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# Crossroads

Voices & views of island life

## CARIBBEAN CURRENTS

### Rest and Repast on Martinique

From fine pastry to the freshest poisson, this French isle has what food lovers want.

*By Poupette Smith*

**F**irefly is anchored off the small village of Ste.-Anne, on the south coast of Martinique, and Leo and I are lying on our bunk, trying to plan our day. A gray sky is visible through the portholes, unusual weather for the Caribbean. Suddenly, the silence of the morning is broken by a mournful sound - *FVOOOOohhh, VOOohhh FVOOOOohhh* - immediately followed by the howling of our neighbor's dog.

"Zero visibility," says Leo, making a foghorn joke in a place that never has fog.

"This isn't Maine, silly, and that's not a foghorn. It's someone blowing a conch shell, announcing the fishermen's return from *miquelon*."

It had taken us a while to figure out the exact location of *miquelon*. Whenever we'd ask a fisherman where he'd gone for his catch of tuna, kingfish, or dorado, he'd invariably answer, "*Au miquelon*." But try as we might, Leo and I couldn't find any trace of it on our Caribbean chart. Finally, our friend Maurice had cleared up the mystery for us.

"It means 'far offshore,'" he said, explaining that the term originated as a reference to St.-Pierre and Miquelon, a pair of French islands located far to the north - off the southern coast of Newfoundland.

"Good day for a walk, I suggest, as the conch beckons again. "Shall we go visit Maurice, and see if he needs help with anything?"

Maurice was, after all, half the reason we'd sailed to Martinique; the other was our desire to feast on the island's French food.

A handsome man in his late 70s, Maurice is a Martiniquan radio operator whose regular morning "net" is a godsend to sailors. Always eager to help, Maurice serves as a vital link between concerned families ashore and their loved ones at sea. We first met him on the airwaves, then later in person here in Ste.-Anne, when Leo and I passed through nearly ten years ago.



David Duncan Livingston

"Sure," says Leo. "Maybe he'll have gotten a ladder by now so I can cut the vines off his antenna."

We launch our dinghy and follow the sound of the conch to where a fleet of yole rondes, the island's signature boats, has been pulled up on the sand. Sleek and colorful - some are bright red, others yellow or green - the boats are adorned with such names as *J'ai Confiance* ("I have confidence"), *La Vi Ka Maché Bien* (Creole for "Life is good"), *Loin de Dieu* ("far from God"), and *Doudou* (an affectionate nickname for women in general). Averaging 20 feet in length, most yole rondes are now used only in sailing regattas, but the vessels on this beach are fishing boats. As such, they are fitted with outboard motors, and most carry bamboo spars on which to hoist sails in case of mechanical failure.

I buy a kilo of kingfish, then scrounge a few extra morsels for Maurice's cat. By the time I get ice and turn to continue on my way, there's no sign of Leo. Muttering to myself, I peer down the main road and spot him making a beeline for the patisserie. Before I know it, he's hung a sharp left and disappeared inside the shop.

Leo is incapable of going ashore on Martinique without making this stop, so I have no choice but to wait for him to re-emerge with a big white paper bag of goodies in his hand and a warm baguette under his arm.

"What did you get us today?" I ask when he comes out.

## A Taste of Tamarind

Want to tart up your favorite Thai coconut soup? Jazzify your jerk chicken? Add sass to your barbecue sauce? Then consider adding a touch of tamarind, as cooks around the world do. Once it has been scraped from the long, lumpy seedpods of the graceful tamarind tree, the sticky pulp with the tangy fruit flavor has lots of uses. In the West Indies it is sometimes sugared and formed into patties. In Central America a pulp puree is mixed with water and sugar to make juice. In India it goes into curries and chutneys. In Indonesia the leaves are used as a flavoring agent. And so on. In recent years American chefs have also discovered tamarind. To do the same, just pick up some ready-to-use tamarind concentrate at an ethnic market, and, voilà! tamarind's pucker power is yours.



He pulls out a couple of flaky croissants and pommes cannelles. I smile, remembering Leo's bewilderment upon tasting his first pomme canelle, which, literally translated means "apple cinnamon" - two ingredients Leo is crazy about. But the brioche-like pastry contains neither.

Disappointed, Leo went back the next day to ask the baker if he'd forgotten to include them. The man burst out laughing.

"*Elle est bonne celle là!*" ("That's a good one!") he said, before explaining that the name of the pastry came not from its ingredients but its shape, which resembled a tropical fruit called *pomme cannelle*.

As we continue toward Maurice's, we pass a large tamarind tree that has dropped hundreds of its seedpods onto the ground.

"Should have brought another bag," says Leo, shelling a pod and inspecting its sticky contents.

"Let's use my hat," I offer. "We can't possibly pass this by. Maybe I can try making something other than tamarind juice."

Soon we've gathered a hatful of the pods, attracting intrigued passers-by, who stop to sample the tart fruit.



David Duncan Livingston

Although the south coast of Martinique is relatively dry, it still has a surprising amount of plant life - even the fence posts take root and become trees. Leo and I pass a banana grove, pick up a fallen breadfruit and some mangoes, then turn up the dirt road that leads to Maurice's home. We call out to let him know we're coming, and he greets us by the patio.

Maurice lives surrounded by the cool shade of lime, papaya, sugar apple, mango, mahogany, and cedar trees, in a small building that once served as the cookhouse of his family's large estate, where his father ran a rum distillery. Most of the land has since

been sold, but Maurice's eldest son now occupies the main house, where Maurice was born. And although there is no longer any outward sign of sugarcane, Maurice's memories of the rum days and his knowledge gained during them live on.

It's nearly lunchtime when we sit down, so Maurice offers us a 'ti punch, the quintessential Martiniquais drink, made with rum, sugarcane syrup, and lemon zest. Maurice makes his with the island's rhum agricole, which is distilled from fresh unrefined sugarcane juice and has a hint of cane scent. (Most rum is distilled from molasses, a by-product of sugar production.) Maurice once told us that to evaluate a rum - whether a white rum that has aged for three months, or a darker vieux (old) rum that has spent more than three years in oak casks - he simply rubs a few drops onto the back of his hand and samples the aroma.

We politely decline the 'ti punch, opting for water instead. Once Leo is refreshed, he sets up the ladder, takes machete in hand, and climbs up a tree to cut away the vines that are invading our friend's antenna.

"Be careful with the stinging nettles," Maurice calls out in French. "They're everywhere."

Sure enough, after finishing the job, Leo hops off the ladder slapping his legs.

"Come over here," says Maurice. "Let me rub some rum on you."

"Rum?"

"Yes, it has medicinal properties. When I was a baby, my mother use to pour some in my tub."

"Really?"

"To disinfect the water. In those days it was not always clean," Maurice says. "I remember sitting in the bath and sucking on the washcloth; it tasted so good."

Maurice is right: Soon after the rum rub, Leo's legs feel normal again.

On the way back through town, Leo and I stop at the market. Maurice and some friends are coming over tomorrow for dinner aboard Firefly, and I want to prepare something special - something creole and French - in their honor. I'll decide on the menu later, based on what we buy at the market - and our bumper crop of tamarind pods.

Ste.-Anne's market isn't large, but it offers a lot of choice. There are even three butchers there on

the weekend, each offering a fine selection of *boudin* (blood sausage), as well as heads, feet, and tasty innards not normally available at supermarkets.

I have my favorite produce stand, so after a brief price-and-quality check at the nearby competition, I steer toward Monique.

"*Bonjour.*"

She greets us with a smile, her perfect white teeth seeming to illuminate her beautiful features and velvety black skin. "Take your time; let me know if I can help," she says in French as I scan her fruits and vegetables - all fresh, ripe, and locally grown.

I choose a dasheen, juicy tomatoes, crunchy cucumbers, miniature melons, a couple of unusually sweet avocados, some grapefruit as delicious as any from Florida, a few aubergines, a jar of *colombo* (an island spice paste similar to curry), a pound of string beans, a pineapple, and a bottle of *punch coco*. For spices, I get half a dozen nutmegs - still enshrouded by the outer shell, which is ground to make mace - and two packets of *cinq baies*, a finely ground aromatic mixture containing peppercorns, allspice, and coriander.

After paying, I show Monique our tamarind pods and ask her opinion of the spicy tamarind marinade I'm thinking about making.

"Never had it," she says, "but it does sound tasty. Is that what you'll be using the spices for?"

"Maybe," I say, sensing a menu beginning to take shape.

As we return to the dinghy, I run the idea by Leo.

"Sweetie, how about a pineapple-coconut punch sprinkled with freshly grated nutmeg, followed by spicy grilled kingfish steaks that have been marinated in tamarind, boiled dasheen à la garlic sauce, avocado-and-grapefruit salad with a honey vinaigrette, and a banana cake for dessert?" "Ummm, sounds great," says Leo. "I knew there was a good reason for sailing to Martinique."

*A licensed captain, Poupette Smith has contributed to Sail and Sailing, and has lived aboard Firefly for 13 years.*

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