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# Island Flavors

Local chefs are spicing up the Caribbean culinary landscape

BY JENNIFER JUERGENS

**C**aribbean chefs are putting their stamps on the culinary delights of their islands, garnished with influences from all over the world.

## Aruba

The traditional Aruban dish of keshi yena is served all over the island, but Executive Sous Chef Ever de Pena of the Aruba Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino likes to put his own trademark spin on this iconic dish.

"Traditionally, it's made in a bowl of baby gouda cheese with chicken, raisins and some nuts," he explained. "At the resort, however, we kick it up a few notches. We add cilantro, garlic, cashew nuts, green olives and minced onion, season the chicken with shallots, saute with tomatoes, onion, bell peppers and top with sliced cheese."

He also uses local produce in his sauces, particularly pica di papaya, which he adds to red snapper. In



EXECUTIVE SOUS CHEF EVER DE PENA

addition, many of the micro greens used are from local farmers.

"The resort likes to maintain relationships with local farmers," he said. "We're proud to highlight their greens in our dishes. We also use aloe, one of the island's biggest exports, in a few of our cocktails, including the Aruba mule and Aruba Aloe Fantasy."

For groups looking to do something different, the sky's the limit, according to de Pena. One group wanted to bring the outdoors in, so they brought a jeep into a conference room, artfully displayed food atop, with tables set around it.

"That was such a cool break concept and inspired us to come up with dishes that are just as creative, such as our Adventure Aruba package that includes a pop-up dinner at a unique island location, like Arikok National Park or Plaza Padu," he said.

## Jamaica

The land of reggae and rum is heavily influenced by Indian, African and Spanish cuisine, said Adrian Weichenberger, executive chef at the Jewel Grande Montego Bay Resort & Spa. Originally from Austria, Weichenberger's own background is influenced by German, Italian and French cuisine.



GRILLED LOBSTER, JEWEL  
GRANDE MONTEGO BAY  
RESORT & SPA, JAMAICA

Weichenberger is now well versed in the spices of the island, like pimento, a key ingredient in the famous jerk; he puts his own spin on authentic Jamaican cuisine with dishes from around the world.

"I use local produce such as ginger, annatto seed and breadfruit in my recipes," he said.

Chef's tables are popular for smaller groups where food is cooked right at the table for every course, he said.

## Dominican Republic

Executive chef Eliexy Collado Darias of the Barcelo Bavaro Palace in Punta Cana first dipped his toes in the culinary world while working in a hotel in his home country of Cuba. Subsequent training made him head of the Hotel Melia Cayo Santa María's restaurant, from its opening in 2003 until he moved up the ladder and became the restaurant's executive chef in 2008.

According to Darias, the best Cuban and

# CUISINE of CANCUN

**M**exico's 32 states promise tremendous diversity when it comes to flavors and specialties. In Cancun, much of the cuisine is inspired by neighboring Yucatan, including many dishes made with pork, such as cochinita pibil or lechon, according to Juan Zahoul Retes, executive chef and director of food and beverage at **The Grand at Moon Palace Cancun** ([www.moonpalace.com/thegrand](http://www.moonpalace.com/thegrand)).

Retes' passion for food started at a young age.

"I was always in the kitchen as my mother prepared meals, and I was captivated by how you could put so much love into something so tasty," he said.

At his restaurant, Retes likes using salsas—from mild to spicy—in all kinds of dishes. In addition, by using fresh fruit and vegetables and fresh-caught fish, Retes is continuously looking for ways to raise the bar for the guest dining experiences. New pastry chef Marelis Teran has also elevated the dessert offerings for groups.

"From donut walls and cake pops, to handcrafted flower petals made of sugar on a nine-layer cake, we can make the sweetest of dreams a reality," Retes said.

Mexican-born Executive Chef Sergio Zarate of the **Grand Fiesta Americana Coral Beach Cancun** ([www.coralbeachcancunresort.com](http://www.coralbeachcancunresort.com)), traveled around Europe after high school where he decided to become a chef. After culinary school he worked in the Middle East, Florida and Costa Rica and believes moving from place to place allowed him to pick up a little culture—and many culinary ideas.

Zarate said his cooking technique is extremely ingredient focused; he's constantly searching for new products and developing new recipes for such classics

as ceviches. His passion shines through as he experiments with exciting ways to incorporate fresh and seasonal ingredients, such as fresh thyme, basil, hinojo, achiote and epazote.

"I like mixing sweet with savory; that's how I come up with different preparations for salsas, moles and marinades," Zarate said.

For groups, the chef's table is the most popular, Zarate said. And for meeting planners, Zarate will sit down with them for a tasting.

"This is where we listen to their specific needs and discover what they are looking for," he explained. "We also taste different wines to see what is the best pairing for the food."

—Jennifer Juergens



JUAN ZAHOUL RETES

Dominican cuisine comes from using the region's freshest seasonings, sauces and produce, like yucca and plantains.

"We try to put our special modern touch on our traditional dishes," he added.

At Punta Cana's Iberostar Grand Bavaro, Spanish-born Executive Chef Mario Gonzalez loved to help his mother prepare meals growing up. Today, some of his island specialties at the hotel restaurant include el chivo al ron (goat with rum) and chillo frito with rice and fried plantains.

The hotel can serve groups dinner on the beach, with such themes as pirate, Dominican and Mexican.

## Grand Cayman

Grand Cayman's Kimpton Seafire Resort + Spa features three restaurants, and first-generation Italian Executive Chef Massimo De Francesca uses local produce at each.

His early inspiration came from his mother's homemade pasta and Italian cookies, and his father's fresh-caught fish cooked daily. At the Kimpton, De Francesca draws inspira-



EXECUTIVE CHEF MASSIMO DE FRANCESCO

tion from local produce, such as pumpkins, Cayman spinach, Scotch bonnet peppers, young coconut jelly, exotic fruits and fresh fish, including Caribbean lobster.

"We offer custom menus at different price points for groups that also enjoy beach barbecues serving fresh local catch," he said. "And if groups want to know how ceviche is made, the gourmet ceviche cooking class is always an option."

## Nassau, Bahamas

Nassau, the capital of the Bahamas, is home to luxury resort Grand Hyatt Baha Mar on Cable Beach. Executive Chef Brent Martin, a native of New Zealand, said "The staple here is conch. We make conch salad and conch fritters. It's a local delicacy we prepare right in front of guests."

Martin's specialty is his conch corn dog.

"We grind up the meat, dip it in corn meal batter and serve it with 'Calypso Sauce,' a mix of tamarind and lime. And for dessert, it's guava duff, a steamed pudding with guava,

brown sugar and rum," he said.

For groups, Martin's chefs cook in the private mansion on the island.

"But the culinary experience begins on the private jets flying in attendees," he said.

## Puerto Rico

Though hit hard by Hurricane Maria last year, Puerto Rico is coming back with a vengeance, with more than 127 hotels and almost 1,900 restaurants open for business. At Wyndham Grand Rio Mar Golf & Beach Resort, locally born Executive Chef Ramon Carillo remains inspired by the local purveyors of fresh and sustainable products used in traditional "cocina criolla" (Puerto Rican cuisine), such as lobster, plantains, yucca, mango, watermelon, guava and pineapple.

"Included in many of our dishes are recao and aijes, two ingredients native to Puerto Rico," Carillo said. "Our team prepares fresh creative fare in Roots Coastal Kitchen, dinner buffets at Marbella, Bar Bites at Caicu Bar & Tapas, or casual gathering spots like our poolside Tiki Hut."

At Caicu Bar & Tapas, Carillo noted there is an increased use of food products at the bars.


"Beet juice, basil caviar, goat cheese foam and ceviche juice for martinis all help make it the hot spot in Rio Mar and a great place to watch the sunset," he said.

## St. Kitts

Since his arrival two years ago, Executive Chef Pankaj Bisht of the Park Hyatt St. Kitts has immersed himself into the Kittian landscape and culinary scene. Born in India and married to a Chinese woman, Bisht said his cuisine is inspired by his wife and the island's seasonal, local produce.

"On St. Kitts and Nevis, known as the 'fertile land,' we have an abundance of fine and very unique produce," Bisht said.

For groups, the resort offers tasting menus, chef's tables and cooking classes.

"A trend we're seeing is the interactive dining experience, where guests not only eat tasty food but get to see how it is prepared, plated and then served," Bisht said. 

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