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THE CARIBBEAN PERSONAL JOURNEYS

I'll Have the Red: Hot Sauce, Island by Island

By MATT GROSS

JAMAICA is a land of deep and profound greens: hurricane-battered jungles, untrimmed coconuts delivered to villa doorsteps, sticky cannabis held in lacquered wooden humidors. But when I first visited the island in 2005, no green fascinated me as much as the contents of the glass jar handed to me one evening by Darren Lee, then the chef at Strawberry Hill, a luxurious resort in the mountains above Kingston. This green was rough and wet, but also glassy, and I recognized it immediately: These were puréed Scotch bonnet chiles — hot as habaneros, but fruitier, almost sweet.

The hot sauce, Darren explained to me, was his Chinese-Jamaican family's recipe, a mix of Scotch bonnets, vinegar and garlic whose precise details he declined to reveal. I opened the lid and inhaled. This was powerful stuff. But I didn't taste it until I'd taken it home to New York City, where for months afterward I'd dab it on anything I could: roast chicken, grilled steaks, hot dogs, my toothbrush. It was magical. But finally, one day, I scraped out the last incandescent smears and faced the terrifying prospect of an empty bottle.

That was when I decided, like Jack from "Lost," that I had to go back to the island.

For I knew that hot sauces abounded in the Caribbean, the flavors and levels of heat varying nation by nation. What I did not yet know was how my chile addiction would bring me in contact with people and places I might not have otherwise found.

Picture a beachside shack: folding tables under a palm-leaf roof, a cooler full of ice and bottled lager, two or three old guys sipping plastic cups of rum in the early afternoon. It could be Jost Van Dyke, in the British Virgin Islands, or Nevis, or Antigua: it doesn't quite matter. In I walk, alone or with friends, and order rice and beans (sorry, rice and peas) with grilled chicken or fried fish, and when the proprietor brings it out, I ask, "Do you have any pepper sauce?"

That is when the proprietor's eyes light up. For one, I had used the proper terminology. While in the United States we'd say "hot sauce" or "chili sauce," in most of the Caribbean, it's pepper sauce. More important, my request gives us — host and guest, local and tourist — a chance to play the always-amusing pepper sauce game, in which I'm warned, repeatedly, about the power of the concoction, then bravely un-



PIOTR REDLINSKI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ABOVE Hot sauce, or pepper sauce, in a restaurant in Port of Spain, in Trinidad and Tobago.

dertake to taste it and survive. There's nothing that bonds people like shared enjoyment of a food; the perceived danger of concentrated capsaicin, the chemical that conveys the feeling of spiciness, only heightens that connection.

Over the years, as I've popped in and out of the Caribbean, I've played this game again and again, from St. Martin to St. Lucia to St. Vincent, with results that were uniformly delicious but also widely different. In Jamaica, pepper sauces tend to be minimalist but ferocious, tasting of Scotch bonnets, vinegar and garlic. Elsewhere, other flavors come into play — thyme, lime, scallions, onions. In the British Virgin Islands, the rum maker Pusser's includes mustard in its bottled hot sauces for another dimension of heat, and a Panamanian sauce I got in Costa Rica was made, unusually, with dried chilies, for a smokier taste.

That diversity makes for a bit of pepper-sauce nationalism. Jamaicans, naturally, pride themselves on their

Scotch-bonnet-eating prowess. In Bequia, the Trinidadian owners of the Salty Dog restaurant dismissed all other pepper sauces as inferior; only the stuff from their homeland, spiked with mustard as in the British Virgin Islands, met their standards. Surprisingly, some locals deferred to this judgment: Trini-

dians are noted as the gourmards of the eastern Caribbean.

These days, many of these pepper sauces are available in the United States. Mabrouk's, from Trinidad, is common, as is Erica's, an estimable pepper sauce from St. Vincent. But commercial products can't quite compare

Darren Lee's Pepper Sauce

Time: About 5 minutes

When I wrote to Darren Lee, asking him for his pepper sauce instructions, he wrote back saying that of course he couldn't give me his family's actual fourth-generation recipe. He agreed, though, to the gist, and I pass it on to you. Good luck, and keep your hands away from your eyes!

1 pound Scotch bonnet peppers, stemmed and seeded

White vinegar

Salt and pepper to taste

Garlic to your liking.

Put peppers in a blender, and add vinegar until it comes three-quarters of the way up the peppers. Add salt, pepper and garlic, and blend until desired consistency.

Yield: A bowl's worth.



with homemade, unlabeled pepper sauces, often packaged in used Lucozade bottles (it's an energy drink). I first discovered them at a roadside stand in the Antiguan hills; that first one was orange and not too hot, but rich in its way, with onions and a bit of sweetness. And it started me on my quest to find the best in the Caribbean.

In Kingstown, the capital of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, I roamed the central covered market in awe. Every fruit and vegetable stand seemed to have a few bottles of green, orange or yellow pepper sauce on a shelf, and I loaded up. One bore a handmade label with an e-mail address on it. I told the lady selling it to keep in touch, and she

A Caribbean tour, leading with heat receptors.

asked, in a lovely Caribbean lilt, "And do you have the Twitter?"

For an instant, I was surprised, partly because this was 2009, early in the Twitter revolution. But then I realized: What I'd imagined as my own perverse medium of communion with the Caribbean was really everyone's. In a region where distances can seem insurmountable in the face of sketchy or nonexistent ferries, unpredictable waters, language differences and poverty, pepper sauces were about connection, augmented by new technologies and shared masochism. They function as memories of home, well preserved and easily transported in glass bottles and enthused about on the Internet.

The best of these, I should add, was the one from Sunny's Market, on the sleepy island of Mayreau in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, whose proprietor had to unlock a special wooden cabinet to show me her wares. The sauce was thick and sports-car red, in a skinny bottle, and as powerfully hot as any I've tried, though full of flavor, too — you taste it everywhere on your tongue.

I don't know who exactly made it, or with what, and it is, alas, almost finished. Whether Sunny's still stocks it, I don't know, but that's O.K. When the bottle is empty, I will replace it with whatever I happen to find wherever — a new memory of an old Caribbean flame.