



We kick off with cocktails. I opt for a Jamaican Mule (Jamaican rum, ginger beer, angostura bitters and fresh lime), while Elio orders White Sands (lychee juice, white and coconut rum and fresh lime). They're both winners, sliding down smoothly while we navigate the unfamiliar items on the menu: Ackee and Saltfish, Bammies and Cou Cou Bites. Before we know it, our table is crowded with dishes and we formulate a plan of attack. "Bajan fish cakes?" I ask Elio and he nods assent, spearing one of the crispy balls with his fork. I follow suit, dousing it in creamy jerk mayo before taking a bite. The flavour combination of saltfish, spring onions and Scotch Bonnet is incredibly moreish. The mayo moderates the heat and a squeeze of the fresh lime wedge enhances the taste of sunshine.

Elio points to the golden segments of plantain on the next dish and we both bite into mouth-sized morsels that taste like the love child of a banana and a potato: sweet, yet starchy, the exterior slightly caramelised.

Before we can continue, our waitress, Veronica, swings by sliding yet another dish into the only empty space remaining. "This is the jerk-marinated sirloin steak," she says with a smile. The meat looks charred, but Veronica has already explained that the steaks come well-done as they cook quickly in the smoke pit. Elio slices the tender meat and we tuck in. The smoky flavour is deep and intense. It's like we're sitting next to a barbecue, inhaling the fumes as we chew.

"I'm dying to try the goat curry," I tell Elio, and he nudges the plate towards me. I tear off a strip of soft chilli roti, ladle some curry onto my plate and wrap a chunk of goat meat with the roti, sliding it into my mouth before the juice can dribble down my fingers. "Now that has some kick," I tell Elio, helping myself to more, along with a scoopful of rice 'n' peas. I've eaten goat before, and naturally, I've eaten curry, but this is my first goat curry. It won't be my last.

SINGING IN THE SMOKEHOUSE

CARIBBEAN CUISINE COVERS A PLETHORA OF DISHES AS DISPARATE AS THE COLLECTION OF ISLANDS IN THE REGION. GISELLE WHITEAKER SAMPLES ISLAND FLAVOURS AT LEVI ROOTS CARIBBEAN SMOKEHOUSE.

The name Levi Roots may ring a bell. The Jamaican-born entrepreneur is somewhat of a dragon slayer, with his Reggae Reggae sauce winning support from Peter Jones and Richard Farleigh on *Dragon's Den* back in 2007. The sauce has spread a long way from its humble beginnings, when Levi concocted batches in his kitchen in Brixton with the help of his seven children, selling it out of the bag on his back. Now it's on the shelves at all of the major supermarkets and Levi is something of a household name – whether it's for the sauces, his cookbooks, or his Reggae albums. I've found the best place to sample all three: Levi Roots Caribbean Smokehouse.

Walking into the 'Rasta'rant' at Westfield in Stratford feels something like rocking up to a beach shack in the Caribbean – clad timber walls, steel mesh and exposed steel work combine with bright blue walls, yellow chairs and wooden floorboards to create a chilled-out feel. There are shelves of sauces, stacks of books, and a background of Reggae beats. The super friendly staff adds to the relaxed vibe, which is also decidedly upbeat – all of the punters this Wednesday night have smiles on their faces as they chatter with friends and chow down on the spiced delicacies on offer.

My boyfriend Elio has never dined on Caribbean cuisine before, and I'm also somewhat of a novice. I've sampled jerk chicken and fried plantains, and several rum punches may have made their way past my lips, but it's not a cuisine I'm overly familiar with. That's about to change.





The final dish to sample is the boneless jerk chicken thighs with Levi's BBO Reggae glaze. The restaurant aims to serve the best jerk chicken in the world and while I don't have the experience to determine whether they've been successful in their endeavours, I can confirm it's certainly something special. Rumour has it that Levi's jerk recipe is generations old, passed down to him by his grandmother. She must have been one talented chef. I had no idea chicken could taste like that. It's hot, but smooth, smoky, but light, tender, yet substantial.

"Your favourite?" I ask Elio. He considers for a moment before sticking his fork into another Bajan fish cake. "Yours?" he counters. My eyes swing between the fish cakes, the jerk chicken and the curry before I reach for another piece of roti to swipe through the curry sauce.

We make our way around the dishes again and again. "I have to stop," I say, groaning, as Veronica makes another pass. I catch her eye. I'm not one to ask for a doggy bag, but there's a whole chicken thigh left. "You have to throw that away if we don't eat it, right?" I ask her. She confirms. "Could I possibly take it home instead?" She laughs and whips the plate away, bringing the chicken back neatly boxed. Jerk chicken wraps for lunch tomorrow.

"Does that mean you can't fit dessert?" Veronica asks. Elio and I share looks filled with food longing. "Maybe just a small slice of pineapple upside-down cake and two spoons," I suggest. The treacly sponge topped with candied chilli is the perfect finisher.

"We're definitely coming back here," Elio says as we push away from the table. There'll be no argument from me. Caribbean cuisine may just be my new favourite thing. ■

INFO

For more information about Caribbean cooking, to book a Levi Roots masterclass, or to find out more about Levi Roots Caribbean Smokehouse, see www.caribbean smokehouse.com

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Jamaican Mule and White Sands.



Pineapple upside-down cake.



Fried fish and Bammies.



Levi's Chic Fest.

LEVI ROOTS BAJAN FISH CAKES WITH JERK MAYO DIP

SERVES 4

INGREDIENTS

- 20ml Rapeseed oil
- 125g Onion diced
- 40g Spring onions
- 8g Scotch Bonnet chilli
- 35g Bajan or Green seasoning (available from Caribbean retailers)
- 15g Butter
- 125g Plain flour
- 100ml Whole milk
- 2 Whole eggs
- 5g Baking powder
- 500g Saltfish
- Oil for deep frying

METHOD

Finely chop the Scotch Bonnet chilli into 3mm dice and the spring onions into 5mm dice. Heat the rapeseed oil in a pan and sauté the diced onion, Scotch Bonnet and spring onions over a low heat until translucent. Leave to cool.

Cook the saltfish in a pan of hot water for approximately 8 minutes. Remove the fish from the pan and rinse under running water to remove some of the salt. Flake the fish.

In a mixing bowl, combine the flour, eggs and milk. Melt the butter and stir into the mix. Fold in the cooked onion and chilli, seasoning and flaked fish until well combined. Cover and leave at room temperature for a couple of hours until the mixture rises slightly.

Use a spoon to scoop the mixture into 20 individual fish cakes and deep fry at 100 degrees for approximately 5-7 minutes or until golden brown and the mixture is cooked in the centre.

Combine mayonnaise with a dash of Levi Roots Reggae Reggae Jerk Sauce as a dip and serve with lime wedges.

