



A traditional feast of jerk chicken with callaloo and rice and peas at 3 Dives restaurant. Opposite: Dramatic views and fine dining at Rockhouse.

STORY BY STEVEN PETUSEVSKY ■ PHOTOS BY ZACH STOVALL

EATING NEGRIL

THE FOOD OF THE CARIBBEAN

There's a "food democracy" in Negril I've not found anywhere else on Jamaica. Perhaps that's why this easygoing beach town is my sweet spot, the epicenter of everything culinary on my favorite Caribbean island. It's the simplicity, the almost hedonistic environment, of intersecting ocean and jungle, where fresh ingredients surround me as I walk along the cliffs or on the beach. In places where large hotels are predominant, local cuisine is obscured; homogenized resorts make food that makes their guests comfortable. But here in Negril, where no hotel can be built higher than the tallest palm tree, every- one can find the same fresh dishes, whether tourist or local, regardless of income or social status. When ➡





you eat on the streets of Negril, everyone is the same and food is the common denominator.

As a chef, I find this completely fascinating. The cuisine reflects the national motto, “Out of Many, One People.” Almost every plate reflects the island’s rich cultural tapestry. The Spanish, first to conquer, left behind escovitch and other vinegary marinated dishes. From the English came the patty, the Jamaican turnover inspired by the English pasty. The Maroons, former slaves, cooked over open fires, contributing to the birth of jerk cooking over allspice wood. Then there is curry, brought by West Indian indentured laborers, and Rastafarian ital cuisine — totally vegetarian, devoid of salt and extremely flavorful.

This is why I always return to Negril. I can completely immerse myself in the culture. Even before the bus embarks on the familiar ride from the airport in Mo’ Bay — a trip I’ve made at least 50 times over the past 35 years — my sense memory takes over and sets my heart racing with pleasure. The fumes of congestion give way to the earthy, exotic aroma of tropical vegetation mingled with the wood fires of roadside jerk stands; reggae rhythms pulse through the open windows as we pass through small towns. Our bus stops more than once for crossing goats. I am home.

My first night here, I walk to Best in the West jerk-chicken shack. I take a seat under the hut’s thatch roof, a high-powered Los Angeles attorney on one side of me, a Chicago stockbroker on the other. The captain of a sailing vessel is tucking in across from me, and there’s a group of pot farmers from Mendocino, California, nearby. We savor the spicy food, dipping our soft, sweet coco bread into the fiery sauce. Our playing field is level. None of us cares what the others do; we are bound by simply knowing this jerk shack is here and by the contentment of just being.

It’s the same sense of well-being I felt on my first visit 35 years ago, only now I feel smarter too. I started coming to Negril as a young art student during the early 1970s, searching for peace, paradise and fellow creative spirits. I’m still an



artist at heart, but now I’m a professional chef, a relentless student of global cuisine and a fresh-food fanatic by sheer desire. Every trip to Negril is both a culinary and emotional journey for me.

My work as a chef and writer has allowed me to cook throughout the world. I’ve found that Jamaica offers something unique to the cooking world that others strive to achieve. Most tourists coming from the States know that the vogue right now is to eat local: “Farm-to-table” fare is the fashionable craze. But in Jamaica, there is no other way. Almost everything is grown and harvested within minutes of where it is cooked and eaten. You can see this natural supply chain from the moment you leave the airport. The roadsides are dotted with tiny fruit and vegetable shacks selling seasonal bounty. What appears simply as beautiful flora lining the road is actually ackee, breadfruit, mango and other delicious edibles.

The island bursts with fruit and vegetables wherever you look. Breadfruit hang precariously

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Locally caught lobsters ready for the grill. Opposite: Miguel, one of the three “jerk brothers” at 3 Dives, poses with the day’s catch before the trio sets to work making the jerk sauce, grilling the lobster over allspice charcoal and serving it with a smile.



The Perfect Patty One reason I feel so attached to Negril is the importance of local cooking traditions. The people who make my food have been doing so for as long as I've been coming here. After all these years, they're still jerking chicken, rolling out patties and stewing conch in a rich curry broth, often passing the torch (or rolling pin) to the next generation. Maybe that's why Miss Sonia's (that's her on the top left, opposite) is my pick for a sit-down lunch. I've been coming to her place for years, and she makes some of

the best patties on Jamaica, with all the spectacle that *National Geographic* specials are made from. The process takes time, but that's part of the experience. It's amazing to watch as the patty dough is rolled out in her outdoor kitchen with a bottle on a board cut from a tree stump, then filled with fresh, expertly cooked ingredients. How fresh? If you want a lobster patty and she doesn't have any lobster, she'll send out one of her kids (or grandkids, like Brian, top right, opposite) to get one and then cook it while you wait. Really.



Just Natural is not idly named — the family-owned restaurant sticks to local ingredients for menu items like its fresh fruit smoothies and ackee and saltfish. Opposite: The Mango Lady and her basket of fruit are a welcome fixture on Negril's beach.

from trees. Unbelievable amounts of avocados pack tree branches, waiting to be plucked and eaten. And all around is the smell of fragrant allspice wood smoldering in roadside jerk pits, where chicken is slowly cooking. It never fails: As a local-food advocate — and someone who just loves real, good food — I reach my happy place as soon as I inhale the aroma of fresh thyme, green onions and spicy Scotch bonnet chile peppers on my way through the palms lining the beach.

I've had the pleasure of cooking alongside Negril's "bush cooks," from whom I acquired so much valuable cooking wisdom. The traditional dishes of Jamaica are intense in flavor and uncluttered in taste, relying on ultra-fresh ingredients and simple, age-old cooking methods. It's a singularly natural way of eating. One thing you'll notice is you never feel full or bloated after a good Jamaican meal. My entire soul smiles after I eat here. I feel rejuvenated, sated but healthful, as if I've done something good for myself.

In the beginning of my love affair with Negril's food, I simply appreciated it. When I became a professional chef, the global culinary kaleidoscope came into focus with each plate. Now, as an adherent of the local-food philosophy, I think every meal here is truly sublime. When I order a callaloo patty, I know the fresh greens will be pulled straight from the ground and

prepared simply. If I'm in the mood for seafood, I count on the fact that my snapper, parrotfish or shrimp (sometimes called "swims") are coming from a little dugout docked off the beach. In fact, I may have met my snapper-escovitch lunch earlier in the day while snorkeling in the intense blue-green waters. And as I stroll the landscape, I take care to walk around the patches of fresh thyme and green onions so as not to disturb them before they go into my rice and peas.

Eating in Negril is improv theater at its finest. There's hustle and bustle in every corner. As you walk along the jungle where it meets the beach, you'll come across food shacks selling freshly cut fruit, tropical drinks, grilled lobster or just-baked patties. Reggae music blasts along the shore and through the bush, providing a melodic backdrop. Small boats drift ashore with the daily catch; food vendors walk the sand carrying baskets of fruit picked moments ago or coco bread just pulled from the oven. It's a nonstop spectacle of people and food.

Negril is divided naturally into two zones: beach and cliffs, each with its own rhythm. Many people like the cliffs — their elevation and dense, jungly vegetation lend a secluded, laid-back vibe. But while I prefer the beach for its constant action and breathtaking turquoise water, being



Street Food, Negril Style

Negril is one of the few places I've been where the food comes to you. Just pick a spot on the sand and wait for the food hawkers to come by with handmade Jamaican patties, flaky coconut pastries called *gizzarda*, grilled lobster or ripe fruit — all delivered to your lap. My favorites are fixtures on Negril's beach whose nicknames are their calling cards:

The Mango Lady wears a giant basket of fruit on her head. You have never tasted a mango like this, ever. Huge, super-sweet and filled with nectar and creamy bright-orange flesh, they almost taste like artificial mango candy.

The Patty Guy pedals around with a warming box mounted to his bicycle, selling incredible patties: curried pumpkin, ginger-spiked curry-chicken roti and beef patties that will have you breaking into a sweat in three bites.

The Bakery Man walks the beach with a large cardboard box on his head filled with soft white coco bread, coconut pies, banana bread, pastries and other goodies, including gizzardas and other traditional local sweets.

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Best Beach Jerk Sauce

Jamaicans almost never share their family jerk secrets, but this recipe was given to me years ago (albeit reluctantly) by my Jamaican sous-chef, Chris, and I've tweaked it myself through the years. Puree the ingredients listed below in a food processor or blender until smooth, then rub it on chicken, pork, fish, tofu, shrimp or red meat and marinate the protein overnight; any leftover sauce will keep for weeks in the refrigerator.

1/4 CUP peanut or canola oil; **2 TBSP.** fresh thyme; **1 BUNCH** scallions, chopped; **1-INCH-THICK** piece fresh ginger, chopped; **4-6** garlic cloves, peeled; **2** Scotch bonnet peppers; **8** allspice berries, smashed; **1 TBSP.** black peppercorns; **1 TBSP.** nutmeg, ground; **2** cinnamon sticks, broken; **2 TBSP.** soy sauce; **2 TBSP.** ketchup; **1/4 CUP** dark brown sugar; Juice of **2 LIMES**

TIP: Wear gloves when handling peppers!

Chef Steve's Glossary of JAMAICAN Food

Ackee One of Jamaica's national treasures, this fruit is an island favorite. The flesh must be eaten ripe, or it is very toxic. It's often cooked with saltfish but is wonderful on its own too. It is buttery and much like scrambled eggs.

Allspice A dark brown berry, known locally as **pimento**, that incorporates the flavors of nutmeg, clove and cinnamon. It's used in many local recipes. Allspice (or pimento) wood is also the traditional jerk-fire choice; you can smell the aromatic smoke throughout Negril.

Bammy Deep-fried cassava bread that's typically served with fish or on the side with breakfast.

Breadfruit This large round fruit is seen hanging from many a tree all over the island. It was once viewed as a nuisance (and was the cause of the mutiny in the movie *Mutiny on the Bounty*) but is now a staple of the Jamaican diet. Starchy and comforting, it's typically roasted over an open fire or made into soups and stews.

Calabaza Known to Jamaicans as pumpkin, it has a rich flavor and bright-orange flesh, and is found everywhere. It's used to make soups, stews and patties.

Callaloo This healthy green is reminiscent of spinach and frequently used in patty fillings or as a side dish with fish or ackee. Sauteing it with garlic and hot peppers brings out the flavor.

Chayote Known locally as cho cho, this delicately flavored gourd takes on the flavors of whatever dish it's in; it's often cooked in soups or stews, stuffed, or steamed with carrots and fresh thyme.

Conch Served all over Negril, this massive gastropod with the iconic shell is like a clam on steroids. Impossible to chew until tenderized, it makes incredible soups and stews and is also delicious when curried or grilled.

Escovitch Named for the Spanish word for pickle, *escabeche*, this cooking method is usually reserved for fish: The fillets are browned, then marinated overnight in vinegar, spices, chile peppers and oil. (For a shrimp version, go to ctltravelmag.com/shrimpescovitch.)

Jerk A method of cooking as well as a seasoning, jerk is served

all over the island, and whether using chicken, pork, shrimp or fish, jerk masters each have their own secret recipe. (Such as the one I swear by, opposite.)

Okra Originally imported from Africa, okra grows across the island and is typically found in soups and stews.

Peas Jamaicans call any bean a "pea." Most common are pigeon peas (also referred to as gungo peas) and kidney beans, which are used in classic rice-and-pea dishes. Rice and peas accompanies almost all Jamaican dishes and is a valuable source of protein.

Rundown A thick stew, usually made with fish, that always includes coconut milk, green onions, thyme, chile peppers and vinegar. It is heaven on earth.

Saltfish Also known as *bacalao*, this dried cod is a national dish when combined with ackee. It's also made into fritters.

Scotch Bonnet Fiery, fruity and an integral ingredient in many Jamaican recipes, this small pepper packs a powerful punch — eat with caution your first few days. (My Jamaican friends taught me to put out the fire with sugar on the tongue, but downing some dairy also cools the heat.)

Sorrel This is not the green sorrel leaf stateside cooks are familiar with but the petals of a deep red flower called roselle. At Christmas, it's made into a sweet drink that's like nectar.

Stamp and Go Another name for a hot and spicy fritter that can be made from a great variety of ingredients — fantastic as a snack.

Yam Not to be confused with the orange staple of kitchens throughout the American South, this starchy tuber is huge, with white flesh. It is often roasted over open fires or made into hearty soups.





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able to enjoy the best of both is yet another facet of Negril's enduring appeal for me. My personal game plan is to stay on the beach, then head up to the cliffs for dinners and side trips when I'm ready for something a little different.

This, for me, is the real Jamaica. There's an air of immediacy, a culinary primitivism here that I don't feel in any other place. In Negril I find complete contentment in just walking the beach and scoping out where the food shacks are and what they're serving that day, knowing it's coming to me straight from the earth — or sea. When the mood strikes, I find an accommodating spot and do as I please: grab a bite, go for a swim or bask in the sun like a lizard, then repeat the process in any order through the morning and into the afternoon.

If eating here is an organic experience, drinking is no different. Ting, the local grapefruit soda, is the way I start my day, but as afternoon approaches, I graduate to Red Stripe or, better yet, head for one of the ubiquitous rum huts along

the beach. I watch as the barman pulls a fresh banana from the bunch, adds a ripe papaya and a soursop, then purees it all with ice and Jamaican rum. It's local food — and drink — at its finest.

My dining routine in Negril

is a way to reconnect with the people and food I've come to cherish. For a foodie like me, it's a daylong affair. In the morning I head to the beach to wait for the Mango Lady (see p. 55) to come by and peel a fresh mango or papaya for me. Then I move on to a cup of homegrown Blue Mountain coffee, which, thankfully, is served everywhere, along with a dense banana or other fruit bread.

When I crave a traditional Jamaican breakfast, I venture to my favorite breakfast place, Sweet Spot, for a plate piled with ackee and saltfish, roasted or boiled banana, sauteed callaloo, and bammy or festival, local doughnuts of sorts, heavy but wonderful. For lunch, I improvise on either the beach or the cliffs. Miss Sonia's (see p. 53) is a must on every trip, but I also stop by the small beachside huts for fresh-baked patties or a bowl of chunky soup. I often succumb to some of the beach hawkers too, whether I indulge in a pumpkin patty or a bag of freshly roasted peanuts.

Dinner is my favorite part of the day, when I visit my go-to haunts, eat amazingly fresh food and catch up with the owners I've befriended through the years. It also inspires a dream I've held almost as long as I've been coming here: a beautiful little seaside restaurant that serves modern Jamaican food with a twist called Kojak's on the Beach (in honor of the nickname my local friends have given me and my bald head). I'm not taking reservations just yet, but check with the Mango Lady the next time she strolls by.

Steven Petusevsky, aka Chef Steve, is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America and a passionate advocate of local food and natural cooking. He is a frequent contributor to Relish.com, pens the Vegetarian Today column for the Chicago Tribune News Service and is the author of The Whole Foods Market Cookbook (Clarkson Potter, \$25.95).

The eggplant special with a side of fried plantains and bammy at Just Natural. Opposite: Pushcart, the casual restaurant at Rockhouse, serves up Jamaican street food (hence the name) in a slightly more refined setting.

