

Best Caribbean Islands for Foodies

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With fresh ingredients, amazing spices, and far-flung influences, these islands serve up some of the world's most tantalizing cuisine.

From April 2013
By Joe Yogerst

"Caribbean food has something for everyone," says Virginia Burke, the Jamaican author of *Eat Caribbean* and other cookbooks. "A decade ago many of the hotels still served European-style food as the local cooking was deemed too heavy. There has been quite a revolution. Caribbean as a cuisine has shaken off the old restraints and is evolving quickly."



Courtesy of Hotel Guanahani & Spa

While the Caribbean is rarely included among the great gastronomic hubs, it may be time to change that. Among its advantages: fresh ingredients like straight-off-the-boat seafood, tropical fruits picked each morning, and a plethora of spices that European empires fought wars to control in centuries past.

That history also explains the uniqueness of Caribbean cuisine: the food reflects traces of the British, French, Spanish, Dutch, Swedes, Danes, and Americans, all of whom had colonial presences in the region. The Europeans brought in African slaves and Asian indentured servants with their own culinary traditions, and the Arawak, Taino, and other First Nations groups added to the collective cooking pot, as have Latin American cultures that flourished after the Spanish left.

"Each of the islands has a series of elements that set them apart," says Puerto Rican celebrity chef Wilo Benet, who pilots Pikayo restaurant in San Juan.

"Cubans prefer black beans and cumin. Dominicans boil their staple plantain dish (*mangu*) and use more oregano than we do. Puerto Ricans prefer red beans and fry their staple plantain dish (*mofongo*). Curry is favored in many of the English islands. And of course the French ones like Martinique have lots of French influences. One element all of us have in common is flavor-packed recipes," Benet says. "In the evolution of the general palate, those who disliked spice now love it and need more intensity consistently."

Aiding and abetting the culinary revolution is a new wave of chefs, some of whom are European and North American maestros lured to the islands alongside local cooks. "I would venture to say that our local cooks learned a great deal once the tourism industry expanded and more modern and highly trained chefs came in to run the hotel kitchens," says Burke. "I think there has been quite a trade-off of skills, with everyone learning new ways to use our local ingredients."

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Trinidad

Dining in Trinidad is a journey through the foods of the various cultures that have come to populate this southern anchor of the Lesser Antilles. More than 40 percent of the population is of South Asia origin, so the Indian cuisine is especially good. But immigrants from Africa, Europe, South America, the Middle East, and China have also enhanced the local food culture. From roti bread and red-hot curries to callaloo soup and jerk meats, it's hard to know where to start.

Local Favorite: Chaud restaurant in Port of Spain.



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