

Food Culture around the World

# Food Culture in the Caribbean



Lynn Marie Houston

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also contributed significantly to religious practices such as Orisha, practiced today mainly in Trinidad and also in Grenada, and Obeah. Blends of African religions with Christianity have produced a number of religions in the Caribbean as well: Vodun, or Vodou (which comes from Benin on the west coast of Africa) in Haiti and Santeria (which comes from the Yoruban peoples of West Africa) in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. These religions are known as syncretistic because they show examples of a blend of religions, specifically a blend of indigenous African spiritual practices with Christian influences from colonial powers. The Rastafarian movement, championed popularly by the late reggae master Bob Marley, is a spiritual and political movement indigenous to Jamaica but founded on many principles of African religious beliefs and Hinduism. In general, scholars summarize Christian religions in the Caribbean by characterizing the Spanish and French Caribbean islands as Catholic, and the British and Dutch Caribbean islands as Protestant; however, they note that in addition to these official religions, for many people, religious practices that blend influences of multiple religions and that draw from folk traditions are the norm.

### THE CARIBBEAN BY REGIONS

In this book, discussions of the Caribbean are broken up into regions of colonial influence: British, French, Spanish, and Dutch. This is not to suggest that in any way these Caribbean territories should continue to be defined by the colonial powers that once controlled them (or the ones that still do), but that the food culture of these regions has been distinctively marked by European settlement and colonial influences and reflects the blending of European food cultures with immigrant and indigenous food cultures. Often, too, official articulations of culture are still linked to the European colonial past. In the following section, distinctions between European colonial powers are not always clear, as Britain, Spain, France, and the Netherlands fought over control of islands in the Caribbean and many islands changed hands over the course of history.

Interisland connections have been forged along the lines of European colonial influences and along linguistic lines, which often go hand in hand. The shared Caribbean historical heritage—in general, moving from European settlement and decimation of indigenous population, importation of African slaves, emancipation of slaves and importation of indentured servants from Asia, independence from colonial forces and emigration, and increasing reliance on tourism—is discussed in relevance to issues impacting food culture, in Chapter 1.



The next introductory section gives background on the history of the political situations and populations in Caribbean territories. The section is broken down by major regions because many islands in these regions share very similar historical, political, and economic characteristics. While not every island in the Caribbean is covered, the major islands and countries defining the regions are addressed.

### **The British Caribbean**

The British-influenced Caribbean extends to the islands of Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Bermuda, the Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos, and the Virgin Islands. When referred to as the Commonwealth Caribbean, this region also includes the mainland countries of Belize and Guyana. These territories are managed by such organizations as the Caribbean Community and Common Market (Caricom) (at which Haiti and the Dominican Republic are included as observers but not active participants), and the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS).

### ***Anguilla***

Anguilla is a dependent territory under British rule. Its people are mainly of African descent. The official language is English and the main religions are Anglican and Methodist. Anguilla used to be considered a single colony with St. Kitts (otherwise known as St. Christopher) and Nevis, but when it tried to declare its independence from these other islands it went back to British control.

### ***Antigua and Barbuda***

The people of Antigua and Barbuda are mainly of African descent. Most of the population lives in the city of St. John's. Barbuda is a coral island off the coast of Antigua. The official language of both territories is English. Barbuda presents a rare example of national development for the Caribbean, as its lands were never used to cultivate sugarcane; its people have always, instead, gained their living by fishing and subsistence farming. Antigua was colonized by the British in 1632, while Barbuda was not colonized until 1678. In 1834, Britain emancipated the slaves in these two territories. Antigua became fully independent in 1981.

### *Bahamas*

The name of the Bahamas comes from the Spanish word *bajamar* meaning shallow seas. Its population is made up of people of African descent, but there are also some British, Greek, and Syrian descendants, as well as Haitians and other West Indians. English is the native language in the Bahamas, but with an influx of Haitian immigrants one can hear French and French Creole being spoken. The Bahamas achieved independence from Britain in 1973.

### *Barbados*

About 90 percent of the population of Barbados is of African descent. The rest of the population is made up of those with European descent and mixed European and African heritage, as well as East Indians. English is the official language, but a Creole English called Bajan is spoken by many. Barbados achieved independence from Britain in 1966 and has one of the most stable political systems in the English Caribbean. Much of its farmland is held by large estates on which peasants work in a system of tenant farming.

### *Dominica*

Dominica was named by Columbus; he saw the island on a Sunday and named it after the Latin *dies dominica*, or the Lord's day. Dominica went back and forth between French and British colonial control for many decades, but it became independent in 1978. Its population is mainly of African descent, but Dominica also has one of the largest population of Carib descendants in the area. While English is the official language, French patois is spoken, and many place names are derived from Carib words. Dominica is a rather poor country and lacks the tourist facilities of most of the other Caribbean islands. It has had a recent history of extremely devastating hurricanes. In 1979, Hurricane David almost destroyed the entire agricultural system of the island, washing away most of its topsoil.

### *Jamaica*

Columbus named this island Santiago, but it has since reclaimed a derivation of its indigenous name *Xaymaca* (meaning land of wood and water). The British seized Jamaica from Spain in 1655 and, in the process, the existent slaves fled into the mountains. There they formed commu-

nities, living in the fierce wilderness, and became known as the Maroons (derived from the Spanish word *cimarrón*, meaning wild or untamed. During British occupation, other slaves joined these communities until they were emancipated in 1833. In 1930, Marcus Garvey became an outspoken labor leader and led a revolt to change conditions for the working class. Jamaica achieved independence in 1962 and has become a commonwealth. Jamaica's population is predominately Afro-Caribbean and mulatto descendants of slaves, with small communities of British, Indians, Chinese, Syrians, Portuguese, and Germans. English is the official language, but English Creole (a mix of English, African languages, Spanish, and even French) is widely spoken. Fishing is a major way of life, supporting some 150,000 people.

### *St. Kitts and Nevis*

Although Columbus named one of these islands St. Christopher after his patron saint, the name was shortened later by British colonists to St. Kitts. The name Nevis comes from Columbus's description of the clouds on the island's mountains as *las nieves* or snowy. St. Kitts and Nevis are two islands that have been considered, together, as a sovereign state since achieving independence in 1983. Their population is mainly of African descent with a small percentage of mulattos, east Indians, and white Europeans.

### *St. Lucia*

Both the French and the British vied for control of this island during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it exchanged hands many times. Although it is considered part of the English-influenced Caribbean, achieving independence from Britain in 1979, the French influence can be seen in the popularly spoken French patois (despite the official language being English) and the high percentage of Roman Catholics. Its population consists of a majority of Afro-Caribbeans, with a small mulatto, white European, and east Indian population.

### *Virgin Islands*

The Virgin Islands are broken up into the U.S. islands, which are a territory of the United States, and the British islands, which were a former British colony. The U.S. group is made up of St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John, while the British group is made up of, most notably, Tortola, Virgin Gorda, and Anegada. The population of the Virgin Islands is mainly descendants

of African slaves, but immigration from Puerto Rico and from the mainland United States has increased the population in recent years. Descendants of French Huguenots make up a distinct ethnic group and are called the Chachas. The official language is English, but a dialect termed Calypso is spoken. Also, French is spoken on St. Thomas and some Spanish is spoken on St. Croix, which has a large Puerto Rican immigrant population.

### *Trinidad and Tobago*

The islands of Trinidad and Tobago together constitute an independent republic since winning independence from Britain in 1962. The set of islands are linguistically diverse. While English is the official language, some east Indian languages are spoken and there are also four different Creole languages spoken popularly: Trinidad English, French Creole, Spanish Creole, and Manzanillan, a mix of English, Spanish, and several different African languages.

### *The French Caribbean*

The French Caribbean includes Haiti and the islands of Guadeloupe, Martinique, St. Barth, and St. Martin (the French side) in the Eastern Caribbean. Sometimes the South American island of French Guyana is even considered part of the French Caribbean.

### *Haiti*

Haiti occupies the western third of the island of Hispaniola, shared with the Dominican Republic. The Treaty of Rijswijk gave the land to France from Spain, and the French named it Saint-Domingue. A slave rebellion started in the 1790s gave Haiti its independence in 1804, making it the first black republic in the Americas, and the second country in the Americas, after the United States, to gain freedom from colonial rule. Haiti's independence was achieved partly due to progress made by Toussaint-Louverture, a former slave, who had become governor in 1801, but a black army formed by Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe achieved the final victory over the French. After independence, the Taino name Haiti, meaning mountainous land, was reclaimed. In 1822, Santo Domingo (the Dominican Republic) was invaded by Haiti, but by 1844 they had been expelled; Haiti and neighboring Dominican Republic have had a rather violent history of cohabitation. The Haitian government itself is characterized by a history of popular uprisings and assassinations of

political leaders. In 1957, François Duvalier (known as Papa Doc) became president and enacted a police state, declaring himself president for life. Toward the end of his life, he designated his son, Jean-Claude, known as Baby Doc, as the next president. His time in office was ended by a popular uprising in 1986. In 1990, Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected in the first free elections in Haiti but was ousted the next year by the military. After the United States imposed a trade embargo, tens of thousands of Haitians attempted to flee the country to the United States by boat. Aristide returned in 1994, served his term until 1996, and was reelected in 2000. In the beginning of 2004, popular uprisings again forced Aristide to give up his office and flee the country.

Most Haitians are of African descent. Like the majority of areas in the Caribbean, most of Haiti's natural landscape has been lost due to practices of agriculture, grazing, and timber production. Haiti's culture is what is known as Creole, a mixture of Western and African influences; it shares this distinct culture with other islands like Guadeloupe, Dominica, Martinique, and St. Lucia. Its official languages are Haitian Creole and French. Unlike many other Caribbean countries, malaria is still a major health problem for Haitians. Many lack proper medical treatment as Haiti is one of the economically poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. Its material culture, however, is rich.

### *Guadeloupe*

Guadeloupe is an overseas department of France. The Carib name for the land was *karukera*, meaning island of beautiful waters. Colonial control of the island went back and forth between the French and the British. In 1703, Jean-Baptiste Labat led slaves in armed revolt against British occupation and helped bring the island to prosperity by founding sugar refineries there. Emancipation for slaves was achieved in 1848. The population of Guadeloupe is mainly Creole of mixed European and African descent. St. Barth and St. Martin are dependencies of Guadeloupe and have a larger white European population. French is the official language, but Creole is also spoken.

### *Martinique*

Martinique is also an overseas department of France. Its name comes from the Carib words *madiana* or *madinina*: meaning, respectively, island of flowers or fertile island with luxuriant vegetation. The Dutch and the English both fought the French over possession of Martinique, and the

island went back and forth between French and British control during colonial times. Slaves in Martinique were emancipated in 1848. In 1902, an active volcano, Mount Pelée, erupted and killed 30,000 people. Most of the population of Martinique is mulatto, but white Creoles hold the economic power. The official language is French, but a Creole dialect similar to that of Haiti is spoken.

### **The Spanish Caribbean**

Countries in the Spanish Caribbean have a dual identity as both Caribbean and Latin American. Some scholars even include Haiti within the Spanish Caribbean because of the shared histories of political dictatorship and frequent U.S. intervention. Unlike most areas in the British and French Caribbean, where the African influence is strongest, two of the largest islands in the Spanish Caribbean, Cuba and Puerto Rico, are made-up of 70 percent white European descendants.

#### **Cuba**

The major immigrant groups to Cuba include the Spanish, Africans, Chinese, and people from the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico. About two-thirds of Cuba's population is white, from Spanish descent, and Spanish is the national language. Cuba is mostly plains land suitable to the sugar and cattle industries. Much of Cuba's forests have been destroyed by the cultivation of sugarcane, coffee, and rice. Since Fidel Castro came to power, Cuba has belonged to a socialist economic body, the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon).

#### **Dominican Republic**

The Dominican Republic is situated on the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola, which it shares with Haiti (a split made in 1795). On the north it is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean and on the south by the Caribbean Sea. Juan Pablo Duarte was the father of a rebellion in the 1850s that led to independence in 1844. The negative effects of Rafael Trujillo's regime, from 1930 to 1961, are still felt in the country. This regime caused much poverty and many deaths, especially deaths of Haitian immigrants who were targeted in racial attacks. The population is predominantly mulatto (of mixed European and African descent). The Spanish language has always been the major language spoken in this area, but now English has become more common, and Haitian immigrants



have brought with them a French Creole. Unlike most Caribbean countries, the Dominican Republic produces much of its own food, as well as some for export. The quantity and quality of meat and dairy products has been improved in recent years due to the tourist industry. The United States and Venezuela provide imports to the Dominican Republic, and the United States receives most of its exports.

### *Puerto Rico*

After the Spanish American War, Puerto Rico was made a U.S. territory by the Treaty of Paris, but it was granted more autonomy in 1952 with the creation of the commonwealth of Puerto Rico. The population is predominantly of Spanish descent and of mixed Spanish and African heritage, but a smaller percentage of the population descends from immigrants who came in the mid-nineteenth century from China, Italy, Corsica, Lebanon, Germany, Scotland, and Ireland. Other Caribbean peoples have come to settle in Puerto Rico: many Cubans moved to Puerto Rico after Fidel Castro came to power, and some people from the Dominican Republic have come to seek employment opportunities. Spanish is spoken in Puerto Rico, but many English words have been incorporated into the vocabulary.

### *The Dutch Caribbean*

The former Dutch territories consist of the Dutch Windward Islands of Statia, Saba, and St. Maarten, and the Dutch Leeward Islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao. Curacao is the largest of these islands and has traditionally dominated political and economic decisions for the Dutch Caribbean. The Dutch emancipated the slaves in their colonies in 1863. After achieving independence from the Netherlands, these islands of the Caribbean formed a federation called the Netherlands Antilles, from which Aruba broke in 1986 because of problems with Curacao's (and also St. Maarten's) dominance in decision making for the territories. Dutch is still a language taught in these countries, but the people of Statia, Saba, and St. Maarten all speak English as a native tongue. The people of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao speak a Creole language combining Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, English, and African languages called Papiamentu or Papiamentu. This is a nonstandardized language that changes greatly from region to region within the Dutch Caribbean and has no set spelling system.

There are significant populations of Afro-Caribbeans in Curacao and Bonaire, while Aruba has more Amerindian- and European-descended

### Bread Pudding with Guava-Rum Sauce

- 1 lb. stale rolls or bread (approximately 1 loaf—remove crusts from sandwich bread)
- 3 c. milk
- 1 c. coconut milk
- 4 eggs, slightly beaten
- 1/2 tsp. salt
- 1 c. sugar
- 1 pinch nutmeg
- grated zest of half a lime
- 1/2 tsp. ground cinnamon
- 1/4 c. crushed almonds
- 1/4 c. butter, melted

#### *For Topping:*

- 1/4 c. grated coconut (toasted)
- 6 tbs. guava jelly (or your favorite flavor)
- 2 tbs. rum (or juice/water)
- 1 tbs. water

Break the bread into small pieces in a bowl; pour milk and coconut milk over it, and stir. Soak for 20 minutes, until bread has absorbed the milk. In a separate bowl, cream sugar and butter together, then beat eggs in. Mash bread mixture thoroughly, then add egg mixture and all other ingredients to it, mixing well. Pour pudding batter into well-greased 2 1/2-quart casserole and set casserole in a larger pan. Pour 1 inch of hot water into larger pan. Bake at 350° for about 1 1/2 hours. Cool, then serve slices of bread pudding with guava-rum sauce and toasted coconut.

To make topping: stir jelly, rum (or juice/water), and water together in a saucepan over medium heat for a few minutes until it has the consistency of a sauce. Place grated coconut in a pan and toast over medium high heat, while stirring, until browned. To serve, spoon guava-rum sauce over bread pudding and sprinkle top with toasted coconut.