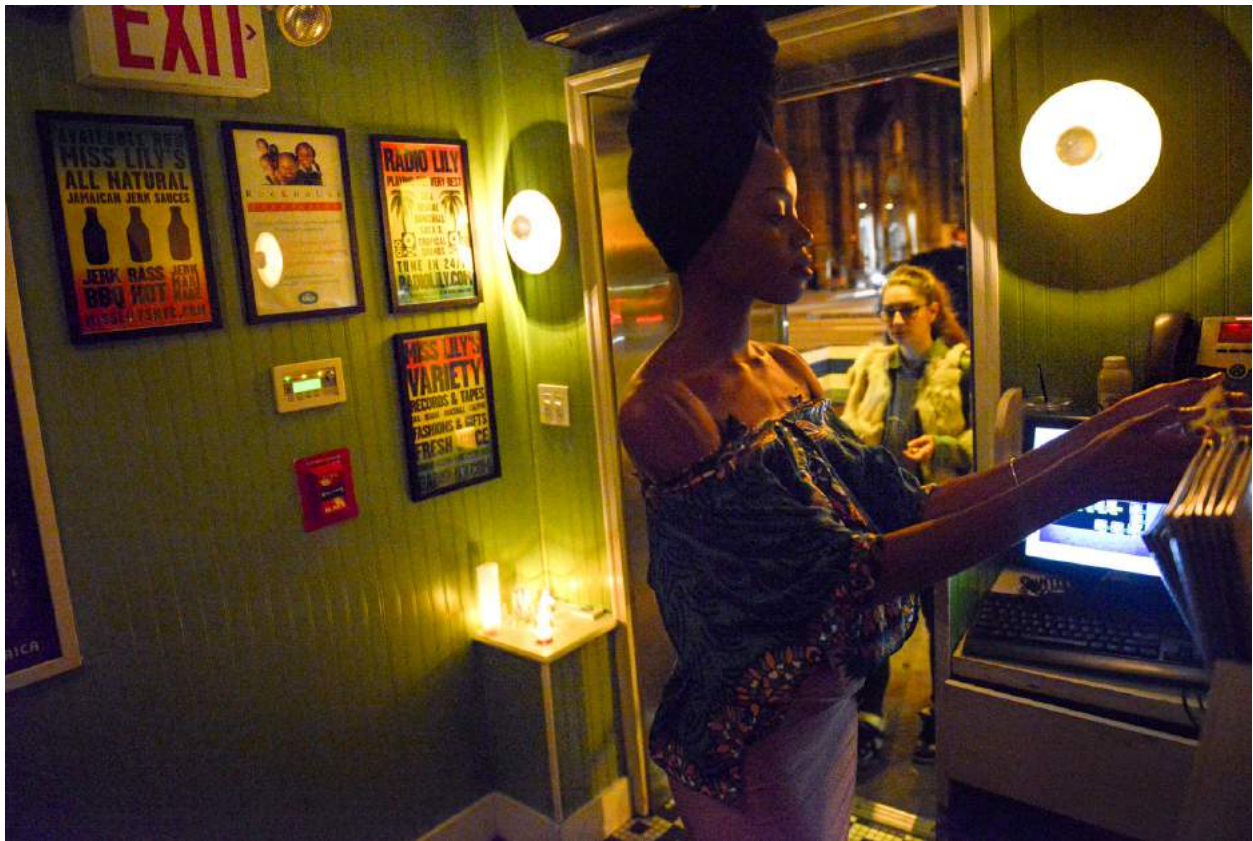


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FOOD

The New Caribbean Food Movement

By RACHEL WHARTON OCT. 27, 2015



The Caribbean, a catchall term for the islands of the West Indies and the Caribbean Sea, as well as coastal countries like Belize and Guyana may be the latest place to spark New York City's culinary interest. More than 1.5 million New Yorkers can trace their roots to the region, where the cooking is often spectacularly bright, complex and flavorful. Here, the hostess at Miss Lily's on Houston Street in Manhattan.



Miss Lily's was co-founded by the nightclub guru Serge Becker and Paul Salmon, the chairman of Rockhouse Hotel in Negril, Jamaica.



The restaurant now has two locations, and a design inspired by the Caribbean diners here in New York City, Mr. Salmon said.



Along with its own line of sauces and a late-night menu featuring \$5 rice and peas, sweet plantains and the cornmeal fritters Jamaicans call festival.



The chef at Miss Lily's, Adam Schop, has fallen for the floral Scotch bonnet chiles and other Caribbean "seasoning peppers" like sweet aji dulces or hot Grenadas, now found at several of the city's Greenmarket stands.



"I chop 'em up," Mr. Schop said, "and put them in everything I can get."



Here, the Red Stripe-steamed mussels and coco bread at Miss Lily's. Mr. Salmon said that he was inspired to open the restaurant to provide New Yorkers with a tropical escape and a taste of "the richness of the cuisine."



At Glady's, in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, the chef Michael Jacober prepares traditional Jamaican jerk chicken, fish and pork over a high-end wood-fired grill in a modern open kitchen. A resident of the neighborhood, Mr. Jacober was inspired to cook Jamaican food after attending the area's West Indian American Day Parade held each Labor Day.



The jerk chicken at Glady's, which Mr. Jacober created after spending time in Jamaica to study the dish.



Rawlston Williams intended to open the Food Sermon in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, as mainly a catering business.



But once people tasted his riffs on the food of his childhood in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, he realized he had a restaurant.



The Food Sermon's stew chicken, which Mr. Williams serves typically with his own version of Indo-Caribbean roti that are seasoned with whole fennel seed.



A handful of younger Caribbean-American street vendors have thrown themselves into experimenting with the ingredients they grew up with, or honing the finest details of their technique. Many of them sell at Smorgasburg, the food markets held around the city, which have added five new Caribbean vendors in the last two years.



At his slickly designed Smorgasburg stand MofonGO, Manolo Lopez makes a traditional rendition of that dish, topped with pork and Puerto Rican mayo-ketchup, say, or shrimp in butter-garlic sauce. All were inspired by his mother's recipes.



Mr. Lopez's shrimp mofongo.

When Rawlston Williams opened the Food Sermon in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, this year, the chef intended to use the kitchen for his catering business, offering only a limited takeout menu.

But once people tasted his riffs on the food of his childhood in St. Vincent and the Grenadines — where he recalls the smoke of callaloo soup cooking over hot stones, and the scent of burned sugar that forms the base of a proper stew chicken — “suddenly,” Mr. Williams said, “I had a restaurant.”

For decades, New Yorkers have dug into the rice and beans of Dominican diners and the yellow-orange Jamaican beef patties sold at pizzerias.

But the diverse queue of customers at the [Food Sermon](#), in a gentrifying neighborhood that has long been home to a vibrant West Indian community, is the latest sign that the next place to spark New York City’s culinary interest may just be the Caribbean, a catchall term for the islands of the West Indies and the Caribbean Sea, as well as coastal countries like Belize and Guyana. More than 1.5 million New Yorkers can trace their roots to the region, where the cooking is often spectacularly bright, complex and flavorful.

Consider [Grandchamps](#), a new all-day cafe in Bedford-Stuyvesant, where the chef Shawn Brockman dips into his wife’s Haitian family cookbook to make sandwiches layered with griot — pork that is slow-cooked, then fried — plantains and pikliz, which is a mess of shredded cabbage, carrots and fragrant Scotch bonnet chiles.

At the two-year-old restaurant [Glady’s](#) in Crown Heights, the chef Michael Jacober prepares traditional Jamaican jerk chicken, fish and pork over a high-end wood-fired grill in a modern open kitchen. That grill is fed in part by imported pimento wood, for an authentically smoke-charred, deeply spiced dish with just the right balance of sweet and heat. Mr. Jacober plans to open a 4,000-square-foot outpost, also in Brooklyn, next year.

And then there is the success of the two [Miss Lily’s](#) restaurants in Manhattan, the second of which opened last year on one of the busiest corners in the East Village. Co-founded by the nightclub guru Serge Becker, the diner-style restaurant has its own line of sauces and a late-night menu featuring \$5 rice and peas, sweet plantains and the cornmeal fritters Jamaicans call festival.

That the food of the Caribbean is increasingly being embraced by chefs and diners alike comes as no surprise to Alexander Smalls, an owner of Minton’s and the [Cecil in Harlem](#).

“It’s bold and full-flavored and aromatic and textured food,” Mr. Smalls said. The Cecil in particular draws liberally from Guyana and Trinidad, in dishes like a roti pizza topped with soft shreds of oxtail, while the shrimp in chile-

tomato sauce over yam flapjacks borrows from the executive chef J J Johnson's Barbadian relatives.

Mr. Smalls grew up eating the Gullah cuisine found in his native South Carolina, which has deep ties to the Caribbean islands via the colonial slave trade. He has spent a lifetime pondering the culinary legacy of the African diaspora and the effects of "hundreds and hundreds of years of migration," he said, on countries like Barbados and Guyana.

Though the results vary from nation to nation, Mr. Smalls said, Caribbean food is a fusion of influences that may include plantains, okra and rice from African slaves; stir-fries and soy sauce from Chinese migrant workers; pork in all forms from Spanish colonists; puff pastry from the French; and myriad curries and flatbreads delivered with indentured servants from India.

Add in the tropical climate — mountains where high-quality coffee grows, brimming seas, verdant backyards laden with coconuts and sweet mango — and you have the makings of some astoundingly good food, said the Guyanese-born chef Raymond Mohan, who owns the Harlem restaurant [LoLo's Seafood Shack](#) with his wife, Leticia Young-Mohan, who goes by Skai.

The menu draws from a wealth of Caribbean influences, including Ms. Young-Mohan's Belizean ancestry, in dishes like boiled shrimp with "coco curry," flaky thyme-scallion johnnycakes with honey butter or achiote-glazed smoked chicken wings.

"It hits your palate and lights it up every time," said Mr. Mohan of the region's deep flavors. "And don't forget the chile pepper."

The chef at Miss Lily's, Adam Schop, has fallen for the floral Scotch bonnet chiles and other Caribbean "seasoning peppers" like sweet ají dulces or hot Grenadas, now found at several of the city's Greenmarket stands. "I chop them up," he said, "and put them in everything I can get."

The upscale restaurant menu is a new context for the ingredients and dishes of these islands, where typically only tourists eat out at formal restaurants, said Mitchell Davis, the executive vice president of the James Beard Foundation, who grew up eating Caribbean food in Toronto. These foods were the provenance of home cooks and food stalls, not the professional kitchen.

"My mother had several very close West Indian friends, mostly from Trinidad and Tobago," Mr. Davis said, "and they were among the best home cooks I've ever known: pumpkin curries, handmade roti, coconut bread, stewed oxtail."

A handful of street vendors are carrying on that tradition, Caribbean-American cooks raised on New York City's dining scene, with its mash-ups, food trucks and blogging chowhounds. They have thrown themselves into

experimenting with the ingredients they grew up with, or honing their technique.

Many of them sell at Smorgasburg, the food markets held around the city, which have added five new Caribbean vendors within the last two years.

One is Island Tingz, where the Trinidadian-American chef Dwayne Bovell (who spends his days in the executive kitchen at JPMorgan's Manhattan headquarters) sells out of his versions of Trini street snacks like the fried fish sandwich known as bake and shark topped with mango chutney slaw, and doubles, two soft fried flatbreads wrapped around curried chickpeas and laced with sweet-sour tamarind sauce.

Samuel Branch, a Barbadian-American private chef who owns the Jamaican patty business [Mr. Cutters](#), makes his pastries by hand in flavors like jerk mushroom in a callaloo crust. He sold the patties this summer at Smorgasburg, at the Brooklyn Whole Foods Market and in the archway under the Manhattan Bridge in Dumbo.

Mr. Branch said he was inspired by reading about Brooklyn's artisan food movement, and decided to apply it to his own culinary heritage. "I want to be part of the new Caribbean food movement," he said.

At his slickly designed Smorgasburg stand [MofonGO](#), Manolo Lopez makes a traditional rendition of that dish, topped with pork and Puerto Rican mayo-ketchup, say, or shrimp in butter-garlic sauce.

This year Mr. Lopez finally quit his day job as a product designer to devote himself to crushing thousands of pounds of plantains to order. Each weekend, he said, diners with Puerto Rican heritage stop by to tell him they like his mofongo.

"A lot of people say, 'This is better than my grandmother's,'" he said. "That's when I know I am doing a good job."

And to Drink ...

Wine with mofongo? Of course. Although mofongo does not derive from a traditional wine-oriented cuisine, wine can go with almost anything. The earthy richness of the plantains and pork, the savor of the garlic and the lift of the shrimp lend themselves most readily to a lively rosé, even though some say the season has passed. A rosé with a little extra body would be ideal, like those from Bandol or an unusual outlier like Clos Cibonne's excellent cuvée made from the rare tibouren grape. If rosés are too hard to find now, pick a crisp white with personality, like a sauvignon blanc, as long as acidity takes precedence over oak and other cellar-induced flavors. As for a red, try a Côtes du Rhône or other grenache-based wine. **ERIC ASIMOV**