

Eating across Trinidad and Tobago

T&T's "sweet hand" food is like music to the mouth



Text and Photos by Chelle Koster Walton

“Cashew wine?” he asked, proffering a mysterious unlabeled bottle with his leathery hand. When I hesitated, he asked, “You want taste?” There among tables mounded with leafy callaloo, beautiful shiny avocados, voluptuous breadfruit, earthy clumps of roots, and packets of golden masala curry powder at the Scarborough market in Tobago, the wine had just enough backyard-still authenticity to pique my interest.

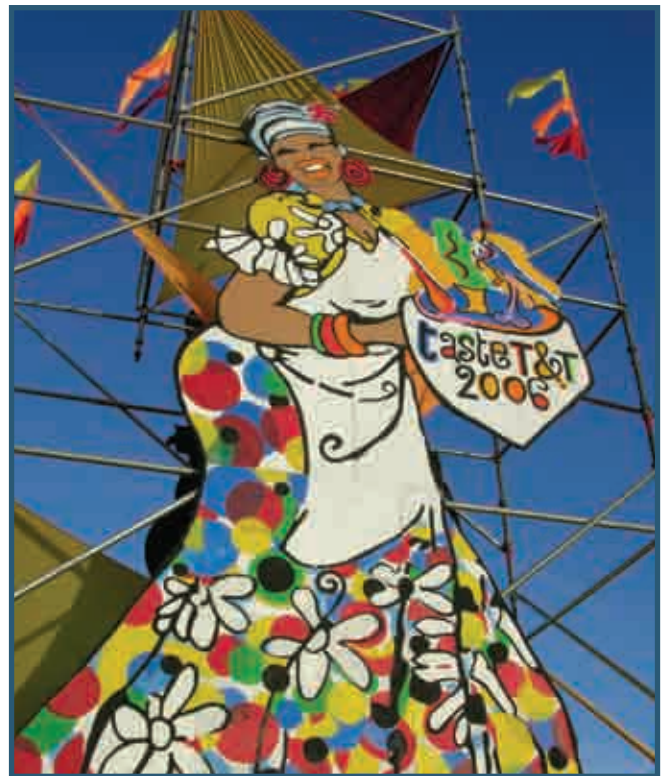
“You try et now?” he asked, extending a capful. A hint of vinegar tickled my tongue before the alcohol exploded, sucking out my breath like a strike of Kentucky white lightning. It tasted exactly like the island nation of Trinidad and Tobago in one swallow—potent, yes, but with a little vinegar that I like.

The country does its own thing—unlike a lot of Caribbean islands today—with little care for how the tourists will like it, especially when it comes to food and drink. Turns out when you please yourself, you’re that much more attractive to the sort of traveler looking for genuine in a world molded by American whims.

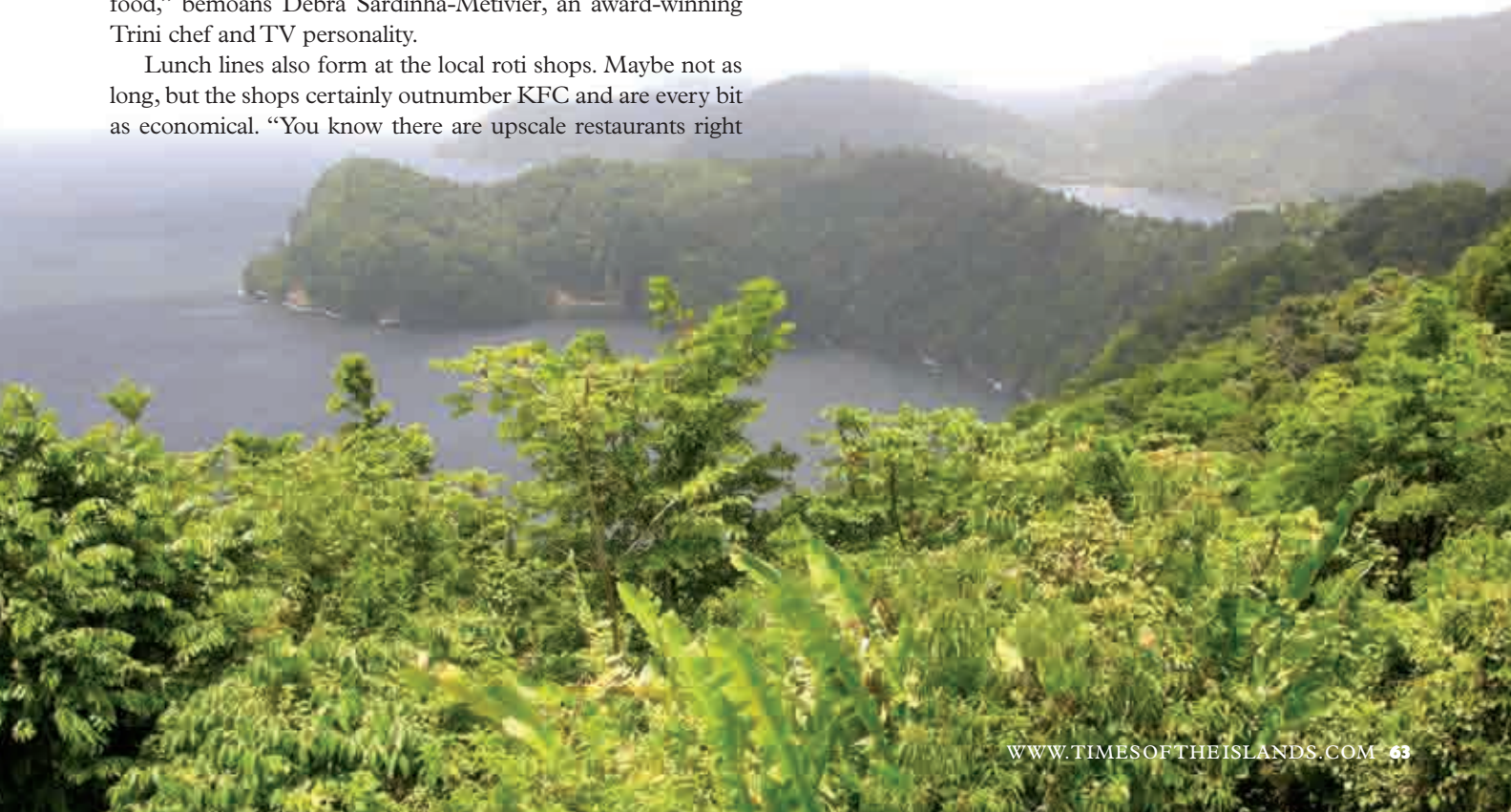
Not to say that T&T, as the country gets shortened, escapes American influence. On the main island of Trinidad, most American visitors are in the business of oil production. Trinidad largely earns its living from its refineries so needs not depend heavily upon tourism. Yet TGI Friday’s, Ruby Tuesday, and twenty-one KFC outlets let you know that the typical American oil guy wants a taste of home when he’s fueling his tank. One of the KFCs downtown in Port of Spain, the country’s capital, stays open twenty-four hours and sells the second-most chicken of any store in the chain. Long lines form at lunchtime, but it’s mostly locals queuing up.

“Because we grew up with good food, I’m a little saddened losing a whole age group to what is our food. They know fast food,” bemoans Debra Sardinha-Metivier, an award-winning Trini chef and TV personality.

Lunch lines also form at the local roti shops. Maybe not as long, but the shops certainly outnumber KFC and are every bit as economical. “You know there are upscale restaurants right



The annual Taste T&T celebrates the cuisine and traditions of Trinidad and Tobago (above); Trinidad’s countryside is as tasty as its food (below); a heritage dancer ponders her next move at the Buccoo Bay goat races in Tobago (opposite).



up the street,” an American expat told us as we stood in line. We assured him we were looking for the genuine Trini lunch experience and were there by choice.

Roti could be considered the national dish of T&T, although chef Raymond Joseph says that due to the country’s mishmash of cultures, it’s hard to name just one example of a national food. The dish comes to the melting pot—or callaloo pot may be more apt—from the nation’s predominant population of East Indians but is Trinidadian by birth. Roti itself is a type of tortilla or pita-like flatbread flecked with ground chick peas that is thin and malleable. At a roti stand or restaurant such as Shiann’s in Port of Spain, where we lunched, the hungry file through a buffet line of fragrant curried dishes such as beef, chicken, goat, duck, and channa (chick peas) with potatoes. Your first choice is wrapped or unwrapped, your second the main filling(s), then hot sauce, and finally side dishes.

someone tastes it, it’s not too refined.”

My goal was to start at the roots and graduate with the cuisine, so after roti I was off to Caracas Bay, where the dish shark & bake arguably got its start in a beach shack that has grown to a handful of purveyors. At a traditional shark & bake, it’s all about condiments; so am I, so we got along just fine. You are handed a paper basket with a baked flat johnnycake sliced open to accommodate chunks of deep-fried shark meat (or kingfish, mahi, or shrimp). You dress it with your choice of lettuce, pickled mango, tomatoes, and a number of sauces from thousand island or garlic to tamarind, oyster, hot pepper, or *chadon beni*, a local herb that’s cilantro-like in taste. Wash it down with Carib beer (or a Stag, if you’re a “manly man”), and you’re ready to hit the beach.

Shark & bake became my new favorite breakfast while in T&T. You don’t have to eat it for breakfast, but they do at

At a roadside stand, oversized jars filled with exotic contents were more luring than a candy shop. A sample costs you under a quarter, and the green-on-green mountainside view comes free.

“Wrapped” gets you a fat burrito-like bundle you can fire up with local Scotch bonnet sauce that comes in either hot or blazing. “Unwrapped” means you get the roti on the side and the filling loose (we selected several), which works best if you’re eating bone-in chicken or goat. Sides range from *bora* (cut-up foot-long green beans) to sweetened stewed tomato or pumpkin. Locals eat all this, even the unwrapped version, without the aid of flatware, sometimes even without napkins. But there’s a trick to the roti scoop method that I wasn’t getting; I requested a fork.



Femmes du Chalet Breakfast Shack, where rows of local cooks fix breakfast and lunch mostly for the business population in Port of Spain. Saltfish & bake is also a popular choice here.

Another form of Trini fast food, doubles are smaller versions of roti. I sampled one at the Chaguanas Market on its busiest day, Saturday, when the little town’s street clogs with people and the marketplace swells with a bounty of produce, fish, crab, goat, and other

meats. We snacked on snow cones enriched with sweetened condensed milk and slices of green mangoes salted and spiced. I love the way Trinians graze.

At a roadside stand, oversized jars filled with exotic contents were more luring than a candy shop. Pickled hot mango slices, preserved sweet pimento peppers, Surinam cherries, black mangoes, jaw-breaking sesame-packed benne balls: A sample costs you under a quarter, and the green-on-green mountainside view comes free.

Fully versed in street food, road food, beach food, and folk food, I took the Trini food elevator up. At Cascadia Hotel, I sampled an approximation of the culinary competition’s winning nonalcoholic beverage prepared by Raymond Edwards, as his colleague, Chef Joseph, explained that the Taste of the Caribbean competition ran *Iron Chef*-style, where each team



Jars of goodies at a roadside stand in Trinidad; Scotch bonnet peppers at the Chaguanas Market (above)



received a “mystery basket” of ingredients they were required to use. Edwards, who believes cocktails are “liquid food,” proved his theory by flavoring his Soca (named for the local strain of calypso) with the ubiquitous pimento pepper, a savory but mild local variety. It gave a new dimension to the fruity drink rimmed with spices. Another of his winning inventions, the Abracadabra, blends together vodka, avocados, and cream.

As for the team of chefs, one of its award winners was curried lamb pot pie, putting to use T&T’s love of curry spices. That night at Mélange Restaurant, among a row of fine eateries along Ariapita Avenue in Port of Spain, we sampled the curried crab that, along with doughy dumplings, makes up Tobago’s signature dish. Mélange earns its name by swirling classic French into T&T’s cultural stew. A typical example on the changing menu at the cozy, *maison*-like restaurant would be

Clockwise from top left: The Saturday market in the village of Chaguanas; a heritage dancer at the Buccoo Bay goat races in Tobago; French cuisine with a tropical twist at Seahorse Inn Restaurant



pepper-crust pork tenderloin with cassava and wild rice cakes or stuffed chicken breast with a coconut crust and port wine sauce. A snifter of Trinidad-brewed Angostura 1824 aged rum caps the experience.

To taste the British in Trinidad's heritage, we repaired one afternoon to the Pax Guest House at the Mount St. Benedict monastery, where the good monks make their own brown bread, honey, and yogurt and have traditionally welcomed pilgrims and other visitors to rest and eat. Gracious proprietor Gerald Ramsawak has resurrected an old tradition of afternoon tea and serves internationally themed goodies made from the recipes of local ambassadors' wives. Brown bread, Pax honey, curried egg sandwiches, frozen Dutch chocolate cake, guava jelly, and sesame and cheese scones add global allure to the peaceful, hilltop setting where birders and professors gather.

Tobago bears little resemblance to Trinidad except for the beauty of its ravishing mountainous countryside. More West Indian than East Indian in population and country cousin to Trinidad's city mouse, it has strong culinary traditions of its own based on its agricultural and fishing heritage. In Charlotteville, which tumbles down mountain cleavage to the sea, cocoa



grew profusely until Hurricane Flora in 1962. The town still produces a small amount and sells it at festivals, where locals perform the traditional cocoa dance (they polish the seeds with their feet). Kariwak Village resort near the airport serves the cocoa for breakfast along with a daily local special. On the day of my visit, it was coconut bake and fresh fish *boljol*, a spicy, minced, refreshing dish usually made with saltfish.

The resort's restaurant—open-air and breeze-cooled like most in Tobago—also serves lunch and dinner featuring native-infused fare such as chicken with basil and coconut, made with homegrown herbs and embellished with homemade salad dressings, yogurt, breads, and ice cream. Like many Tobago establishments, it specializes in healthy and vegetarian cuisine.

Tobago likes to party as much as it likes to eat, and the two invariably go together. At the semi-annual Goat and Crab Races I attended at Buccoo Bay, the smell of smoke and barbecue turned the air mouthwatering. Handwritten signs advertised goat stew and curried crab, which seemed a little insensitive to the racers, I thought, or perhaps it was incentive. Buccoo Bay throws a "Sunday School" party every week with food and live music. Also on Sundays, villages take turns hosting a "harvest," where locals and visitors can promenade from house to



From top to bottom: Visual and culinary art at Mélange Restaurant; Chef Raymond Joseph (left) and bartender Raymond Edwards, members of Trinidad and Tobago's team at the most recent Taste of the Caribbean competition; a seaside lunch at the Hilton in Tobago

house for tastes of local favorites, including exotic wild meats such as iguana and agouti.

Like in Trinidad, fine Tobago chefs strive to sweeten their gourmet pots with traditions of old. At capital city Scarborough's darling Blue Crab Restaurant, Alison Sardinha (who so happens to be mother to Sardinha-Metivier) delights guests with the flavor of her sweet and sassy personality and her classic lunchtime renditions of flying fish fritters, grilled kingfish, breadfruit salad (a tasty down-island twist on potato salad), *coo-coo* (okra polenta), and callaloo. At the Hilton Tobago Golf and Spa Resort, I sampled a nouveau interpretation of callaloo, pureed and milder than most but made with the requisite coconut milk, the magical ingredient of much that is flavor- and waistband-bursting about Tobago.

Tourism matters much more to Tobago than it does to Trinidad. Most of its top restaurants reside at upscale resorts and along the leeward resort coast's Shirvan Road, Tobago's equivalent of Trinidad's Ariapita Avenue but with goats and roosters instead of lights and traffic. Magnificent, unexpected things happen at these rarified restaurants: grilled lobster with polenta and Creole sauce at Coco Reef Resort's Tamaras Restaurant and fish stew at its Coco Café around the corner in Crown Point; rack of spring lamb with port and guava sauce and an impressive wine menu at beachside Seahorse Inn; wine-poached mahi on black beans at the Villas at Stone Haven's hilltop Pavilion Restaurant. Feasts fit for a gourmet, every one.

But the grandest food orgy of all I experienced was the two-night Taste of T&T in Port of Spain, where the best local chefs—sixteen total—gathered to prepare tastes of their specialties, while others performed demonstrations and local costumed dancers, steel-drum bands, and school groups entertained. I tasted tandoori drumsticks, nutmeg-horseradish creamed potatoes, guava-glazed grilled kingfish, Creole coconut shrimp, and more, all obviously prepared with multicultural influences and with, as Sardinha-Metivier called it, the “sweet hand.” Plus a feisty touch of vinegar. 🍷

Chelle Koster Walton is Times of the Islands' travel editor and also contributes to Fodor's Bahamas guide and Caribbean Travel & Life magazine.



Goats and their owners get a workout at Tobago's goat races; the view is as good as the food at Pavilion Restaurant (below).

If you go:

For more information about the restaurants mentioned in this story, please see below.

Blue Crab Restaurant, Tobago,
868-639-2737, www.tobagobluecrab.com

Café Coco, Tobago,
868-639-0996, www.cocoreef.com

Cascadia Hotel, Trinidad,
868-623-4208, www.cascadiahotel.com

Kariwak Village, Tobago,
868-639-8442, www.kariwak.com

Mélange Restaurant, Trinidad,
868-628-8687, www.melangetrinidad.com

Pavilion Restaurant, Tobago,
868-639-0361, www.stonehavenvillas.com

Pax Guest House, Trinidad,
868-662-4084, www.paxguesthouse.com

Seahorse Inn Restaurant, Tobago,
868-639-0686, www.seahorseinntobago.com

Tamaras, Tobago,
868-639-8571, www.cocoreef.com

For more information about visiting Trinidad and Tobago, contact the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Tourism at 800-816-7541 or www.visitnt.com or Tobago Tourism at 868-639-2125 or www.visitstobago.gov.tt.

