

BELOW: Maya Gurley infuses her Caribbean cuisine with continental flair. RIGHT: At Tasty's, chef Dale Carty gives local ingredients a French flavor.



Return of the Native Chefs

He's from Anguilla; she's from St. Bart's. He went to France; she went to New York. But the delicious allure of the Caribbean kitchen was just too strong to resist. **BY ALAN RICHMAN**

I drove down from the hills, toward the Caribbean, praying that Maya's restaurant was at the end of this road, because it hadn't been at the end of the other four I'd tried. On the undulating island of St. Bart's, a tourist soon finds that life consists of going up, coming down, getting lost, or lying on a beach so blissfully isolated that when it's time to go someplace else, nobody is around to offer directions.

Just then, visibility diminished as a passing squall lashed the island, and the narrow road, without visible warning, turned into a neighborhood boat ramp. I jerked to a stop, front wheels inches from the sea, and timidly backed out. There, off to my right, was Maya's, as well as a small local cemetery

conveniently placed near the deadly ramp. When I got inside the restaurant, Maya Gurley's husband, Randy, assured me that they hadn't buried an unlucky customer yet.

My first thought: What else is he going to say? My second: At least Anguilla is flat.

I had come down this way to explore the French island of St. Bart's and the English island of Anguilla through the eyes of two preeminent chefs, Maya Gurley of St. Bart's and Dale Carty of Anguilla. Both were born in the Caribbean, grew up in the Caribbean, and choose to remain in the Caribbean, despite opportunities to work elsewhere. They do not, like celebrity chefs, arrive in the winter to indulge vacationers, and then ►



MAYA'S: The chic St. Bart's set gathers at this stylish beachfront restaurant.

depart as soon as the sun burns hot.

St. Bart's is, for the most part, white, highly functional, and standoffish. The currency of choice is the euro, the roads are cement, and the favored royal is King Gustav III of Sweden, for whom the main town of Gustavia is named. Anguilla is, by and large, black, maintenance-challenged, and warmhearted. The currency of choice is the U.S. dollar, the roads are asphalt, and the favored royal is Princess Alexandra of Great Britain, who dedicated the local airport.

Maya's restaurant has a locale like few others on earth, squashed between a cemetery and a sea. You want a quiet place to dine, you can't do better than that. The entrance is camouflaged by two red-flowering trees called flamboyants, although not the originals that were growing there when Maya and Randy rented the place in 1984; those two blew away in Hurricane Luis in 1995. Inside, the room is painted white and is dazzlingly chic. When I complimented Maya on hiring only complementary blonde waitresses, she replied, "They're blonde because of the sun. They go back to France, they become brunette."

The clientele is mostly American in the winter, but the off-season brings well-reared Frenchmen who never wear shorts to dinner and always nod politely to strangers. Dogs sit under tables. Kids run about. Only Randy, a laconic New Englander, disputes the notion that he runs a classy place—he points to a

nearby desalinization plant, calls the beams that support the corrugated steel ceiling "telephone poles," and makes sure I notice that the floor is cement. He doesn't like hearing that Maya's is at the core of the ever-increasing sophistication of St. Bart's.

The food is part French and part Caribbean, but mostly what Maya likes to eat, which means some basic Italian dishes such as chicken *piccata*. The menu changes daily, subject to what boats bring to the island (where almost nothing grows, except herbs). The soups are Asian and named Soupe No. 1 and Soupe No. 2 because "when Randy and I were in Paris, we couldn't read the menus at the Vietnamese place we loved and named the soups number one and number two." The grouper tartare is accented with Scotch bonnet chile, basil, and mustard, and the dessert every customer orders is the lightest flourless chocolate cake ever conceived, made from her great-grandmother's recipe.

Not far away, by the airport, is Maya's To Go, which offered, at the time of my visit late last year, the best take-out food I'd ever tasted, in particular the pasta with fresh lobster and the *chouquette*, little breakfast dabs of softness, sweetness, and crunch made by pastry chef Stephane Giraud—yes, it's a take-out shop with a pastry chef. A friend of Maya's, Catherine Feric, whom I encountered outside Maya's To Go, says that in the early '80s conditions on the island were dispiriting for a restaurateur—little

electricity, few telephones, fresh water collected in cisterns. "She still managed to be fabulous," says Feric, who went on to compare Maya's lobster fricassee to a work of literature.

Maya, 56, was born in Martinique, the granddaughter of the founder of the Neron rum distillery, now a museum. She grew up on a sugar plantation and learned to cook by watching the family servants, as well as her mother. After studying interior design in France and working at an architectural firm in Paris, she returned home, not knowing what to do, and was working as a waitress on St. Martin when she met Randy. He arrived on his sailboat, looking for charters. Off they went.

"Maya was the cutest girl on the island," Randy says.

"Randy was very charming," says Maya.

"I propositioned Maya to go along as the only crew member," he adds. "My ulterior motive was incidental because, boy, did she know how to cook. She could make anything out of anything and my locker was filled with cans without labels."

They married in 1980, had two sons, and lived contentedly on St. Bart's until a business opportunity brought them to New York's Hamptons in the summer of 1999. They opened a branch of Maya's in the village of Wainscott, thinking that they might operate two restaurants permanently if all went well, which it did, but ultimately they decided that New York was not for them. "You have to be a shark to do business in cities, and I don't know if I'm a shark," Maya says. "And Randy's not a shark at all."

On the south side of South Hill Road is Tasty's Restaurant, so near the road it's buffeted by wind from passing trucks. That's where you'll find Dale Carty 16 hours a day, preparing breakfast, lunch, and dinner, slipping out only to buy fresh lobster from men sitting in rusted trucks by the side of the road or to shop at The Fishery, where the air is blazingly hot ▶

People and Places

but the doctor fish and red hind pristinely fresh. Tasty's, painted like a tropical rainbow—turquoise, lavender, and green, with murals of island life—is the vibrant reincarnation of a simple place Carty's mother ran years earlier. Her restaurant went out of business not because of the food, which was reliable, but because of the customers, who were not.

"She gave credit to a lot of the village people, got tired of them not paying her, and closed down," he says. "She had enough of that. It was vacant for years."

These days it's the tourists who keep Tasty's going, and not just everyday winter escapees. The fancy eaters show up, too, customers like Paul Bocuse, Roger Vergé, and Guy Savoy, eager to try Carty's interpretations of the local cuisine—dark, primal curried goat; soft, lemony conch salad; and his extraordinary version of "fish 'n' fungi with provisions," a peculiar local dish.

Carty also escapes his restaurant Friday afternoons to have lunch at Ken's Pork, open only two days a week. Ken's has a long, battered grill, unvarnished wooden tables, rickety wooden benches, flies that won't go away, roosters in the field next door, and chicken that tastes magically caramelized. As we eat, customers coming by look startled and say, "What are you doing here, Dale?" They are not really surprised, just eager to acknowledge the preeminent celebrity chef in these parts. Carty has been asked to open a restaurant in, of all places, Israel—he declined partly because explosions were going off as he was talking long-distance to a potential investor. He's also had offers from Miami, but says, "I've never considered any of them seriously."

Across the street, at The People's Market, he picks up an avocado, and the woman working the scale (an old assayer's model with counterweights) quickly says, "Don't squeeze—they're ready." He laughs, again flattered by the attention, still not quite believing that a fellow like him, a former juvenile delinquent turned 35, has done so well. He's even caught the



TASTY'S: Diners flock to this Anguilla favorite for sublime dishes like marinated conch salad, which gets a hint of heat from chopped jalapeño.

interest of two ministers in his hamlet, one Methodist, the other Seventh-Day Adventist, both vying to transform him into a religious man.

It wasn't so long ago that nothing was expected of Carty. In school he was best known for playing hooky and swiping cans of Vienna sausage from the local grocery. On the last day of classes, he recalls, "My teacher clapped her hands together and said to me and my best friend, 'I can't wait to get rid of you guys.' Now when I see her, she says, 'I'm so proud of you—you're so nice.'"

Adds his girlfriend, Lisa, a teacher herself, "When I look at the neighborhood Dale grew up in, with no role models, what he did was unbelievable. It wasn't like the Bronx or Brooklyn, but there wasn't much pressure for education. Not many of the people around there grew up to do much."

He was saved by the stove. He went for an interview at Anguilla's Malliouhana Hotel, and the next day he was washing dishes and peeling potatoes. "It completely reformed me," he says. Lisa adds, "If he wasn't smart then, he is now."

He rose through the kitchen brigade, learning under hotel chef Alain Laurent and two consulting chefs, the late Joe Ros-tang, who had a three-star restaurant on the Riviera, and his son, Michel, who has a two-star restaurant in Paris. Says Laurent, "We had to teach him everything, but we kept him around so long I knew we could do something with him."

The consulting chefs brought him



to France repeatedly so he could learn. On his first Riviera trip, when he was still a teenager, Carty got off the plane with \$1,500 in his pocket and spent almost all of it in three weeks. Eventually, he rose to the number three spot at the Malliouhana, but he left when Laurent told him a French chef would always run the kitchen. He took his knowledge of French cooking, applied it judiciously to Caribbean recipes, and opened Tasty's in 1999.

His conch, seasoned with chopped jalapeño chile, is magically tender, and his version of fish 'n' fungi with provisions turns out to be a staggering mound of cornmeal—called "fungi" in Anguilla—surrounded by snapper fillets served atop an onion-tomato-pepper compote. The provisions are chunks of sweet potato, yuca, plantain, and green banana. When I told Carty how much I loved it, he replied, "I can't serve it on Anguilla like I gave it to you—an Anguillan wants the whole fish, not fillet. He'd storm the kitchen, demand the fish head."

I asked him to compare his cooking to what a tourist might find on St. Bart's, and he said he had never been to St. Bart's. In fact, Maya Gurley had told me that her last visit to Anguilla was 15 years earlier, when she stopped in for lunch. The islands are only 50 miles apart, but St. Martin sits right between them, apparently enabling each to forget that the other exists. ■

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