



CARIBBEAN CREOLE – A CULINARY HISTORY

The first settlers were the Arawak, Taino and Carib Indians, peaceful tribes of farmers who cultivated such foods as sweet potatoes, corn and cassava. They seasoned their foods with fiery chilies, cassareep, and annatto seed. Cassareep still remains a key ingredient in Bajan pepperpot, a soulful stew made with wild meats. Annatto seed is used in Cuban arroz con pollo, and Puerto Rican asopao. As for chilies, the powerful scotch bonnet is one of the defining flavors of the Caribbean.

The arrival of the Spanish in 1492 introduced a variety of new foods to the region, from wine and olive oil to vinegar and European spices. Metal utensils from Spain greatly improved Caribbean technology, as did the durable containers made from metal and glass. An ancient Spanish vinegar-based meat seasoning became Cuba's national marinade, Adobo.

Christopher Columbus brought sugarcane to the Caribbean on his second voyage in 1494. It was not long before the "old world" technique of distillation created a "new world" spirit that remains the quintessential drink of the Caribbean: Rum. Virtually every nation in the Caribbean produces its own rum, with styles varying widely from island to island. In Guadeloupe and Martinique, for example, rum is made from fresh sugarcane juice, not molasses. Most rum is distilled in industrial continuous stills, but a few brands, like Haiti's Barbancourt, use the traditional pot still of cognac and Scottish whiskey. Jamaican distillers once favored dunder rums, made like sour mash whisky in Kentucky. Dunder comes from fermented molasses added in the manner of levain to bread. Connoisseurs in the French West Indies prize rhum vieux, or "old rum" which acquires a brandy-like complexity after lengthy aging in oak barrels. Armed with rum and the local tropical fruits, "new world" bartenders created a cocktail tradition that has inspired mixologists around the world.

Eager for a share in the new world's wealth, the French, Dutch, and British colonized the islands in turn. Each nation put its mark on local larders. In the French islands for example, you will find French-style jams, rum-preserved fruits, and a tropical vinaigrette called sauce chien. The Dutch influence lives on in the pika (chili-fired pickled onions). The British influence is apparent in the fruit cheeses and ginger beer found on most of the English-speaking islands.

The arrival of the first African slaves in the seventeenth century had a profound impact on Caribbean culinary history. Brought to the Caribbean to work on the sugar plantations that stretched from Cuba to Trinidad, the slaves introduced such traditional African foods as gunga peas, okra, and yams (a true yam is quite different from what Americans call a sweet potato). Denied fresh meat or fish because of the expense, the slaves evolved a cuisine based on inexpensive ingredients, such as “ground provisions” (starchy root vegetables), beans, salt fish and salt pork. Many Caribbean hot sauces and condiments were perfected by the Afro-Caribbeans to lend excitement to an otherwise monotonous diet.

When slavery was abolished in the nineteenth century, new groups of immigrants were recruited to work in the cane fields, such as the indentured workers from India who brought curry powder. Portuguese laborers were the source of Curacao’s famous fruitcake, bolo pretu (black cake) that today is widely eaten throughout the Caribbean around the Christmas holidays. Indonesians introduced satays with peanut and fish sauces. Chinese workers added Asian spices and vegetables; bok choy can be seen growing throughout the Caribbean, not to mention Asian style pickles and chili pastes, to the already cosmopolitan Caribbean pot.

The warm climate of the Caribbean supports a bounty of exotic fruits, from perfumed guava to tangy passion fruit. Small wonder that the tropical fruit jams and jellies, rum punches, fruit cheeses, and fruit curds became popular West Indian sweets. Nor is it any great surprise that the world’s sugar capital should produce such a rich tradition of candies and sweets, ranging from tamarind balls to coconut candies.

The West Indies is the home of the world’s hottest chili, the scotch bonnet. The name comes from its crinkled crown, which with a little imagination looks like a Scottish turban. The Scotch Bonnet and its cousins- Mexican habanero, Jamaican country pepper, the French West Indian piment- are fifty times hotter than a Jalapeno chili.

There are several reasons for the local popularity of such fiery chilies. The capsaicin in chilies fosters perspiration, the body’s natural cooling mechanism. Then there’s the “chili high,” which is said to come from eating hot peppers. The body reacts to the painful bite of the hot pepper by producing endorphins, the natural opiates that are responsible for the runner’s high. Chilies are also rich in vitamins A and C. It is not accidental that some of the world’s hottest sauces come from the Caribbean islands closest to the equator.

America’s love affair with Caribbean flavors began before the United States was even named as such and continues to this day. In the colonial period, rum, molasses and spices were the mainstay of the North American sea trade. 1649 when a group calling themselves the Barbadian Society of Gentlemen Adventurers set off northward and opened the Carolinas (seven of the first 21 governors being Barbadian, as were two in Massachusetts). George Washington stayed on the island of Barbados for six weeks in 1751 in the company of his half-brother Lawrence who had made the six-week voyage from the Potomac for health reasons. Nineteen at the time, it was Washington’s only trip abroad. During the American Revolution, food, arms and even Benjamin Franklin’s mail were brought through St. Eustatius. Haitian soldiers fought alongside Americans during the war of 1812. The first large scale arrival of Cuban immigrants in Ybor City and Key

West in Florida in the 1860s introduced Caribbean foods and flavors to the North American marketplace. Each new wave of immigrants – Jamaicans to south Florida, Barbadians to Atlanta, Puerto Ricans to new York- has increased the availability of West Indian foods.

The reggae revolution of the 1970s furthered North American interest in West Indian cooking. It was only a matter of time that the nation who listened to Marley, Cliff and Tosh would discover the fiery joys of jerk. The travel boom in the 1980s, with increased air service to the Caribbean, gave many Americans first hand introductions to the bold flavors of the Caribbean. Even America's favorite pastime, barbecuing, is not quite so American.

The origins of barbeque, involving grilling and smoking and the word itself are somewhat obscure. In Jamaica, the people made a shallow pit to both smoke and grill their food. They made a grill smoker with the native wood pinion that they would burn down to charcoal. They then used green sticks to place over the burned pinion wood to make a grate. They cut their meat in strips and placed spices on the meat and smoke-grilled those strips to create jerk. The jerk was then dried on hot rocks. The meat was preserved by grilling, smoking, and spicing the meat. They then carried the jerk meat strips in pouches made by hand. This smoke-grilled meat was called barabica or bar-b-cue. The word translates as sacred fire pit and is also spelled barbicoa or bar-b-que.

Caribbean vs. West Indies (from Wikipedia)

The word Caribbean is named after the Caribs, one of the dominant Amerindian groups in the region at the time of European contact during the late fifteenth century.

The term "West Indies" originates from Christopher Columbus's idea that he had landed in the Indies (then meaning all of southeast Asia, particularly India) when he had actually reached the Americas.

The Spanish term Antillas was commonly assigned to the newly discovered lands. Derived from the Sea of the Antilles, it is a common alternate name for the Caribbean Sea in various European languages.

In the English-speaking Caribbean, someone from the Caribbean is usually referred to as a "West Indian," although the rather cumbersome phrase "Caribbean person" is sometimes used. The use of the words Caribbean or Caribbeans to refer to a West Indian or West Indians is largely known in the English-speaking Caribbean.

Spanish-speaking Caribbeans do not like to be called "Hispanic" or "Latin" due to the significant differences between the South and Central American countries. Spanish-speaking Caribbeans not only have different native origins but they also have different histories, (Spanish) dialects, cultures, traditions, food, and moral and religious beliefs. They relate more easily to fellow Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries, specifically

Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Cuba due to similar culture, history and Spanish dialect.