

PLANTAINS AND A SUGAR-CANE SKEWER ADD ISLAND APPEAL TO THIS PLATE OF SHRIMP.



OCEAN CUISINE INTERNATIONAL

A DOZEN WAYS:

Caribbean CREATIONS

Adding these sweet, savory and spicy flavors to the menu gives your customers a great escape on a plate

For centuries, explorers left places like Spain, Portugal, England and China and headed to the string of islands stretching from the tip of Florida to the coast of Venezuela in search for gold and other riches. The tropical oasis and culinary treasure trove they found were far more valuable.

The Caribbean Islands offered newcomers fresh and exotic ingredients — sugar cane, first and foremost —

plus fruit, nuts, seafood and spices. And these explorers and traders gave as good as they got, leaving a deeply rooted cultural footprint on the island's cuisine and creating a melting pot of native and European influences. From the refreshment of tropical fruits to the comfort of new tubers and the range of heat from native chiles, here are a dozen easy ways to incorporate tropical influences into your menu.

- ▶... The historical and geographical forces that make Caribbean cuisine so flavorful
- ▶... The essential ingredients in the Caribbean pantry and how to use them
- ▶... Dozens of menu ideas for adding tropical tastes to any concept

1 GET YOUR MOJO ON

First and foremost, you need to have your “mojo” going when preparing Caribbean-style food. In culinary terms, mojos are piquant sauces made with vinegar, citrus, olive oil and fresh garlic. Similar to vinaigrette, these sauces are easily prepared, keep well in a refrigerator for up to four or five days and make everything — from grilled proteins to fresh greens — taste better.

- Ceviche martini with Curaçao-spiked orange mojo
- Yucca-stuffed crispy snapper with Scotch-bonnet-and-oregano mojo
- Grilled pork tenderloin with mango-habanero mojo
- Exotic baby greens topped with chorizo-crust sea scallops and chile-spiked cilantro-lime mojo vinaigrette

2 MAD FOR MANGOS

Prized for its soft, juicy flesh and its sweet, tart and slightly savory flavor, the mango has a place on any menu. Mangoes are of Indian origin, widely used in bottled chutneys and are available in more than 1,000 varieties — and even more culinary applications — worldwide.

- Napoleon of ahi tuna tartare with mango-habanero coulis
- Caribbean-spiked carpaccio of salmon with mango salsa
- Grilled foie gras with caramelized mango and passion fruit
- Calypso-spiked slaw with jicama and green mangoes



DOLE

SWEET, TART AND SLIGHTLY SAVORY, THE MANGO ADDS INSTANT ISLAND APPEAL.

3 A SKEWER OF SWEETNESS

The early explorers found no gold in the Caribbean, but they did hit a jackpot in the sugar-cane plant, which became such a sought-after commodity in Europe that many of the islands were deforested to create cane fields. Sugar cane has other uses besides being processed for sugar and making rum. We like using the cane for skewering food, creating a unique and authentic presentation. Moreover, the use of sugar cane in the menu copy lends instant Caribbean credibility.

- Sugar cane-skewered shrimp glazed with sweet-and-spicy guava jelly
- Grilled sugar-cane pork glazed with mojito jelly
- Seared sugar-cane tuna with citrus-vooodoo glaze
- Mojito with rum and muddled fresh sugar cane



BAHAMA BREEZE

BAHAMA BREEZE PAIRS JAMAICAN-STYLE MARINATED CHICKEN WITH FAMILIAR ELEMENTS LIKE PASTA, CREAM AND MUSHROOMS.

THE KIND OF JERK WE LIKE

4

Authentic jerk cooking typically uses pork, seafood, chicken and beef that is dry-rubbed or marinated with a combination of scallions, onions, thyme, allspice, cinnamon, nutmeg, peppers and salt and grilled over a fire pit filled with allspice (also known as pimento) wood to perfume the food. Some say the name “jerk” is derived from the short, quick motion grillers use to move meat over intense heat.

- Jamaican-jerk chicken lollipops with rum-spiked pineapple chutney
- Grilled jerk-chicken sandwich with applewood-smoked bacon and caramelized sweet pineapple
- Jamaican-jerk chicken on a bed of cinnamon-spiked yam mash, fire-roasted vegetables and Cuban black beans
- Caribbean spring rolls stuffed with jerk chicken, fire-roasted vegetables and pepper-Jack cheese

5 HEY, HO AND A BOTTLE OF RUM

The Caribbean’s favorite drink is also a powerful way to pour flavor onto the menu. Rum, a sugar cane-based spirit, can be divided into two categories: light and dark. Light rums require no more than six months of aging in oak casks. Dark rum’s darker, richer flavor comes from longer aging — from three to 12 years — plus added caramel.

- Grilled pork tenderloin glazed with dark-rum-mojito jelly
- Cuban-style crisp pork shank with Havana Club rum-mango glaze
- New York strip with rum demi-glace and sweet-potato mash
- Banana-nut bread pudding with grilled pineapple-rumba sauce

6 PLAY UP PLANTAINS

In the Caribbean, the plantain is more than just a fruit; it’s part of the culture. Also known as the cooking banana, it’s used like our beloved potato and has a great range for flavor enhancements and cooking techniques.

Prepared plantain chips, or tostones, are a simple way to offer a tropical spin, but the sky’s the limit when it comes to the plantain’s plate possibilities.

- Pan-fried tostones with mango-habanero ketchup
- Tropical tuna tartare with ancho-dusted plantain chips
- Sweet plantain fritters stuffed with pork carnitas
- Slow-roasted pork Cubano with sweet plantains and black beans

GO TROPICAL WITH TUBERS

7 With the popularity of “Floribbean,” island and Nuevo Latino foods, humble root vegetables like jicama, yucca, boniato, taro and malanga have become sexy plate accompaniments, adding authenticity and credibility to a Caribbean-inspired dish. These starchy options can be flavored easily and offer comfort equal to what the potato brings to American cuisine. Once notoriously difficult to source, these tubers are taking root throughout the country with the strong growth of the Latino population.

- Cuban pork shanks with cinnamon-spiked bonito and yucca mash
- Yucca chips dusted with adobo and served with chile-spiked-mango ketchup
- Yucca fritters stuffed with crisp carnitas
- Grilled skirt steak basted with chimichurri, served with yucca and malanga fries

A TASTE FOR TAMARIND

8 The flesh of tamarind, a pod with small seeds and pulp, has a flavor similar to that of sour prunes. Used in Caribbean sweets, curries, chutneys, jellies and glazes, tamarind can be purchased by the pod, in dried bricks or cakes and as concentrated pulp, prepared paste or instant powder. For centuries, tamarind’s tartness has been used as a flavor enhancer, most famously in Worcestershire sauce, and we value its role in developing memorable background flavor.

- Tamarind-glazed salmon with yucca mash
- Grilled pork tenderloin with barbecue sauce and tamarind-mango chutney
- Sizzling Caribbean-shrimp salad with a molasses-tamarind vinaigrette
- Smoked baby back ribs with guava-tamarind barbecue sauce

CHALK IT UP TO CHILES

9 Subtle, multi-layered seasoning is the key to island fare. The chiles of all shapes, sizes and degrees of heat that grow in abundance on the various Caribbean islands play a pivotal role in the cuisine. Among the most common and hottest are Scotch bonnet and habanero — so fiery that they should be handled with care and used sparingly.

- West Indies tuna sashimi with fire-roasted jalapeño-plantain salsa
- Conch fritters with lime-habanero tartar sauce
- Chorizo-crusting shrimp with Scotch-bonnet-spiked gazpacho salsa
- Grilled sirloin steak salad with chimichurri-and-piquillo-pepper vinaigrette

CHILES ARE A MAJOR PLAYER IN THE CUISINE OF THE CARIBBEAN ISLANDS, WHERE THEY ARE ABUNDANT.



10

A FLURRY OF CURRY

During the early years of colonization, the Caribbean's melting pot of cultures also included an influx of Indians, Asians and Africans who worked the sugar-cane fields.

They brought along their own food traditions, many of which survived to become part of the culinary landscape of the islands. The Hindu influence is stronger in Trinidad, Martinique and Guadeloupe, where the introduction of curry powder added verve to the local foods. Because spices are so abundant in the region, some curry powders contain 16 different ground spices and can vary from hot to mild and range in color from yellow to green or red.

- Creole-style chicken curry with saffron, caramelized pineapple and toasted-coconut rice
- Coconut-crust halibut with ginger-spiked green-curry sauce and tomato chutney
- Pan-seared jumbo crab cake served with jicama-and-chayote slaw and coconut-infused red-curry oil
- Char-grilled mahimahi with mango salsa and curry couscous



RIKIKOMAN

BRING FAMILIAR FAVORITES TO THE ISLANDS WITH UPGRADES LIKE COATINGS AND DIPS.

CRAZY FOR COCONUT

With its dark, coarse outer shell, the coconut certainly doesn't look like a promising culinary prize. But its snowy-white flesh, rich milk and even richer fat are all imminently useful in a range of cuisines. Once just the stuff of fluffy white cakes and a few confections, the flesh takes on a whole new flavor when toasted, and has become a popular coating for crispy shrimp. The milk effectively cools the heat of chiles and curry. Look for more ways for the coconut's sweetness to balance heat and savory flavors.

12

- Slow-roasted pork Cubano with sweet plantains, black beans and curried-coconut-milk reduction
- Caribbean risotto with chiles, cumin, dried tropical fruits, almonds, coconut milk and toasted coconut flakes
- Coconut flan with piña-colada glaze
- Coconut-crust grouper with grilled-pineapple-and-papaya salsa

The Caribbean's far-ranging palate and bounty of international ingredients create a tremendous opportunity for operators. Even familiar favorites like chicken nuggets can get a tropical infusion with a mango dipping sauce or a coconut coating. And have no fear that Caribbean flavors are merely a fad. Hundreds of years of cultural influx and deeply rooted native plants have contributed to the region's culinary riches. Like every great cuisine, it will continue to evolve. ☺

DEAN SMALL and DANNY BENDAS, principals of Synergy, a foodservice consulting firm, can be e-mailed at dean@synergyconsultants.com and danny@synergyconsultants.com.

ENTER THE EMPANADA

Though empanadas are associated mostly with South America, many Caribbean islands have their own versions. These Latin American pastries, filled with seafood, meat, cheese, vegetables or fruit, can be oven-baked or deep fried. Empanadas are an easy way to package new appetizer ideas or plate accompaniments.

11

- Grilled mahimahi with mango mojo, toasted-coconut rice and baked mini-shrimp-and-lobster empanadas
- Crisp, fried empanadas stuffed with seasoned beef, grilled vegetables and three cheeses
- West Indian empanadas with jerk chicken and fire-roasted vegetables
- Dessert empanadas stuffed with caramelized bananas and grilled pineapple

TAKE-AWAY TIPS

- ▶ **THE MIGHTY MOJO:** This citrus-herb-oil combination has as much menu potential as pesto
- ▶ **TOTALLY TUBULAR:** Try tropical tubers – they're as comforting and versatile as potatoes