

## Tommy Cantina, Port Elizabeth, Bequia

*South-of-the-  
border south of  
the border*

by Louise Wollman

**M**y food fantasies generally run to Chinese egg rolls, Japanese sushi rolls or a perfect bowl of spaghetti Amatriciana. Culinary cravings like this are endemic to a lifestyle where you mostly find goat curry, cuspid-killing conch and bone-dry boneless fish.

A Texas cruiser must lust similarly after taquitos. Me, I would only hanker for Mexican fare retroactively—that is, if I rammed smack into some south-of-the-border cantina. Which happens just about never in the Caribbean.

But then in Bequia I hear about a Mexican restaurant. Visions of overstuffed tacos and plump tamales come entirely unbidden. (Well, there is also the lure of a perfect margarita.)

Fortunately we are in Admiralty Bay, and the news comes just before lunch. We jump in the dinghy and gun it to the Frangiapani dock.

Steps away, as the beach path dribbles off and Front Street ends, looms Tommy Cantina, a mini-riot of primary colors. Yellow tables



Tommy Cantina is the author's favorite stop in the Caribbean for Mexican fare

with aqua legs, purple tops with orange legs, aqua tops with red, all set with colorful plastic plates behind a white picket fence, with sailboats at anchor beyond.

Equally unpredictable is the owner, Pam Stewart, the archetypal Beach Boys surfer girl fast-forwarded to baby boomer. Pretty, blonde, pony-tailed and burnished gracefully by time. Granny glasses hint brains are involved.

The third zinger is the food. It is neither arms-length Caribbean reinterpretations of some Mexican cookbook nor chain-food American Tex-Mex. Almost exclusively

prepared from scratch, it is what you expect at a family taqueria in Oxnard, California or Burleson, Texas. If, in fact, such phenomena still exist.

“Only thing we don’t make ourselves are the corn tortillas,” Stewart tells me. “I tried but we just couldn’t get them thin enough.”

Indeed, aromas of sautéing onions, garlic and green peppers waft past along with breezes off the bay. You hear the sizzle of shredded beef on the grill while you guzzle a beer or sip a margarita—if you are a salt freak,

***Sailing on your stomach: In the wake of an insatiable food sleuth***

they will satisfy your mania with a thickly crusted rim.

The salsa picante on the table is made daily. Cooked long, until it is smooth with nearly liquefied onions, it doesn't detonate jalapeño fire mid-swallow. The tortillas are moist, almost flaky, unmistakably made that morning.

Quesadillas (about \$6.75) are just plain to-die-for, arriving hot: the interior cheese warm and melted, the exterior brown with just-charred flavor.

Most plates—and there are combination plates, too—come with a nurse's cap of rice and some black beans in a ruffled taco shell studded with a mild, white cheddar.

Stewart says it must be cheddar—actually a reasonable substitute—because manchego is hard to come by in Bequia. Sourcing food is her biggest challenge. “There's no such thing as wholesale here, and so much of what we make isn't locally available.”

She may soon tackle tamales. “They're really tedious to make, but so good homemade,” she says. “I think I can do batches, freeze them and then steam them to order. It's worth a try.”

Tamales? Fresh tortillas? Quesadillas? What's a nice California girl doing running a Mexican restaurant in Bequia?

Accidental, like many of life's pleasant surprises. She and her husband Tom visited on vacation six years ago and, like others, found it paradise incarnate. Next came winters and they ultimately bought a full-time house with a terrific view.

Paradise had only one small

flaw: “I went through Mexican food withdrawal.”

Stewart grew up in Clovis, a tiny central California town near Fresno. “There were a lot of Hispanic people, many migrant workers who stayed. I adored Mexican food...so I asked a lot of questions. Mostly I taught myself.”



**Tommy's taco combination plate comes with rice and black beans**

Eventually she moved to San Diego and enjoyed a terrific but frantic career in hotel design. Opening a Mexican restaurant was, she says, not much crazier than other things she has done.

“I thought there might be a niche here.”

Pam, the front person, runs the kitchen and staff. Tom does “the number things.” It is named Tommy Cantina after him and to evoke the panache of Tommy Bahama and Tommy Hilfiger, both significant Caribbean clothier presences.

They are open year round. Though in sleepy little Bequia Stewart's not “racing at 50 miles an hour with OSHA and unions and health departments breathing down my neck, still there is a health department and a tremendous amount of competition, at

least 50 other restaurants to choose from.” Staffing—finding friendly people who want to work—is a significant challenge.

Aside from its unique food niche, Tommy Cantina has a dessert that will knock your socks off—if you are uncool enough to be wearing socks with your

sandals. You might be taco-phobic, bored with burritos or cumin-averse, but there would still be the lure of Tommy Cantina's Amazing Frozen Banana Dessert. (I am only reading from the menu, where I noticed it on a subsequent visit.)

“You have to try it,” insists the waitress.

“You mean you've been here three times and you haven't

tried it?” asks the incredulous owner.

Though it will stand alone, we are instructed to try a topping. An unswerving purist, I grudgingly succumb to Bailey's Irish Cream. No mistake.

It is unadulterated banana, puréed in a blender. Sweet, rich, with a consistency so thick, so smooth and so silken, it is like slurping on chilled moonbeams.

Deserving the rating “Top Banana,” Tommy Cantina's Amazing Frozen Banana Dessert (around \$2.75) does demand trying. It is unavailable elsewhere—except, Stewart admits, on one New Jersey Shore pier.

You might as well be in Bequia!

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*Louise Wollman, and her husband Gary, have been sailing and sampling the Caribbean aboard LULU since 1999.*