

Carib Reserve Cuisine at Sandy Bay, St. Vincents & the Grenadines

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St Vincent & the Grenadines - St. Vincent, cradle of the original Black Carib population, is a lush, volcanic island of steep mountain ridges, valleys and waterfalls and a population which is predominately of mixed African descent. The rugged eastern coast is lined with cliffs and rocky shores while the western coastline dips sharply down into black and gold sand beaches. To the north, the volcano, La Soufrière, rises over 4,000 feet and the island's rich volcanic soil produces an abundance of fruits, vegetables and spices, such as coconuts, bananas, breadfruit, nutmeg, and arrowroot. For more about this island, its history, population, and culture see my [Lore of the Caribbean: The Black Caribs](#).

Although this lovely island has many attractions, I shall focus here on its culinary delights and to get you in the proper mood I begin with the chorus of a song entitled "Carib Cuisine":

*Vincentian local dish,
Is de bes' in de Caribbean,
It's something you can relish,
Come visit we island.
To eat it once
Yo go want it twice.
Yo eat it once, yo go want it twice.*

During my stay in the Carib Reserve in Sandy Bay, I stayed at the home of Greta Baptiste in Sand Hill to learn more about Carib culture and cuisine. For my first meal, Greta summoned me to the kitchen where I was served a splendid Carib lunch consisting of stewed chicken, carrots, tomatoes, lettuce, christophene, egg plant, banana, banana dumpling, and yam.

Since I am dealing almost exclusively with Carib cuisine in this section, let me also mention meals I was served here on subsequent days. Among my favorites were: a) sweet potato pudding; b) "fresh boil" (a concoction of carrots, fish, banana, yam, Irish potato, garlic, onion, sweet pepper and seasonings all boiled together in the same pot); and c) baked bread.

Although Carib bread (known as "bam-bam") is still occasionally made at Sand Hill from cassava flour in the traditional way, most modern Caribs prefer freshly baked "flour bread". To produce this "flour bread", Greta takes lard, butter, yeast, salt and banana flour and kneads it with water to produce what she calls "cut away" which she then flattens and rolls with a ketchup bottle. After this she rolls it into a cylinder, places it in a pan and bakes it. The finished product – even without butter - is very tasty indeed.

Most Carib dishes - she said -include grated coconut. This is hard work and the work is shared by a number of members of the same family [See description of the preparation of coconut milk in the section dealing wit Nicaragua in my Lore of the Caribbean].

I then asked grandma Estina (Greta's mother) how to make "banana fritters" and "madongo dumplings" and she readily responded with the following two recipes:

Madongo Dumplings

Ingredients – Arrowroot flour (which has been ground by a miller), salt, sugar, coconut, & nutmeg.

Preparation – Wash the flour (optional); strain and drain in mill so that it is dry; cut away; then wet it and make it into a ball; place ball in hot water to cook; after it is cooked, remove it from the water and let cool; then knead with a rolling pen onto other ingredients; then cut out and fry or bake it. Note that you can also eat it before frying or baking.

Banana Fritters

Ingredients – Yellow bananas, flour, coconut oil.

Preparation – Beat bananas into bowl; add flour from shop; mix with banana; take a spoon full of this mixture and place in hot coconut oil; remove and eat.

The fritters were also delicious and - as the song goes - "*Yo eat it once, yo go want it twice*".

During my stay in Sandy Bay I was invited to an all-male community outing in which everyone was treated to a wondrous dish called *bulljau* prepared on the spot by Mcinnis Baptiste (who was born in 1975) and Selwyn Lavia. McInnis (who was born in 1959). When asked how the bulljau was prepared, McInnis (who completed a 6 week cooking course) and Selwyn (who learned from his mother) provided me with the following recipe:

Bulljau

Ingredients – Salted cod fish, tomatoes, onion, coconut oil, hot pepper, water, cucumber,

Preparation – Wash fish; cut tomatoes, onions, and cucumbers and cook in pot of boiling water with hot pepper and coconut oil for about 15 minutes. Serve with roast breadfruit or “green fig” (i.e. boiled plantain).

McInnis then said that to roast the breadfruit you simply throw it on the fire. When it gets real black you knock it out of the fire with a stick and when it cools you break it open and eat it. McInnis also informed me that he does pottery work at Orange Hill and invited me to come see some of his work.

There is another famous calypso song from St. Vincent dealing with “moonlight dancing”, bread-fruit, *bulljau* and some other typical dishes a portion of which I have reproduced below:

*Bread Fruit and Bulljau
Boiling and Pelau
Crayfish and Callaloo
Dumpling and Manicou
Served in a Calabash
Make the flavor right!
Then wash down with tumale
Dance and sing all night.*

etc.

Note that in the days before TV and video, songs like the above were quite popular when people sang and danced at night competing with other schools. With the advent of electricity, however, this custom has, unfortunately, ended. Tumale, by the way, is a local drink made from cassava.

When someone dies in St. Vincent people assemble at the home of the deceased where they grieve and sing songs for 8 days. It is in such mourning rituals that some old songs or tunes may have been preserved. Fortunately no one died while I was there and so I didn't get a chance to witness the occasion.

There is more to the aforementioned all-male outing than meets the eye, for it gives an opportunity to the young men of the village to get to know one another and to test each others prowess through the game of cricket, much like Zulu herd-boys from a given area get to know one another and test their prowess by means of stick-fighting [for which see my [Lore of Africa, Part I: Three Nguni Nation](#)].

My invitation to the event in which they shared their food with me can thus be considered a recognition of the fact that I was now a (temporary) member of their community (for at least a week) and that in this manner we would be able to recognize each other should we meet again. After all, if I was not known to be a legitimate dweller there, I would surely be regarded with suspicion as I walked unescorted through their neighborhood.

After the match and feasting was over I returned to my “home away from home”, ate, and prepared for a visit to the other neighboring Carib communities, one of which was Owia where the arrowroot factory is located. Arrowroot, if you recall was the principal ingredient in the fabrication of *madongo* dumplings in the above-cited recipe for the same.

Prior to going there, however, Wayne Baptiste (one of Greta’s sons) told me how Good Friday and Easter Sunday is celebrated in St. Vincent. He said:

On Good Friday it is a custom here in St. Vincent to give hot cross buns to friends and relatives and to consume them with *mauby* or ginger beer. Moreover, since Christ was killed at 12:00 Noon, your meal that day must be cooked before that time and you can’t eat rice after that hour on that day. On Good Friday we usually eat smoked herring or cod or herring fish which has been thoroughly cleaned (to make absolutely sure there is no blood) and seasoned. This is consumed with ground provisions like yam, potato, dasheen, and tannia because these grow under the ground. Before 12:00, however, you can have rice which is usually served with okra or peas. On Easter Sunday we eat provisions (i.e. tubers) and salad with either beef or chicken. Another Garifuna plate that is also associated with Easter is *dukunná*. This dish [according to Verden Roberts] is made by wrapping potato, flour sugar, essence, plantain, nutmeg, and ginger in a leaf and then boiling it for one hour.