



The Cayman Islands' premier culinary draw, the Cayman Cookout, was held last year on Rum Point Beach, Grand Cayman. Photo: Lyn Hughes

## CULINARY ADVENTURES

SOMETIMES, IT'S ALL ABOUT THE FOOD.

*Some say love is the universal language. For many, however, it's food. Then again, perhaps they're two sides of the same coin. After all, food also tempts us, thrills us, sates us, connects us, defines us. And a good meal with a good glass of wine becomes — like love — a transcendent experience.*

### THE CAYMAN ISLANDS

Perhaps the culinary philosophy of the Cayman Islands is best summed up by the experience of the creator of hot pepper jelly, a delicious blend of sweet, tangy and hot that's the islands' latest food craze. "When making it I have resorted to wearing a mask and snorkel so the pepper fumes don't knock me out," says Carol Hay, who not only makes the jelly herself but who also grows her own peppers in her backyard. In other words: flavor is everything, even if it makes you woozy.

Ah, the Cayman Islands: sunny beaches, mangrove-covered wetlands, blood-red coral reefs and an equally diverse range of culinary possibilities. Here, much of the dining experience is barefoot casual — Caymanians are notoriously un-stuffy — with road- and beachside eateries galore. (There's even a local fish market where you can buy your own fish then have it cooked by the restaurant next door). Caymanians are

also very family-oriented, and kids are welcome everywhere; if a restaurant doesn't have a children's menu, it will likely be happy to whip something up especially for the little ones.

For those looking to go upscale, the islands are dotted with tony restaurants where world-famous chefs have come to make their mark. Caymanians understand that a good meal must be accompanied by good wine. Not coincidentally, Cayman, with a population of only around 55,000, is home to a disproportionate share of Caribbean restaurants boasting extraordinary wine lists.

A testimony to the gastronomic draw of the Islands, the Cayman Cookout is the Caribbean's premier epicurean event. Hosted by celebrity chef Eric Ripert (owner of Blue by Eric Ripert, Grand Cayman's only AAA five-diamond restaurant), this year's event — to be held January 14-18, 2010, at The Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman — will feature an incomparable roster of world

famous chefs, sommeliers and spirits blenders who will offer tastings, demonstrations, tours and dinners celebrating the taste and barefoot elegance of the Islands. "The Cayman Cookout is the most intimate, convivial, exclusive and, of course, delicious culinary event of its kind," says Ripert, who is also chef and co-owner of New York's famed Le Bernardin. "I am already looking forward to escaping cold New York City with my friends this coming January, and heading to the beaches of Grand Cayman."

What is the taste of the Caymans, exactly? Colonized from Jamaica by the British during the 18th and 19th centuries, the islands retain a definite sense of British culture. Still, the cuisine has remained decidedly Jamaican in style, evolving into its own often spicy local fare. Island specialties include jerk chicken, pork, fish, goat, even tofu (essentially a Jamaican-style spicy barbecue) and all manner of fresh seafood hauled from local waters — tuna,

turtle, eel, mackerel, wahoo (a bit like tuna) and dorado (also called dolphin, not to be confused with the mammal of the same name), served Cayman style with tomatoes, peppers and onions. Crab flavors the chowder and fills the crêpes and stuffings. And fresh swordfish, grilled or served as carpaccio, is divine. Conch is ever-present and served in various renditions — from conch stew, to conch salad, marinated queens conch, conch fritters (sometimes called “flitters,” a staple at every island bar), conch gazpacho, creamy conch chowder, even conch schnitzel and conch burgers.

And if you see a “Cayman Sea Sense” icon on the menu, you can enjoy that conch burger with a clear conscience. The Cayman Sea Sense project, a sustainable seafood education program, encourages restaurant owners and their customers to make environmentally positive seafood choices. A “Cayman Sea Sense” logo certifies that menu items have come from an ocean-friendly source.

Your Cayman culinary experience isn't complete until you've indulged in an authentic Tortuga rum cake, baked in Cayman from a generations-old recipe. Soaked in the locally produced Tortuga

rum, it runs circles around your grandmother's brandy-soaked fruitcake.

Yes, the best in Cayman is produced locally, by hand, such as that hot pepper jelly that has currently taken over Carol Hay's living room. “My husband asked me the other day what I wanted for my birthday,” says Hay, who views this “hobby gone mad” as something to keep her busy when and if she quits her day job. “I told him a plot of land in East End where I could tend to my pepper patch all day. He laughed — but I wasn't joking!”

### CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

To truly experience the “Jewel of the South,” you must taste her food. While the stately plantations, sun-drenched beaches and world-class golf courses are certainly a big draw, Charleston is a true foodie's dream. Fresh regional ingredients combined with international influences create and define Lowcountry specialties found only here, where you'll enjoy some of the best dining east of the Mississippi.

Each season comes with its own distinctive fare. Fall rolls out garden vegetables tilled from the area's rich soil; fresh catches from local waters; and wild game and farm-raised



*Charleston's Cypress Lowcountry Grille offers a progressive take on the traditional fare of the region.*

meats. All of these find their way into savory recipes passed down for generations — corn-meal-dusted triggerfish; fried green tomatoes; oyster stew with Carolina Gold rice; steaming, velvety she-crab soup; and shrimp and grits.

Experience many of these local delicacies at the 29th annual Taste of Charleston, a three-day celebration of Lowcountry cuisine to be held October 9–11, 2009. The event will fea-

### TO TRULY EXPERIENCE THE “JEWEL OF THE SOUTH,” YOU MUST TASTE HER FOOD.

ture tastes from 50 of the area's finest restaurants, along with cooking demonstrations by some of Charleston's world-renowned chefs (plus the legendary Waiter's Wine Race and the Charleston's own East Coast Party Band).

Each restaurant, too, has its own, distinct flavor. Housed in historic homes, antique banks and tucked away in pine forests and along tidal creeks and beaches, Charleston's eateries possess the kind of local character and down-home Southern charm you just can't fake. This is the real thing — as is the kind of hospitality (Southern, that is) you just can't find up north. As the locals like to say it: “Come taste what has always been here.” ■

**PONTE VEDRA INN & CLUB**  
**2COL X 5.188**

**PALM BEACH CO.**  
**3COL X 10.875**