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THE GENIUS OF JAMAICA'S CUISINE

Rich and spicy as the pepperpot soup that originated with the Taino Indians, Jamaican cooking draws its genius from a brilliant interpretation of East Indian, Chinese, African, Spanish and British influences—all working harmoniously in a style that is uniquely Jamaican.

Among the **specialties of the island** are:

- bammies—cakes made from cassava root, a staple in the diet of the Taino, the indigenous people who lived on the island long before Columbus arrived
- ackee—a bright yellow fruit, brought from Africa by the British to feed slaves working on sugar plantations, now served with saltfish as Jamaica's National Dish; when cooked, it looks a little like scrambled egg
- duckunoo—a steamed pudding made from cornmeal and coconut, wrapped in banana leaves
- breadfruit—introduced to the island by Captain William Bligh of *The Bounty* fame
- meat patties—a spicy pie sold in snackshops or by roadside vendors

Curried goat, a popular dish often served with white rice, rice and peas or other food, is a legacy of East Indian indentureship. The new arrivals added curry and other spices, expanding the island's kitchen of exotic flavors.

Indigenous Fruits and Vegetables

In addition to indigenous vegetables like cho-cho, which tastes rather like squash, and callaloo, similar to spinach and used in pepperpot soup, Jamaica's lively markets are piled high with bananas, coconuts and pineapples.

Among the more exotic fruits are guinep, sweetsop, papaya (also called *pawpaw*) and the star apple. A delicious dessert called *matrimony* is extremely popular and incorporates fruits laced with condensed milk.

The native pimento tree, the source of allspice, is used in numerous Jamaican dishes, as are ginger, garlic, nutmeg and the searingly hot Scotch Bonnet peppers imperative to the seasoning of Jamaica's famous jerked pork, chicken and fish.

The Origins of Jerk

The technique of "jerk" is thought to have originated with the Maroons, descendants of slaves who escaped from their Spanish masters to the island's most remote mountain areas. Meat is first marinated for hours in an incendiary mixture of peppers, pimento seeds, scallion, thyme and nutmeg, then cooked over an outdoor pit lined with pimento wood. (The Maroons did the cooking underground to camouflage the smoke.) The low heat allows the meat to cook slowly, retaining the natural juices while becoming infused with the flavor of the wood.

Regional Dishes

Jerk stands can be found all over the island, especially at Boston Beach just outside Port Antonio. Rastafarian I-tal (no salt) cuisine offers vegetarian dishes that are popular all around the Negril area, and, in the Middle Quarters area of the South Coast, dried peppered shrimp are sold by the bag. Several delicacies are offered everywhere in Jamaica, among them:

- *stamp and go*—saltfish cakes served as appetizers

- *mackerel run-down*—whole salted mackerel simmered in coconut milk, tomatoes, onions, scallions, thyme and hot peppers, and served with boiled green bananas or yams

Diverse Dining

The range of dining venues in Jamaica is as diverse as the flavors of its cuisine, from open-air beach restaurants to opulent dining rooms in luxury hotels.

Known for fine food in Kingston in an elegant setting, the **Red Bones Blues Café** near New Kingston is one of the country's best-known restaurants. **Sugardaddies** in Kingston also provides delicious Jamaican food. Up in the Blue Mountains, the restaurant at **Strawberry Hill** offers a creatively compiled menu featuring jerked lamb with guava and fish grilled in a mango marinade.

At **Scotchies**, in Montego Bay, jerked pork and chicken cook over huge open fires and are served with roasted breadfruit, to be finger-eaten out of foil wrapping at simple outdoor tables or purchased by weight for takeaway. Red snapper and Jamaican stuffed lobster at the historic **Town House** restaurant attract a sophisticated crowd, including Marlon Brando and Sir Paul McCartney, and dining at the **White Witch** combines great tastes with heart-stopping views.

Rasta Pasta is a highlight at **Evita's**, a popular Jamaican-Italian eatery in Ocho Rios, and the **Ruins at the Falls** offers a mix of international and local cuisine with live music on a pretty waterside terrace. The **Almond Tree** restaurant is a local favorite, famed for its excellent pepperpot soup.

In Negril, the local cafés offer delicious Jamaican variations of classic French dishes, especially memorable at **Charela Inn's Le Vendome**, where the wine list is extensive. The **Hungry Lion** in Negril serves Caribbean-style seafood and vegetarian dishes in a casual ambience. Further east, the **Hotel Villa Bella**, a few miles from Mandeville, is known for its Jamaican-style breakfasts, which include ackee and saltfish.

No visit to Jamaica would be complete without sampling the local rum, which comes in a variety of strengths and brands, and the famed Blue Mountain coffee. The local beer is Red Stripe, served ice-cold or *hot*, meaning non-refrigerated.

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