has a pungent coriander flavour, is the most dominant herb used in green seasoning and many other dishes.

"I knew how knocked out the team would be to see how diverse our food was," says Hasan. "The first stop was Doubles outside the Brooklyn Bar, which is basically a bara (bread) sandwich with curried channa

(chickpeas) as a filling. You need to know how to order – either slight, medium or heavy with the pepper sauce – and eat them – using the top bara to pick up the peas.

“There are so many uniquely Trinidadian eating experiences to choose from. My favourite was the River Lime. This is where curried duck is cooked over an open fire by the river. While it is cooking people take the opportunity to swim, drink and chat, or just chill out. While the duck was cooking we made Okabar (also called mother-in-law). It’s made from okras, tomatoes, garlic and hot pepper at the side of the fire. You eat it with bread or dumplings or – up shut – a torn up paratha.”

Tobago

Although Trinidad and Tobago are counted as one country there are differences in their cuisines. There’s a strong African influence in Tobago in the food and the people.

According to Barrington the team all fell in love with their Tobagonian mentor, Deborah Sardinha-Metivier – not only for her grace and charm but for her “sweet-hand” style of cooking. Her parents run the Blue Crab Restaurant in Scarborough, where they cooked a stunning Flying Fish in Tempura Batter (now featured on Barrington’s menu).

“Deborah was such an inspiration to us,” says Barrington. “She made a Cocoa Rubbed Fish, knowing that we had just visited Duanne Dove’s Cocoa Estate. She introduced us to a special Pone made with cassava, pumpkin and sweet potato for dessert, which we featured in the banquet.”

Grenada

Grenada is sometimes referred to as the “doux-doux” (meaning “sweet” in patois) as well as the spice island of the Caribbean. Some people will swear that the scent of many of the spices grown there – such as nutmeg, cinnamon, vanilla and ginger – permeate the air with a sweet aroma.

Grenadian mentor Dextor Burns, who works in Rhodes’ restaurant at the Calabash Hotel, introduced the chefs to some local dishes, which highlighted the cultural diversity of the island. The national dish, oil-down, is a combination of breadfruit, coconut milk, turmeric (misnamed saffron), dumplings, calaloo (taro leaves) and salted meat (salt fish, smoked herring or salt beef). It is often cooked in a large pot commonly referred to by locals as a karhee, or curry pot.

Popular street foods include aloo pie, doubles and dal puri (also called roti) served wrapped around a curry, goat, bakes and fish cakes. Sweets include kurma, guava cheese, fudge or barfi, tamarind balls, rum and raisin ice cream and currant rolls.