

A TASTE OF CAYMANIAN

THE ISLAND OF GRAND CAYMAN MAY BE INFAMOUS AS A HAVEN FOR UNTAXED WEALTH BUT, AS TODD PITOCK FINDS, IT'S ALSO THE CULINARY CENTRE OF THE CARIBBEAN.

Let's get something out of the way at the top: Cayman is pronounced cay-MAN, like caveman without the 'v', not CAY-mun. The main people who know this, or care, are its 56,000 residents, who greet visitors with a warmth that can feel almost like love, even though the mispronunciation makes some of them bite down as they smile.

The Caymans consist of three dollops of land speckling the Caribbean. Cuba hovers like an arched eyebrow due north, Jamaica like a birthmark to the east, and Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula to the west. The largest island is Grand Cayman, a name that suggests it's larger than a spit of 197 square kilometres, or about a fifth of the area of Auckland. The other two are Little Cayman, which has 60 residents and is called 'Little', and the Cayman Brac, whose bluff, or brac, is popular with rock climbers.

In short, the Caymans are small. They are a dependency of the UK similar to Jersey or Bermuda. Like the latter, they have no direct taxation, which has made them a haven for wealth, with hundreds of banks, trusts, insurance and other financial services companies, along with more than 10,000 mutual funds that list the territory as their address. This turf that is so hospitable to growing gardens of money, though, isn't quite so fertile for garden-variety produce, which is mostly imported from America. And, of course, there's a link between money and food. It's hard to make one without the other, and Caymanians, with a living standard on par with Switzerland, can afford to import the raw ingredients and hire the talent to transform them.

Now, although they continue to import most food from the United States, the trend is to use what the soil will grow and work with Caribbean bounty like breadfruit or coconut, sour sop, a tropical fruit that tastes like a combination of pineapple and mango, or to fashion cocktails with fruits like sea grapes.

It's kind of an anomaly, when you build a big reputation but people don't even know how to say your name. Of course, I didn't come to the Caymans to learn how to say it, either.

I came just to eat.





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My weekend coincided with the ninth annual Cayman Cookout Food & Wine Festival, a four-day food event of a rarefied culinary level, settings and imagination. Its first course was a getaway on a private jet to Le Soleil d'Or Resort in the Cayman Brac, one of the two smaller islands, with chef Eric Ripert, of New York's acclaimed Le Bernardin Restaurant, and Terry Peabody, owner of New Zealand winery Craggy Range. My personal opener was Friday evening, where, on a slash of beach, barefoot enthusiasts moved between food stalls manned by some of the planet's great chefs, among them Ripert, Anthony Bourdain and José Andrés. A breeze fanned grill flames as kitchen teams sliced, diced and plated. Here brisket and tongue mixture on a Vietnamese *banh*; there a surf and turf of scallop with strips of Spanish Ibérico; a *kielbasa* with American cheese, bacon jam, crispy bacon and chicharones.

The celebrity quotient brought as much panache as the food. Bourdain, pinching a bottle of beer between his thumb and index finger, acceded to requests for photos but seemed not quite prepared to pretend to like it. José Andrés visited a colleague's massive grill where great hunks of beef blackened above raging

flames. It was how a pack of maniacs would cook, roasting whole dismembered parts, rather than cuts, of beef and yet his crew cut it into bite-size pieces that were uniformly perfect and exquisitely tender and delicious. And Andrés was loving it. Heavy swords – the kind of weapon raiding pirates would have carried – were stuck in the sand, and Andrés pulled them with the look of a good-humoured lunatic, held one up and handed the other to a woman who requested a picture together.

Chef Ripert is one of the reasons why Cayman is the Caribbean's culinary centre. The island had a fairly robust food scene going back even to the 1960s, the same period as its financial services industry took off. But in 2005, Ripert opened Blue by Eric Ripert at the Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman, raising the bar of contemporary haute cuisine. And in 2008 he hosted the inaugural Cayman Cookout, roping in his friends Bourdain and Andrés, and rotating in other A-list chefs. Now there are many more fine restaurants than one could reasonably visit on a long stay. And I was there for just a short one.

The key to these things is, of course, pacing yourself, in food as in drink, and not to fill up too quickly or so completely that

you wake the next morning, or in the middle of the night asking yourself what you have done.

They should run public service announcements: Eat Responsibly.

But then again, who ever does that?

The next morning a strong wind from the northwest battered both surf and turf, lashing palm trees, whipping up the sea and cancelling plans of snorkelling to the island's stingrays. It blew out the candle I held for golf. It had no effect, however, on my desire to explore, or on my appetite, so I rented a car and drove along the highway that bends along the island's perimeter looking for another kind of food experience. Half of Cayman's population comes from 135 other countries, which is really a remarkable statistic, and yet there are indigenous things, including food. Traditional Caymanian dishes include cow foot, turtle and iguana, whose taste can be inferred by its local name – tree chicken.

I passed fish-fry stalls and barbecue stands before pulling into Over the Edge, in Old Man Bay on the north side of Grand Cayman. It looked anonymous enough, a bar and a dining

room with a fine sea view. I contemplated goat curry and jerk chicken before settling on the conch steak, a hearty mollusc whose former residence, a marvellous shell large enough to hold in two hands, I'd seen for sale by roadside vendors. The meat came pounded, breaded and fried – a Caribbean schnitzel – and managed to be both typical and exotic, in that everything breaded and fried tastes similar. But still, it was a large conch.

I ate nothing more, in preparation for my weekend's main event: a pairing dinner at *Avecita*, the signature restaurant at the Kimpton Seafire Resort & Spa, a 266-room hotel that opened in November. The dinner was a kind of joint debut, pairing the wines of the Burgundian winemaker Dominique Lafon and Larry Stone, the master sommelier and owner of *Lingua Franca*, the much-anticipated Willamette Valley, Oregon, winery that has created variations of Burgundy-style Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs.

Moreover, it announced *Avecita* as a heavyweight contender in the Caymans. At Cayman Cookout, executive chef Massimo De Francesca and signature chef Remy Lefebvre had set up the evening's only all-vegetarian (nay, vegan!)



FROM TOP LEFT: Live music enlivens the Cayman Cookout; Burgundian winemaker Dominique Lafon; haute cuisine Cayman style; signature chef Remy Lefebvre.

stall, highlighting locally grown bounty such as charred baby eggplant with burnt eggplant-saga sauce, whole grilled baby marrow with smoked romesco and roasted butternut squash with pumpkin-seed pesto.

We were far from the beach now, though, under the high ceilings, at a high table on high chairs with a view of the wood-fired oven and exhibition kitchen the restaurant was built to feature. AVECITA'S focus is progressive, contemporary Spanish with Mexican influences.

Now, the evening began with amuse bouches. A cube of lamb tartar, the loin diced and lightly folded into a classic tartar dressing with egg yolk emulsion, shallots, brandy, cilantro, then kicked up with espelette pepper, a pulverised and aromatic red South American chilli. A quail egg slowly cooked and seasoned with dried basil and raspberry flaked on top, soft to touch and bite, the yolk like cream. Two fishes: a queen snapper diced with citrus, olive oil and fresh herbs, then battered with tempura and flash fried; and smoked salmon with tarragon vinaigrette served on a saffron cracker.

The first dish was Spanish cod. Salted and reconstituted in water, it was lightly blanched and poached in almond milk and served on a chilled black plate with the petals of a caramelised white onion, sprinkled with dehydrated olives and salt flakes on a liquid base with a red bell pepper infusion from peppers that were roasted and infused with anchovy. For me, the real

essence of the meal began with the second course – a hen and truffle cannelloni with Manchego cheese on a delectable and delicate broth of smoked, roasted lobster shells with saffron and fresh herbs. The layering of pure and clear flavours, which were discernible and yet worked together like instruments in a song, was marvellous.

And yet, the featured dish, the *pièce de résistance*, was still to come: squab, a popular Spanish bird, tender and tiny, here slow-cooked at a low temperature, then finished on the *plancha* to crisp up the skin on both sides and served in a shallow bowl over a molé – Mexico's answer to curry, a base of cocoa with nuts, seeds and chillies. The only drawback (and it was a serious drawback) was that there weren't two or three birds, or maybe even six or eight, because with just one, and even with dessert still to come, I was left feeling teased, even a little mournful. Either from lack of courage or enough good taste, I did not carry my plate to the kitchen and beg for more.

I consoled myself with the remains of *Lingua Franca's* bold and lovely Mimi's Mind Pinor Noir, and considered whether I'd just have to come back next year. **W**