



Bajan delicacy of black-bellied sheep.

Hope Philbrick



It's not cous cous, it's cou cou.

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Eating Barbados

Beyond the famous rum, rich Bajan foods abound under the Caribbean sun

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

The nine-year-old girl fidgeted in the front seat next to her father, our van driver; perhaps she was intimidated by the four strangers seated behind her in the van. Her father informed us that Sherise had just gotten out of school. She glanced back at us with luminous black eyes. In an attempt to put her at ease, I asked, “What did you learn today?”

“Nothing,” she answered.

I chuckled. This exchange could have taken place with any child in my Atlanta neighborhood. But it happened in Barbados. As we spoke, Sherise displayed a polite formality unlike that of American children, but which is so common among Barbadians that they’ve earned the reputation of being the world’s most hospitable people. And so our routine conversation was sealed in my memory as a singular experience. A trip to Barbados provides many such

opportunities to have experiences at once familiar and unique.

This proved especially true for the food, because ingredients familiar in the southeastern United States excited new sensations when prepared in Barbadian (locals use the term Bajan) style. As an example, corn meal and okra are the two main ingredients of cou cou, which, along with flying fish, is the country’s national dish. Cou cou can be served soft or firm, like Italian polenta. It’s rather bland alone, but it’s usually jazzed up with sauce.

Flying fish is a staple of the daily diet in Barbados—so much so that the tourism authority chose flying fish as its emblem—and it graces menus from casual beach stands to elegant restaurants. A flying fish filet is approximately the size of a tilapia filet, though slightly thicker and with a dark stripe of meat down the center. Whether prepared steamed or fried, the fish has a dense bite.



Steamed flying fish is typically served with a fish-and-tomato broth that adds a savory flavor dimension. When fried, usually in either a dense crumb coating or a flaky crust, flying fish is usually served with a mustard-based hot sauce featuring scotch bonnet peppers.

Actually, Bajans typically serve hot sauce alongside everything, including eggs. Tasted on its own, the typical Bajan hot sauce burns the tongue, but fried flying fish tempers the heat—it's still hot, but much more tolerable—and the cou cou offers a calm reprieve. Flying fish and cou cou make a tasty combination. Try the dish at Waterfront Café on the Careenage marina in historic Bridgetown, a spot equally popular with locals and tourists.

For those with adventurous palates, what makes Barbados a great culinary destination is the chance to try something new. For instance, mauby juice is made of tree bark that is steeped in boiling water before adding sugar and spices. It's definitely an acquired taste. Mauby was served as a frozen granité at Careenage Bar & Grill at Hilton Barbados as a refresher between courses. Initially refreshing and pleasant, it grew bitter on the finish. The restaurant's French-trained executive chef Denis Lartigue says, "I wanted you to realize what we can do with the local produce. It's vital to embrace the culture that you cook in. I'm very much for the fusion, for the marriage of anything. [But at the same time] I try to respect the old techniques as the foundation."

Pleasant surprises like black-bellied sheep, indigenous to Barbados, taste like a combination of lamb and goat. (They look that way, too.) Chef Lartigue braised the lean, delicate meat, but it can also be grilled. Christophene is a pear-shaped squash-like fruit with a single soft seed. Under its pale green skin is white flesh that's eaten as a vegetable. The texture and mildly sweet flavor is reminiscent of cucumber. It's commonly served steamed with carrots. When in season, christophene is readily available at supermarkets and restaurants. Look for it among the Bajan buffet lunch offerings at Cliffside Restaurant. Or simply enjoy the rum punch.

A Whole Lotta Rum

There's something special about sipping rum in the Caribbean, where it can be blended with Coke or a simple ocean breeze. Rum shops are



Barbados Tourism Authority



Barbados Tourism Authority

part of Bajan culture, and with 1,200 rum shops on the island, options for rum consumption abound. But "most people never go to a shop too far away from their own neighborhood," says Brian Harris, tour guide at Mount Gay Rum Visitor's Center. "Our tradition is when you buy [a bottle], you never take it back home," he says. Rather, purchases are shared with others on the premises. So buy a bottle and enjoy it right away. Spend the afternoon chatting with locals, and don't worry about a language barrier; English is the official language of this member of the British Commonwealth.

For another drink to savor, try the water. It might seem a little strange to mention water as being worth your culinary notice, but Barbados is a coral island with naturally filtered water. Tap water here is not only safe to drink; it's arguably among the best water in the world.

Bajan cuisine has a number of influences, including African, Mediterranean, English, Indian and Asian—all this convenient to Atlanta via Delta's new direct flights. Chefs from around the world bring their experience and inspiration to Barbados to create dishes they hope will appeal to a global audience.

Chef Kevin Gratton, head chef at the famous Le Caprice restaurant in London, England, visited Daphne's in Barbados last December to host cooking classes. "The restaurant scene on Barbados has really come a long way in the last five to six years," he says.

Since much of the food in Barbados is imported, it's possible to find North American bison, French foie gras and local fried plantains. For example, a winter menu at L'Acajou, the signature restaurant at Sandy Lane luxury resort, featured fresh seafood and local delicacies alongside Canadian scallops and duck from Indiana-based Maple Leaf Farms.

Brian Ward, owner of The Cliff restaurant, says importing quality products is crucial to keep his guests returning. "We bring in the best quality and don't settle for the best available. We have people who eat here every night for all 14 nights" of their two-week vacation, he says. At least 50 percent of The Cliff menu is changed each night, and three times a week it changes completely, driven by product availability.

On an island that measures 21 by 14 miles, sourcing ingredients can be a challenge. Even flying fish were scarce in December 2005, following



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Christophene, a member of the squash family found on Barbados.



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The Mount Gay portfolio of rums includes Eclipse and Extra Old, a sweet "Sugar Cane Brandy" (which is actually rum) and flavored varieties such as mango and vanilla.

A tour of the Visitor's Center reveals how rum is made:

- Sugar cane takes 12 to 18 months to mature. It's harvested between February and June, when the sugar content is at its peak.
- Sugar cane is cut and crushed to extract rich juice, which is filtered and then boiled to produce sugar crystals and molasses that are then separated in a centrifuge.
- Molasses is mixed with Barbadian water in oak vats and fermented for 36 to 48 hours.
- To distill this mixture, Mount Gay uses two methods:
 - Single, continuous distillation in a Coffey Still produces a distillate that's 97 percent alcohol by volume and has subtle flavor.
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- Matured distillates are blended by the master blender, filtered, and inspected prior to being bottled as Mount Gay Rum.

hurricane season. (Barbados was last "hit" in 1955, but the storms' effects were felt in its surrounding waters.) Flying fish was back on menus by April 2006. Tom Hinds, owner of Naniki, says the size of the island itself has unforeseen consequences: "With urbanization, a lot of things are being displaced." Although wild hare was once popular, he says that he hasn't seen one on his property (which in addition to a restaurant boasts cottages, a spa and an anthurium flower farm) since 2001.

Still, more than 700 hectares (1,730 acres) of land are used to grow fruits and vegetables including cabbage, beans, carrots, cucumbers, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, limes, guavas, cherries, grapefruit, mangoes and avocados. And a remarkable range of seafood is sourced from the Atlantic Ocean off the east coast and from the Caribbean Sea off the west and south coasts.

While the availability of ingredients may vary, finding a place to have good meal in Barbados is never a problem. In fact, with hundreds of options, a study of Bajan flavor could take a lifetime—even for a native like Sherise.

Hope S. Philbrick is a freelance writer because she doesn't think work and fun should be mutually exclusive.

“Our tradition is when you buy [a bottle], you never take it back home...”

Brian Harris, tour guide at Mount Gay Rum Visitor's Center.

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Mount Gay Rum Visitor's Center
(246) 425-8757
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Where to Eat ...

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