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JANUARY 2011

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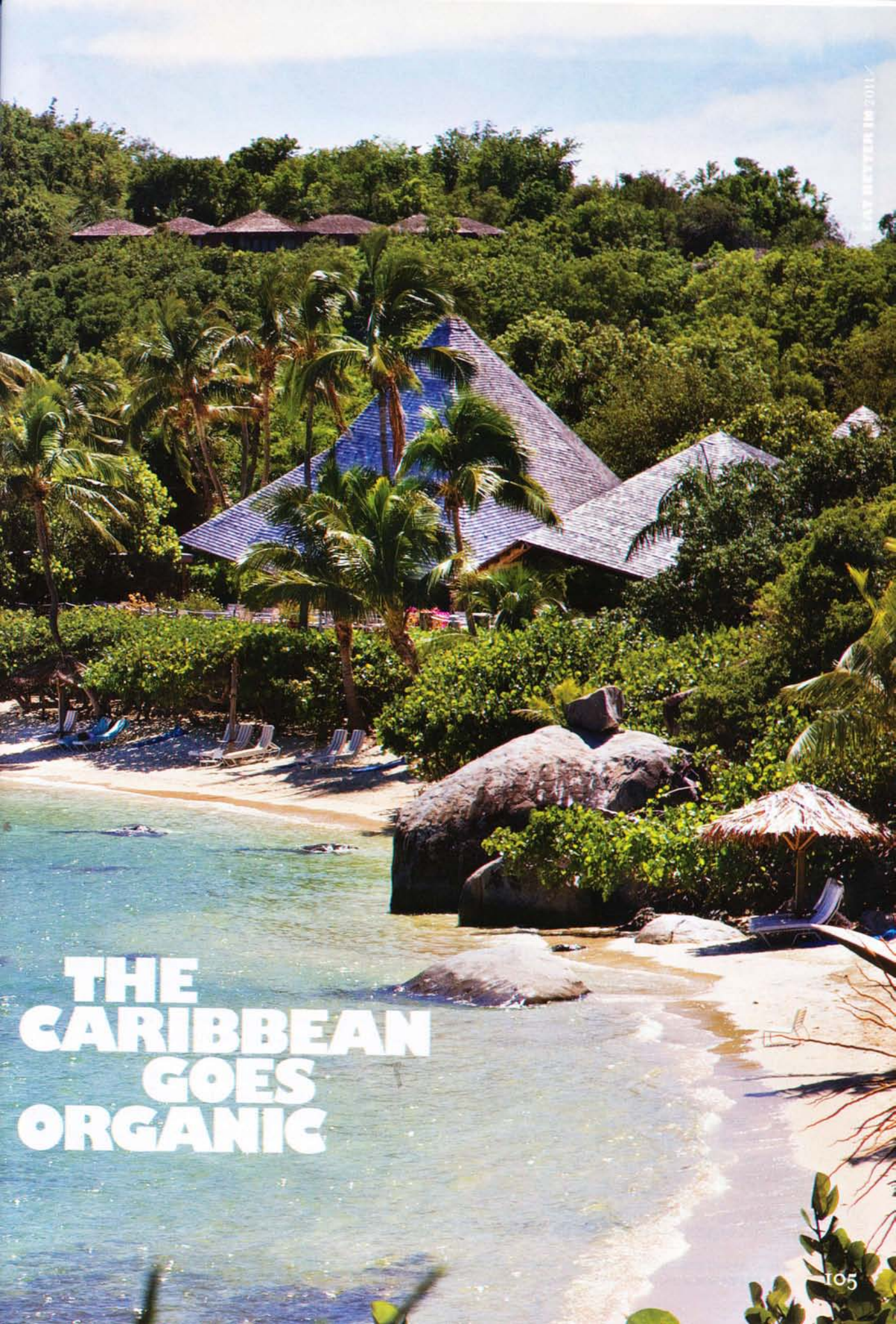
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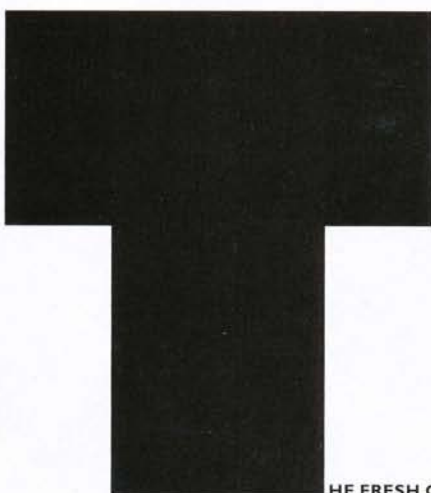
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THE CARIBBEAN GOES ORGANIC



THE FRESH CUCUMBER JUICE AT JAKE'S,

a bohemian-chic hotel on Jamaica's Treasure Beach, has a grassy taste and a tangy kick of spice that lingers on the back of my tongue. It's a fittingly refreshing welcome drink. "What's its secret?" I ask Dougie, the 60-something caretaker at the poolside bar. From inside a thatched hut displaying the requisite Bob Marley photo, he smiles knowingly. "Local cucumbers and ginger. Freshest you can get, mon."

This enthusiasm for fresh, local, organic food is by now a well-established mantra in the food world, but it's late in coming to the Caribbean. Agricultural production in the region has actually declined with the boom of tourism, and farmers have left the field for lucrative jobs in the hospitality industry. Until recently, low food prices made it easy for residents of Caribbean islands to buy necessities from overseas—the region now imports food at a staggering annual cost of nearly \$3 billion. Even on large islands like Jamaica that are still teeming with farmland, bad roads and high prices make fresh local food a last resort for the booming resorts. Complicating matters even further are inter-island trade restrictions: Chances are, a mango in the British Virgin Islands arrived frozen on a plane from the United States, rather than fresh off a boat from nearby St. Lucia.

But there's a seismic culinary shift going on in the Caribbean, to source more produce locally, and when possible, organically. Increasingly, guests with sophisticated palates—accustomed to enjoying organic food at their local farmers' markets—are demanding more from their Caribbean food experience. "We've always catered to an arts and film crowd who appreciate that we source most produce locally. Now they are going further, asking, 'Is it organic?'" explains Jason Henzell, proprietor of Jake's, the low-key 29-room getaway, long an insider favorite of vacationing fashionistas.

Jake's is among a new crop of resorts making an effort to offer organic produce and sustainably caught seafood, from Eric Ripert's organic tasting menu at the Ritz-Carlton

Grand Cayman to the garden-to-table cooking classes taught at Hermitage Bay on Antigua. Even cruise lines have gotten into the swim, with Holland America sourcing organic for passengers on request. I decided to experience this culinary Caribbean revolution firsthand by sampling the rich flavors of the food at Jake's, and later at the British Virgin Islands' luxurious Rosewood Little Dix Bay. I found them to be a world apart from stereotypical notions of all-inclusive Caribbean resorts that fill bland buffets with imported food. But while the dividend for travelers couldn't be sweeter—beautifully sourced meals bursting with West Indies spirit—I discovered that in the Caribbean, it's not so easy being green.

Because of its hands-on approach to working with local farmers, Jake's seemed the perfect spot to begin my quest to discover how resorts are responding to locavore demands.

My first night, under the lanterns at the alfresco restaurant at Jake's, the smoke from kingfish grilling nearby blends with hints of sweetness from bougainvillea. I choose pumpkin curry with chickpeas from a range of vegetarian dishes featured on chalkboard menus. The curry is understated, letting the pumpkin shine. This island gourd tastes milder than its American counterpart—as if it, too, is relaxed by gentle island winds. Alongside it, I have a coconut-laced succotash of butter beans, carrot, and corn.

The restaurant fills with an easy mix of American honeymooners, British fashion plates, and German backpackers. Feeding them all is chef Dockery Lloyd, who has overseen the food at Jake's for three years and sources most of the hotel's produce locally. Surprisingly, Jake's doesn't wear its locavore passion on its sleeve. Other than a small hand-painted sign at check-in encouraging visitors to support area farmers, guests might never know that nearly 80 percent of the food comes from within a few miles.

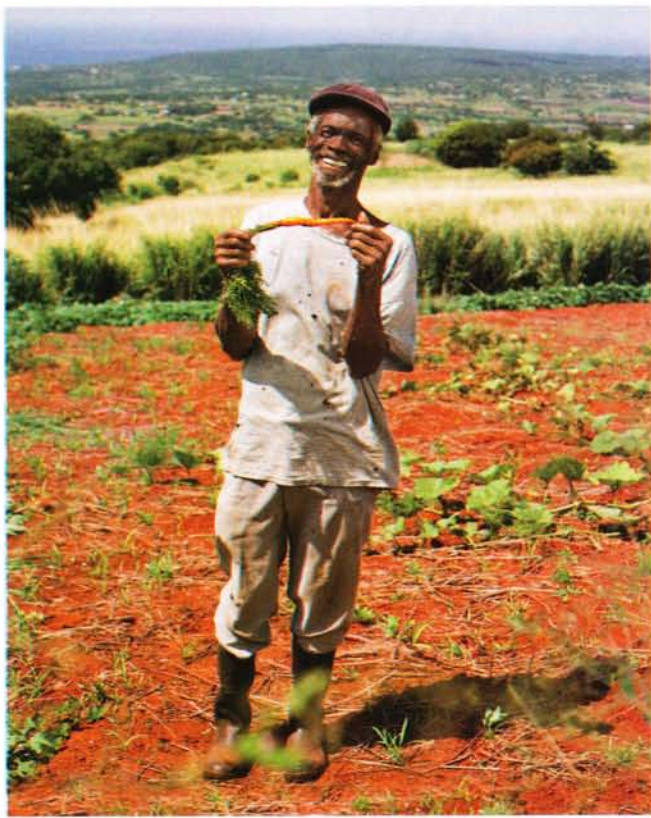
"Cooking with local ingredients is just how I grew up. And I like that the organic produce has a stronger, richer flavor," Lloyd says with a Jamaican lilt.

The next morning, I wake to the sounds of crashing waves outside my TV-free cottage and take my first sip of velvety Blue Mountain Coffee. My peanut porridge makes me reconsider breakfast cereal: Forget gray gruel; this flaming orange breakfast soup combines the hearty flavor of just-picked raw nuts with the silkiness of coconut milk. The chef tells me the secret to the porridge's vibrant hue: fresh, unprocessed peanuts. In short order, I am fortified for my trip to area farms that supply Jake's.

Escorting me on this adventure is American Liz Solms, agricultural consultant to Jake's, who in 2005 received a grant to establish an organic farmers' cooperative in Treasure Beach and stayed on when Jake's wanted to expand the program further. "Many of the farmers have traditional Rastafarian beliefs about cooking food that is pure and natural, so many are anxious to stop using traditional



ISLAND MEDLEY At Jake's in Jamaica, chef Dockery Lloyd prepares his favorite childhood dishes, such as this Caribbean succotash with coconut milk. These days, his ingredients are not only local, but also organic.



CARIBBEAN KEEN / Clockwise from top left: Virgin Gorda's Sugar Mill serves halibut with tandoori spices; Dull McLean embraced pesticide-free farming in Jamaica six years ago; McLean now supplies to the restaurant at Jake's.

fertilizer and pesticides," she explains as we stop at the farm of 70-year-old Dull McLean, who has earth-worn hands and an infectious smile. He proudly leads me through rows of carrots and sweet peppers that he began farming organically six years ago. After cautioning me not to step on his watermelon plants, we pause in the shade of a newly constructed greenhouse.

"Less chemical is better for your health. And everything just tastes better. You've never had sweet potatoes like these," he says, handing me some just-picked root vegetables. McLean instructs me to take them back to Jake's, making me a cog in the farm-to-table wheel. After depositing the farmed treasures with Chef Lloyd, I'm dispatched to dinner and choose the traditional Jamaican specialty *escoveitch*, the fish dish imported to the Caribbean by the Spanish in the late 1500s. The flaky broiled red snapper is topped with a spicy vinegar medley of Scotch bonnets, sweet peppers, onions, and carrots. The result is a fiery delight that I ravenously consume with the help of a Red Stripe beer, and then the chef appears with a dessert fashioned from McLean's produce. The heavenly slice of sweet potato pone with mango syrup is thick and dense, like bread pudding. The mango dollop heightens the sweetness of the potato. As the sun sets and the waves crash within striking distance of my table, I realize how lucky I am to have followed this dish's organic ingredients from the hands of a dedicated farmer to the kitchen of a caring chef.

At the opposite end of the glam spectrum from Jake's is Rosewood Little Dix Bay, a place more preppie luxe than hippie chic that is surmounting a different set of challenges in sourcing local produce. Set on a stunning half-mile crescent bay, the property transformed genteel Virgin Gorda into a jet-set destination when it was built in 1964 by pioneering venture capitalist Laurance Rockefeller. The property has been extensively renovated, but it retains a retro ambiance, with glass-walled hexagonal villas where the characters of *Mad Men* would happily vacation.

Unlike Jamaica, Virgin Gorda is a place where bountiful harvests are a tough row to hoe. Little rainfall and steady dry winds make the geography almost desert-like, with cactus dotting the mountains that slope down to the sparkling Caribbean. But the lack of an organized and large-scale farming culture hasn't discouraged chef Hemant Dadlani, who arrived two years ago with an ambitious plan to increase the resort's access to organic produce.

"Freshness is the soul in my cooking," says Dadlani. "A tomato grown in Holland that comes to me via Miami doesn't taste the same as the one grown on the island. Our guests want that special local flavor," the Udaipur, India, native tells me as I finish my lunch with a scoop of tamarind sorbet. It brings to mind a Sweet Tart candy—first, a smack of bitterness that causes a pucker, then a jolt of sweetness.

"My pastry chef picks the tamarind from trees on his way here every morning. Then we add ginger. Fresh, of course," Dadlani says. Immediately, I order two more scoops.

Currently, Dadlani has a group of employees, their families, and friends growing produce for him; he mentions a hot pepper sauce homemade by restaurant worker Venita Chapman. Overhearing Chapman's name, a fellow guest leans over and shares a tip he's garnered after many visits—Chapman's hot sauce is not for sale, but she might pack a bottle for me to take home—if I'm lucky.

Dadlani allows me to tag along on a round of visits to local growers as he tries to find new produce sources and encourage current vendors to diversify offerings. Just past a farm that supplies pork to the resort, he agrees to buy all the mangoes produced by the trees of an 81-year-old native who recently returned to the island after retiring from teaching in the Bronx. Later, while touring a former employee's farm that supplies the resort with a variety of tomatoes, Dadlani offers to pay for a greenhouse in exchange for all the peppers grown inside. As a thank-you, the farmer gives him several just-off-the-vine eggplants for tonight's dinner. Finally, at a new hydroponics operation, Dadlani guarantees he will buy whatever microgreens it can produce—regardless of quality.

"This is a gamble," the chef says. "But if it pays off, it could mean some of the freshest lettuce available."

Back at Little Dix Bay, after a lazy dip in the sparkling water, I head to the resort's Sugar Mill restaurant. From the first bite of the Asian-inflected cuisine, I taste the rewards of the chef's local hustle that I witnessed earlier. The colossal prawn "Greek salad" features a luscious cube of watermelon set on microgreens from the hydroponics lab with a punch of Scotch bonnet fire powered by Chapman's hot sauce. I ask my waiter to let Chapman know I'm a fan, hoping to score a souvenir bottle. Next, the delicate hoisin-mopped pork belly melts in my mouth, and I am suddenly sad that I only ordered an appetizer portion. Then the braised halibut fillet that smells of coconut and lemon revives me; it's served with smoked eggplant caviar made from just-picked vegetables.

The next day, as I reluctantly board my departure ferry, Chapman appears with a bottle of her hot sauce. "For you," she says. "A little something to help you remember the freshness of the islands." Not so long after, back home in a drizzly New York, I stare listlessly at my coffee, wheat toast, and a couple of breakfast eggs. I realize I'm suffering from a particularly bad case of post-island blues, so I reach in the refrigerator for Chapman's care package. Just a drop or two of her spicy sauce on my *huevos* reminds me of how lucky I was to spend time in the Caribbean. Doubly lucky, these days, since resorts including Jake's and Little Dix Bay are responding to the demands of locavores like me.

JON PAUL BUCHMEYER is the author of the humorous memoir *Alphabet City*; read more at ABCityblog.com.



FINDING ORGANIC IN THE CARIBBEAN

There's a transformation going on in today's Caribbean—in fits and starts, great resorts are phasing out flown-in foods in favor of locally grown organic fruits and veggies and sustainable fish. Here are some early adopters who are making Caribbean cuisine eco-friendly and creative.

STATUS CHEF

At Blue by Eric Ripert at the RITZ-CARLTON GRAND CAYMAN, an island organic tasting menu matches local wahoo with guava and hearts of palm; yellowfin with callaloo; sautéed scallops with pumpkin; and red snapper with relish made with organic tomatoes from the chef's own garden. Six-course organic wine pairings are available, too. ritzcarlton.com

GARDEN-TO-TABLE COOKING CLASSES

Jamaican native and executive chef Dezi Banhan wants visitors to be able to take his dishes home with them, so once a week he teaches guests at ANTIGUA'S HERMITAGE BAY how to make everything

from breakfast-worthy pumpkin fritters to entrées such as Appleton Rum and Ginger Pork Sirloin. An added bonus: Before they start cooking, his students pick herbs and vegetables from the resort's new organic garden. hermitagebay.com

SALT OF THE EARTH

About 40 islands, many of them private, make up the Turks and Caicos. AMBERGRIS CAY is one that has been developed with a focus on green living, with resources like a wildlife educational program and the Ocean-to-Pan culinary program. In it, guests fish local waters and rake their own salt, then prepare a meal along with locally sourced produce. tcsportingclub.com

GARDENS GO ORGANIC

After Hurricane Ivan decimated much of Grenada in 2004, many local farmers on this lush island moved into reconstruction work, then never resumed farming. In response, PARADISE BAY RESORT owner James Post helped set up organic gardens in cooperation with foreign volunteers; today, its bounty supplies two restaurants at the resort. Look for a freshened resort to open post-renovation in February 2011. paradisebayresort.net

ABCs OF ORGANIC

At the newly opened HYATT REGENCY CURAÇAO in the island grouping of the Lesser Antilles (Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao—the ABCs), food and beverage manager Maurice Fahey has a ten-point plan to fill the resort's three restaurants with locally sourced organic meals. And there's a farm-to-table program in the works with local farm Finca del Sol. curacao.hyatt.com

CRUISE LINE'S CUSTOMIZATION

When booking a cruise on HOLLAND AMERICA, guests can request an all-organic menu for their passage, and shore excursions include a tour of the organic gardens and cooking classes at the Exotica Guesthouse in Dominica. hollandamerica.com

EARLY ADOPTER

The hydroponic greenhouse gets lots of attention at the CUISINART RESORT AND SPA IN ANGUILLA—after all, it is the first of its kind in the Caribbean. But the 3,000-square-foot organic garden is the real star, a place where veggies such as Caribbean callaloo, black-eyed peas, peppers, pumpkins, okra, soybeans, and Chinese long beans grow next to an orchard of avocados, guavas, tamarinds, limes, oranges, and star fruit. For about ten years, native islander Franklin Brooks has tended to each individual plant with customized potions of non-chemical fertilizer. Ask for a tour: cuisinartresort.com

—J.P.B.

HOT STUFF
Homemade Scotch
bonnet pepper sauce
is Venita Chapman's
specialty. Dougie

mans the bar at
Jake's, where fresh-
squeezed juices
pack a punch even
without rum.

CARIBBEAN SUCCOTASH

6 TO 8 SERVINGS Local island vegetables are used in this colorful dish offered at Jake's in Jamaica. Serve with brown rice or as a side dish with fish or chicken.

PREP 40 minutes **TOTAL** 40 minutes

- 2 cups fresh or frozen double-peeled fava beans, butter beans, or baby lima beans (about 9 ounces), thawed
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup diced peeled carrots
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 cup chopped onion
- 1 cup diced zucchini
- 1 cup diced red bell pepper
- 2 garlic cloves, pressed
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons minced fresh thyme
- 2 cups fresh or frozen corn kernels, thawed
- 1 cup diced unpeeled Persian cucumber or English hothouse cucumber
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup canned unsweetened coconut milk
- Large pinch of cayenne pepper
- Large pinch of freshly grated nutmeg

INGREDIENT INFO Double-peeled fava beans (beans that have been removed from their pods, then individually peeled) can be found at Middle Eastern markets. Unsweetened coconut milk can be found at many supermarkets and at Indian, Southeast Asian, and Latin markets.

Cook fava beans in large saucepan of boiling salted water until just tender, about 5 minutes. Using slotted spoon, transfer fava beans to medium bowl. Add diced carrots to same saucepan of boiling water; cook until carrots are tender, about 4 minutes. Drain and transfer carrots to small bowl.

Heat oil in heavy large skillet over medium-high heat. Add chopped onion, diced zucchini, diced bell pepper, pressed

garlic cloves, and minced fresh thyme. Sauté until beginning to soften, about 3 minutes. Add corn, diced cucumber, and reserved carrots; stir 1 minute. Add beans, unsweetened coconut milk, cayenne pepper, and freshly grated nutmeg. Stir until heated through, about 1 minute. Season succotash to taste with salt and pepper.

BRAISED HALIBUT FILLETS in COCONUT and LEMONGRASS with SMOKED EGGPLANT and TOMATO-GINGER CHUTNEY

4 SERVINGS A little coconut milk adds richness to this sophisticated dish from the Sugar Mill restaurant at Rosewood Little Dix Bay.

PREP 50 minutes **TOTAL** 1 hour 5 minutes

- 1 large eggplant (about $1\frac{1}{4}$ pounds)
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons fresh lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon Tandoori Spice Blend (see recipe)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon vegetable oil
- 1 8-ounce tomato, peeled, seeded, diced
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh cilantro
- 1 teaspoon grated peeled fresh ginger
- 1 cup canned unsweetened coconut milk
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup bottled clam juice
- 1 lemongrass stalk, bottom 3 inches only, thinly sliced
- 4 6-ounce halibut fillets
- 4 red radishes, trimmed, scrubbed, cut into matchstick-size pieces (for garnish)
- Daikon radish sprouts (for garnish)
- Microgreens (for garnish; optional)

INGREDIENT INFO Unsweetened coconut milk can be found at many supermarkets and at Indian, Southeast Asian, and Latin markets. Lemongrass and daikon radish sprouts can be found in the produce section of some supermarkets and at Asian markets. Microgreens are sold at some supermarkets, farmers' markets, and specialty foods stores.

Char eggplant directly over gas flame or in broiler until blackened all over and eggplant begins to collapse, turning occasionally, about 15 minutes. Place eggplant in large bowl; cool 10 minutes. Peel off skin; place eggplant flesh in strainer set over large bowl. Press on eggplant to release juices; let drain 15 minutes. Transfer eggplant to medium bowl; add lemon juice. Mix Tandoori Spice Blend and vegetable oil in small bowl; add to eggplant and mash with fork to coarse puree. Season smoked eggplant to taste with salt and pepper. **DO AHEAD** Smoked eggplant can be made 1 day ahead. Cover and chill. Bring to room temperature before using.

Mix diced tomato, olive oil, chopped fresh cilantro, and grated fresh ginger in small bowl; season chutney to taste with salt and pepper. **DO AHEAD** Chutney can be made 4 hours ahead. Let stand at room temperature.

Bring unsweetened coconut milk, clam juice, and lemongrass to simmer in large skillet. Sprinkle halibut with salt and pepper; add to skillet. Simmer until halibut is just opaque in center, 3 to 4 minutes per side.

Spoon dollop of smoked eggplant into center of each of 4 shallow bowls. Using slotted spatula, transfer halibut fillets to bowls; place atop eggplant. Spoon dollop of tomato-ginger chutney alongside. Garnish with radishes, sprouts, and microgreens, if desired.

TANDOORI SPICE BLEND

MAKES 2 TABLESPOONS

PLUS 1 TEASPOON

PREP 5 minutes **TOTAL** 5 minutes

- 1 teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 teaspoon turmeric
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper

Whisk all ingredients in small bowl to blend. **DO AHEAD** Spice blend can be made 2 weeks ahead. Store airtight at room temperature.

FOR COMPLETE **NUTRITIONAL INFO**
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