



THE
Spice
OF THE
CARIBBEAN

By Theresa Gawlas Medoff

Redolent of chocolate and spices, blessed with the bounty of the sea, and home to a resilient and community-minded people, the Caribbean island nation of Grenada serves up unique flavors and culinary experiences.

You can order a plate of oil down at numerous local restaurants in Grenada, and the ingredients of the one-pot stew would be pretty much consistent: breadfruit (when cooked, it tastes much like potato); salted fish, chicken or pork (traditionally pig tails); dumplings; callaloo; turmeric and curry—all cooked in coconut milk. To truly understand why oil down is the country's national dish, however, you simply have to experience it the way Grenadians do.

"Oil down was created by the slaves using the scraps of food that were all they could get," explains Lisette Davis, a Grenadian Brit who moved to the Caribbean island of her ancestors in 2012. "Oil down should be cooked on an open fire in a traditional cast-iron pot. Everyone sits around the fire and talks while it's cooking, and you're getting all those smells, and you're talking and laughing and drinking rum. It's really about sharing and making conversation."

If you're not lucky enough to be invited to a Grenadian's home for oil down, Davis suggests heading to the island's northwest coast on a Saturday, when local entrepreneur Ansil Britton sells her homemade oil down on Main Street in Victoria, just opposite the police station. Or you can join in the festivities of Grenada's Independence Day on February 7, when communities all over the island celebrate with parades, concerts, games and oil-down feasts. Visitors are heartily welcomed at the national celebration of the date in 1974 when Grenada became independent of Britain. If all else fails, most local restaurants serve oil down on Fridays.

Like many islands in the Caribbean, Grenada's history is one of colonization and slavery; the French and the British fought for control, with the U.K. eventually

emerging as victor. During the colonial period, large plantations grew sugarcane, tropical fruit and a variety of spices, particularly nutmeg, which had been introduced to the island from the West Indies. Grenada was once the world's leading source of nutmeg and mace, a cooking spice that comes from the web-like covering on nutmeg. So important was nutmeg to the island that it's even on the national flag. Then Hurricane Ivan hit in 2004, devastating the island and its agriculture. Although nutmeg production is on its way back, only one nutmeg processing station operates, down from four before the hurricane. Grenada also exports cooking spices such as cinnamon, bay leaves, allspice, cloves, ginger and vanilla. Turmeric and soursop, which is a large, green, spiny Caribbean fruit, have become popular exports for medicinal purposes.

Naturally, the spices and tropical fruits that grow on this lush island have become integral to local cuisine. Beyond the beaches and watersports, it's part of the pleasure of visiting the island to taste such local treats as nutmeg ice cream, sweet potato pudding (with nutmeg, natch), callaloo soup (made with the leaves of the taro or dasheen plant), gingered pork, and green banana salad. Instead of black tea, Grenadians drink "bush tea," which can be any combination of herbs, spices and bark—quite tasty, particularly with a little sweetener. Visitors should also indulge in chocolate tea, a drink that we would call hot chocolate or hot cocoa.

Where and how can you enjoy the flavors of Grenada? We've rounded up a selection of taste sensations, from chocolate to rum and from local seafood spots to gourmet restaurants that incorporate local cuisine.



Callaloo and shrimp tartlet served at Rhodes Restaurant at the Calabash Luxury Boutique Hotel

COURTESY OF CALABASH LUXURY BOUTIQUE HOTEL

SPICES

An absolute must-visit in Grenada is the Spice Market in St. George's Market Square. There's also a spice market that was built just for tourists on Grand Anse Beach, near the spot where all the cruise-ship passengers tend to congregate. You'll have a more authentic experience at the original downtown location, where Grenadians also come to shop, particularly on Fridays and Saturdays when many farmers from the countryside set up booths. Browse the indoor and outdoor stalls for island-grown spices, handcrafts and signature products such as nutmeg jam, nutmeg syrup (used instead of maple syrup), coconut soap, cocoa butter, and nutmeg sprays and ointments, which some swear alleviate arthritis and muscle aches and pains.

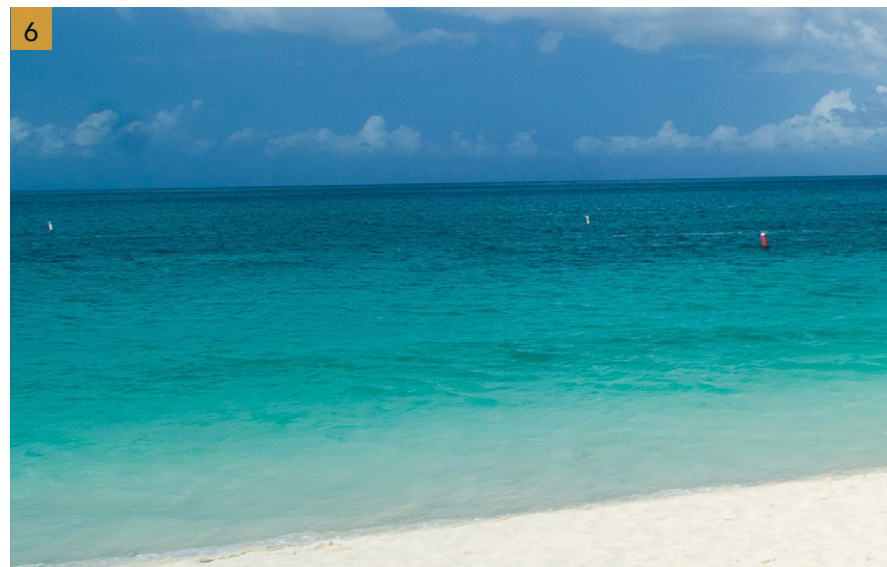
To see where the herbs and spices come from, visit Laura Spice and Herb Garden in the countryside of St. David Parish for a guided tour describing traditional culinary and medicinal uses of the island's bounty.



CHOCOLATE

Until recently, Grenadians exported all the cocoa they grew. Thankfully, that's changed, and there are now five chocolate factories on the island making to-die-for organic chocolate using the island's own cocoa, some of it infused with representative Grenadian flavors, including nutmeg and ginger. And, bonus, it's ethically and sustainably grown, and makers follow fair-trade practices. Chocolate aficionados can take a tree-to-bar tour at Diamond Chocolate, makers of Jouway, and at Belmont Estate, which partners with the Grenada Chocolate Company. The 17th-century Belmont plantation also has a popular 250-seat restaurant. Your chocolate tour will show the production cycle, from picking the cocoa pod off the tree to fermentation of the beans to drying in the sunlight to making the chocolate bars. Of course, you'll finish off with chocolate tasting—and buying. Snap it up, because it can be difficult to find in the U.S.—and it's just that good!

If you're the consummate chocolate consumer, put the annual Grenada Chocolate Fest on your calendar (coming up May 31 to June 7, 2019). Chocolate-centric events at last year's festival ranged from a sunset cruise focused on rum and chocolate tasting to the opportunity to spend a day working on an organic cocoa farm to a fashion show of chocolate-inspired couture—and, of course, lots and lots of chocolate consumption.





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RUM

Rum is the alcohol of choice in much of the Caribbean. That's because it's made with molasses, a byproduct of sugarcane refinement, or directly from sugarcane itself. Sugarcane, as we all know from history class, was widely grown on colonial plantations in the islands.

Grenada has three rum distilleries: Grenada Distillers (best known for Clarke's Court rums), River Antoine Rum Distillery and Westerhall Estate Rum. You can visit any (or all) of them for tours or tastings. You'll likely have the most interesting experience, though, at River Antoine, where they've been making rum since 1785. The distillery here still grows its own sugarcane and uses the same centuries-old water mill as well as old-fashioned copper pots.

For a real education in rum, schedule a rum-tasting dinner or a rum and chocolate pairing at Lisette Davis' Rumboat Retreat, a four-room guest house in the countryside outside the fishing village of Gouyave. An expert in rum, Davis walks guests through the different varieties and qualities of the liquor, helping them to develop a palate and a vocabulary for appreciating rum.

EATING LIKE A LOCAL

At Patrick's Local Homestyle Cooking Restaurant in the capital of St. George's—just across from Port Louis—chef/owner Karen Hall serves up a tasting menu to tourists that includes an array of comfort-food favorites, from fried plantains to codfish fritters to lambie (conch). Finish it off with what one waitress euphemistically called "after-dinner schnapps." More commonly known as under-the-counter rum, it's very strong local white rum that's been infused with herbs and spices.

Goat cooked in curry and coconut milk is the signature dish at BB's Crabback Caribbean Restaurant, an open-air waterfront spot in the Carenage section of St. George's. Chef Nida Joseph, who learned her cooking secrets from her grandmother and the aunt who raised her, also whips up flavorful dishes such as lobster and peppers in citrus sauce, red snapper in ratatouille, jerk pork or chicken, and, on Fridays only, oil down.

You'll get a good sampling of Grenadian foods, along with a lesson in history and culture, on either of the two culinary tours offered by Savor the Spice: the three-hour Savor the Town that stops at various food spots in St. George's or the six-hour

1. Nutmeg, mace and cinnamon
COURTESY OF GRENADA TOURISM AUTHORITY

2. Cocoa beans drying
COURTESY OF GRENADA TOURISM AUTHORITY

3. Cocoa pod still on the tree
PHOTO BY THERESA G. MEDOFF

4. Rum expert Lisette Davis holds tasting sessions at her guesthouse, Rumboat Retreat.
PHOTO BY THERESA G. MEDOFF

5. Belmont Estate, which dates back to the 17th century, is now a popular agritourism destination in Grenada.
COURTESY OF GRENADA TOURISM AUTHORITY

6. Grand Anse Beach
COURTESY OF GRENADA TOURISM AUTHORITY



Savor the Country that goes around the island. Savor the Spice also offers a cooking class and a bar-hopping tour.

For a true immersion in Grenadian food and culture, consider an excursion to the fishing town of Gouyave for its weekly Fish Friday, when roads are blocked off to traffic and pop-up food stands serve all manner of seafood. The same sort of gathering—the Sunset City Food Festival—takes place the last Saturday of every month on Diamond Street in Victoria, but the offerings there go way beyond fish. True Blue Bay Boutique Resort makes it even easier to dine like the locals by holding a “street food festival” with live music at the resort’s Dodge Dock restaurant every Wednesday.

GOING GOURMET

Chefs at Grenada’s fine-dining establishments know a good thing when they see it, and the island’s flavorful herbs, spices and produce inspire some uniquely Grenadian takes on haute cuisine. Consider Oliver’s at the AAA Five Diamond Spice Island Beach Resort. Owner Sir Royston Hopkin learned the hospitality business from his parents, who ran one of the island’s early guesthouses. His mother took recipes from the popular cookbook *The Joy of Cooking* and adapted them for use with local foods, much to the delight of guests. Hopkin encouraged his head chef Jesson Church to think in that same adaptive way, so you’ll get dishes such as risotto with shrimp and callaloo or desserts like the very tasty soursop tart with soursop sorbet.

Calabash Luxury Boutique Hotel, a Relais & Chateaux property, serves dinner at open-air Rhodes Restaurant, while breakfast and lunch can be eaten at the more casual Beach Club that, as its name implies, sits right on the beach (in-room delivery of breakfast is also popular). Both restaurants at Calabash focus on marrying the best of Grenadian flavors with classic cuisine. Using produce from its own garden and local farms, Savvy’s at Mount Cinnamon Resort & Beach Club serves up Indian and Caribbean cuisine; think curried shrimp with chickpeas or the catch of the day with papaya salsa.

From its spices to its chocolate, and from its street food to its gourmet meals, Grenada is an island where you’ll want to experience tastes you won’t find anywhere else. So indulge in the hyper-local cuisine, and don’t skimp on the food-related souvenirs—unless you want an excuse for a return visit soon.



Quick Facts

Grenada is a three-island nation in the southeastern Caribbean with a population of about 110,000, most of whom live on the country’s largest island, which is also named Grenada.

Language: English

Currency: Eastern Caribbean dollar (XCD), although U.S. dollars are widely accepted at an exchange of approximately \$2.67 XCD per U.S. dollar (at press time). Cash remains king in Grenada, and taxis and smaller local vendors do not accept credit cards.

Time zone: Atlantic Standard Time Zone

Operating hours: Note that many stores, restaurants and attractions, particularly those outside the tourist zone, are closed on Sundays.

Climate: Temperatures average 75 to 85 degrees Fahrenheit year-round. The dry season is January to May, and the wet season is June to December.

Getting there: Daily direct flights are offered year-round on American Airlines from Miami International Airport and on JetBlue from New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport. Most international cruise lines that sail the Caribbean make calls in Grenada, particularly from fall through spring.



Jesson Church, head chef at Spice Island Beach Resort
COURTESY OF SPICE ISLAND BEACH RESORT