

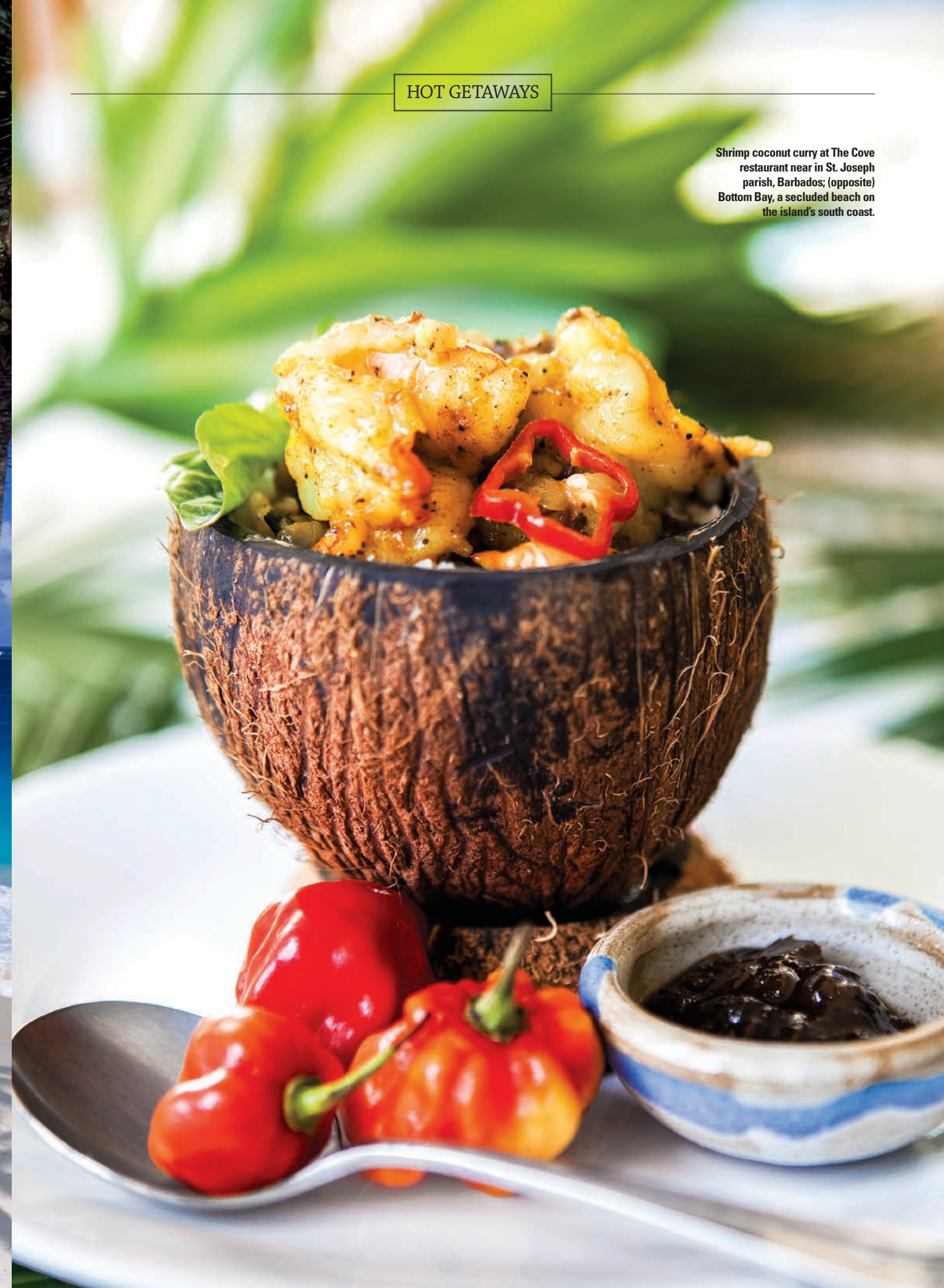
Bajan *Spice*

With culinary traditions descended from the British, Barbados might not seem an obvious food destination – but as the annual Barbados Food & Wine and Rum Festival proves, this island is cooking

BY AARON GULLEY

HOT GETAWAYS

Shrimp coconut curry at The Cove restaurant near in St. Joseph parish, Barbados; (opposite) Bottom Bay, a secluded beach on the island's south coast.





iPad and online users: get celebrity chef Marcus Samuelsson's recipe for "yardbird" fried chicken.

(top) Chef Marcus Samuelsson prepares African-style steak tartare for a rapt crowd at the Hilton Barbados during the Barbados Food & Wine and Rum Festival; (middle, left to right) okra sizzles on a plancha grill during a cooking demo; the Hilton boasts a beachfront pool in Bridgetown; a dish of clams steamed in white wine plates up pretty; (below) pickled root vegetables adorn an avocado dish served to guests.



ON A SWELTERING MORNING IN Barbados, Marcus Samuelsson, an Ethiopian-born, Swedish-raised celebrity chef from New York, is whipping up an African rendition of the classic French steak tartare. A crowd of onlookers in the tented beach-side demonstration kitchen at the Hilton Barbados Resort in Bridgetown, dab their brows and crane to see as Samuelsson cubes U.S.-bred beef filets, stir-fries roasted peppers and thyme in Indian ghee and sears the beef in the aromatic fat. Next, he sautés shrimp and pickled veggies and tosses them in an endive and walnut salad. Then he browns pork tenderloins.

The sharp aromas make my stomach grumble in anticipation, but this isn't exactly the Caribbean feast I envisioned when I signed up for the Barbados Food & Wine and Rum Festival. Though I've come to this far-flung spot – the easternmost island nation in the

Caribbean, in the middle of the Windward Islands – expecting island fare, Samuelsson's tasting menu sounds more like a United Nations potluck. And now the chef is talking about how to infuse bourbon, that classic American tippie, with figs or peanuts. Where is the jerk chicken, the plantain, the callaloo, the conch chowder?



After Samuelsson is finished cooking, I ease into the melée of eager foodies surging toward the counter and eventually get close enough to talk to him. How does his demonstration reflect the local food culture, I wonder. And why is the festival held in Barbados? He flashes me a toothy smile and gives me a slick answer about the island's multicultural heritage, citing influences from England, Spain, Portugal, Africa, India and even China.

"It's an exciting time because every world cuisine has its voice and its place at the table – even this little island," Samuelsson says before a heavyset woman from Florida corners him for an autograph. As he's swallowed up by the scrum of hungry admirers, he motions around at the nearby stand of palms and the lapis water sifting flaxen sand behind him. "Besides, who doesn't want to come to Barbados?"

Fair enough, and it's true that Samuelsson's diverse background and ability to meld ideas from around the globe into his cooking make him the ideal festival ambassador. But I also

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A street vendor sells fruit in Speightstown, Barbados.

find the answer unsatisfying. I travel to discover the idiosyncrasies of a place, the distinctive flavours and spices that set it apart from everywhere else. The four-day festival's schedule is enough to satiate any foodie – with cooking demos by celebrity chefs Mark McEwan, the Food Network's Anne Burrell and Samuelsson, seminars on wine and spirits, and lavish balls each night – but it's thin on local chefs and cuisine. So I resolve that over the next three

days, not only will I attend the festival's slew of events, I'll also head off on my own in search of the true flavours of Barbados.

In the meantime, I jostle through the crowd and manage to land squarely in front of the platter of Samuelsson's Ethiopian beef tartare, which is disappearing fast. I pop a cube into my mouth, and the spicy, sweet, unctuous meat melts any ambivalence I was feeling. I look past the crowd to the sapphire bay



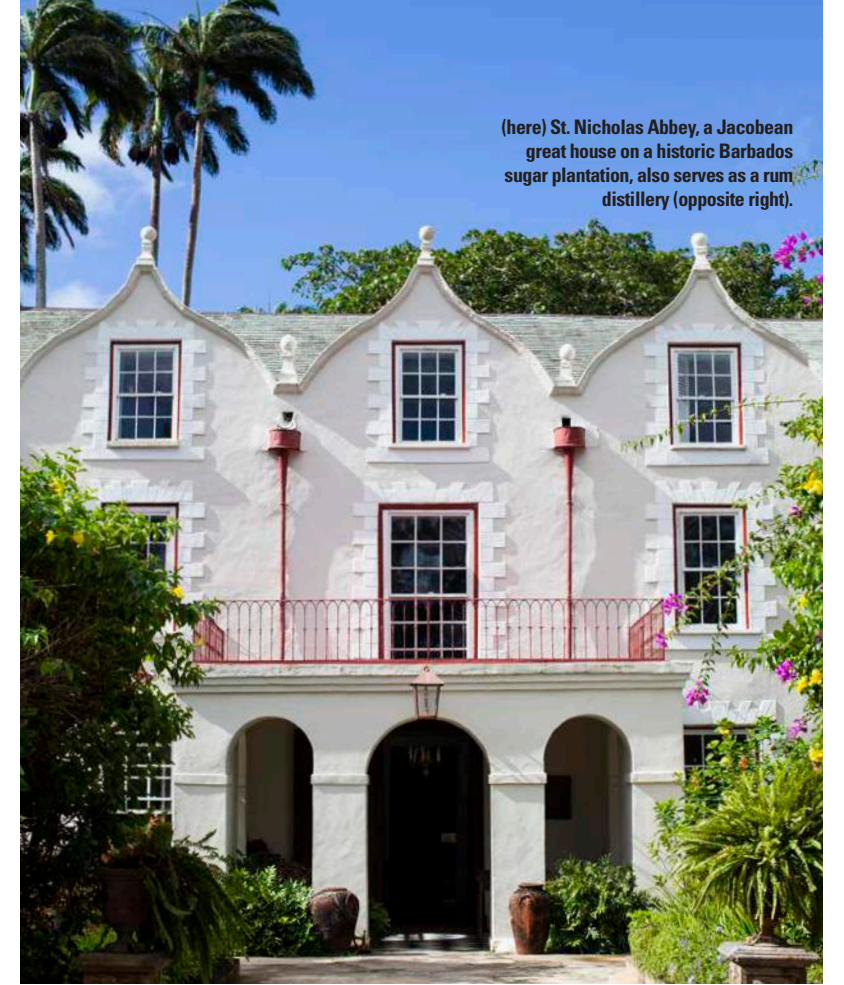
GUY HARROP/MAXX IMAGES, JENN JUDGE

and realize that on some level Samuelsson is right: good food, good setting – what more do you want?

Though the event's name – the Barbados Food & Wine and Rum Festival – seems to suggest that the island's favourite spirit was a late addition to the menu, the truth is that a party in Barbados without the local spirit is like a mai tai without the mini umbrella. (The strange diction is actually a nod to the event's magazine sponsor, *Food & Wine*.) The island has produced sugar since the British began planting cane in the early 17th century, and it's home to a handful of distilleries, including globally renowned Mount Gay. One of the first events of the festival is a rum seminar with Chesterfield Browne, international brand ambassador and mixologist for Mount Gay. I head for the workshop at the Hilton as much to find out what such an awesome-sounding job entails as to hear about rum.

It's only 11 a.m., but the Mount Gay representatives are passing out spiked punch at the door, which has everyone talking and laughing before the seminar even begins. Browne, a jolly Barbadian with a full-moon face and the easy manner of a bartender, walks us through the lore of rum, noting that 17th-century voyagers carried casks back to Europe as proof of their passage, which allowed the spirit to age and explains its long associations with sailing.

JENN JUDGE



(here) St. Nicholas Abbey, a Jacobean great house on a historic Barbados sugar plantation, also serves as a rum distillery (opposite right).



Fried crab backs and (opposite) a cook at Mr. Delicious Snack Bar, next to Miami Beach, Barbados.

He also demonstrates a few favourite cocktails, ending each anecdote with a round of drinks. The concoctions are mostly creamy and syrupy – just how many locals like them, according to Browne – and though I prefer my liquor neat, I drink up to be polite.

I'm woozy from the samples when Browne asks how I enjoyed the event, and without thinking I tell

him I'm not a fan of sweet drinks. He smiles and says to stop by Mount Gay sometime so he can make something more to my liking. "Look me up" is one of those empty things you say back home, never expecting to see a person again, but Browne underlines how laid-back and intimate Barbados really is by handing me his number. When I ring him up a few days later, he answers, sets up a tour of the distillery for me, and then suggests I join him for another tasting at St. Nicholas Abbey, a 17th-century sugar plantation in the north of Barbados that has been transformed into a rum distillery. He regales me with more island stories and snifters of Mount Gay 1703 Old Cask selection – served neat, and as smooth as fine cognac.

With my head rum-clouded, I make my way to Queen's Park, a grassy fairground in the centre of Bridgetown that's host to a festival event of local street food. The street names and places I encounter – Tweedside Road, St. Michael's Row – and the flour-white colonial facades are a jarring disconnect from the steamy heat, wild tropical flowers and blazing sunshine. At the field, vendors in tents prepare steaming trays of food while onlookers sit in the shade of tamarind trees and listen to a band blast out lilting reggae.

It might sound cliché, but Barbadians (Bajans in local parlance) move slower than a sailboat on a

(BOTH PAGES) JENN JUDGE



windless day. I stop at a booth and ask about a dish, and the old woman in a hairnet behind the counter barely moves her mouth to croak out "macaroni pie." It's a local version of macaroni and cheese made with Cheddar and a special sauce of mustard, ketchup and local hot peppers. I point to another. "Puddin' 'n' souse," she rasps, which I find out later is pig offal,

Boost Your Health

Even at the most luxurious resorts, travel-related illnesses can become unwanted souvenirs

BY ALLIE CONNOP

Sure, the Caribbean is idyllic, but the most common traveller's ailments can be contracted almost anywhere. You can pick up Hepatitis A, for instance, from food that's been handled by an infected person – or from contaminated water. Unsterilized manicure tools can carry Hepatitis B. Luckily, a vaccination called Twinrix protects against both. This series of three shots costs about \$210 and can be spread out over six months, or compressed into one month before you travel. A fourth shot, taken 12 months later, ensures 20 years of immunity and stress-free Caribbean spa days.

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feet, snout and other extras splashed in a vinegar and fresh parsley sauce and served with a whack of baked, mashed sweet potatoes. It tastes much better than it sounds. I also order a pile of salty, tangy, fried and breaded balls called fish cakes, which go down easy with an icy local Banks lager. It's simple, hearty fare that cuts the alcohol in my system and tastes about right for this stifling afternoon. I have a whole sightseeing agenda planned, but with the sun on my face and the beer and heavy food in my belly, I decide instead to spend the afternoon like a local: sitting still, watching the tide of people and relaxing to the tunes.

Local fare is on the menu again that night at the manicured Lion Castle Polo Estate in the northwestern St. Thomas Parish, where the festival hosts a gala banquet showcasing food from 12 chefs, half locals and half visitors. In the monumental event tent, men in linen pants and blazers accompany women in short sequined dresses and tall heels between restaurant displays serving tapas-size portions. It's as posh as the afternoon event was unpretentious, and the food is just as different. The fish cakes at one booth are tempura-light. There's a rendition of macaroni pie that's plated as beautifully as modern sculpture and tastes as creamy and delicate as béchamel. And one chef's lemongrass and ginger-infused pork loin is accompanied by truffle-scented white yams instead of sweet potatoes. This is Bajan fare as seen through an international lens, and it makes me realize that in this day of globalization, part of the appeal of a festival like this one is the exchange of ideas and the food fusions that result.

It's almost impossible to reconcile the afternoon and evening experiences, except for the sultry heat, the throb of salsa- and reggae-tinged beats and the free flow of beer and rum. As the night wears on and the banquet floor transforms from fine dining hall to full-on dance party, I feel the familiar and welcome Bajan haze clouding my head. The flavours of Barbados, it turns out, transcend its food scene, and I find myself hoping the night will go on and on.

I wake the next morning with a headache stronger than a bottle of Mount Gay. I'm due for brunch at a well-known local eatery but decide to postpone because the thought of stale restaurant air and big crowds makes my head throb. Instead, I hop a local taxi down the coast to Miami Beach, where I'm told you can find some of the most authentic food on the island. I arrive expecting a chirpy little colonial building with a breezy verandah but find only

a broken-down-Mercedes-bus-turned-eatery with a few plastic tables and chairs scattered in palm shade. The sign on the grille reads "Mr. Delicious Snack Bar."

I'm ready to head elsewhere when I remember something that Marcus Samuelsson said on day one of the festival. "Wherever you travel, go to both sides of town. The really local food . . . that's often where you can find the most intense flavours."

Another seemingly immobile old woman takes my order. I ask for two flying fish cutters.

"Yah want roti?" she asks without flinching.

"What's that?" I ask.

She doesn't move, doesn't speak. I start to wonder if she's dozed off.

"Sure," I say, just to break the impasse.

"And a beer. Banks," I add.

I wander over to a ramshackle table to wait. Afternoon sunlight filters through the hibiscus leaves, and a puff of breeze click-clacks the palm fronds. An elderly man with dreads sitting in a rickety folding chair, one of the only other people nearby, suddenly bursts into an impromptu song about the bird in the treetops. My mind goes momentarily blank, like a trance, until I hear a voice.

"Banks. Banks." The old woman is speaking. "Banks!"

Me? I realize my order is ready, grab it from the bar and walk to a slatted wooden bench by the sea. Inside the oil-stained brown paper bag, I find two local favourites: fried fish filets swaddled in spongy white bread rolls, complete with relish, mayonnaise and Bajan hot sauce, as well as a fist-size dollop of curried chicken and potatoes wrapped up in a flaky Indian flatbread. The flying fish is crispy and succulent at once, and the yellow curry is an ideal counterpoint to the cold, clear Banks lager. It isn't fancy by any means – at home it would be just another fish sandwich and wrap. But here, next to the ocean, after a long night of dancing and drinking, bathed in dappled Caribbean light, it tastes like vacation. That's the thing about culinary tours: food is always better in a stunning place minus the stress of home. And though Barbados may not have the most urbane culinary tradition, the dawdling pace makes you slow down and savour what you eat.

I lie back on the bench and listen to the rhythmic thrum of the sea, and before long I'm fast asleep. When I wake, the sun has set and the ocean air is cooler. I've already missed a cocktail party and I'll probably be late for dinner. But I walk back over to Mr. Delicious to place another order anyway. **W**

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