

WELCOME IMPROVEMENT



TI KAYE *Anse Cochon, St. Lucia*

By Louise Wollman

I'll admit it: I was carrying a grudge. Sad, since St. Lucia's significant charms had once lured us back annually. Like mooring beneath the soaring Pitons, their points tickling the very stars. Like Gros Ilet's Friday night jump-ups: grand eat-athons where one barbecue stand rivaled the next; where we tossed off inhibition, bounced our bottoms and swiveled our hips in pale but spirited imitations of the supple St. Lucians and rocking Rastas.

Like lively Rodney Bay, offering decent markets...good produce... real hardware stores...a well stocked chandlery...thin-crust pizza...terrific Indian...passable Chinese. And steaks so big I once bested 11 tablemates—

burly guys included—polishing off a 32-ouncer to win the Big Chef Sirloin Contest.

But after four-year's hiatus, a different climate. In 2005, sullenness, not smiles, sometimes subtle, sometimes blatant. Inattentive servers, indifferent clerks, a gouging taxi driver. Unpleasantness thicker than that 32-ounce steak.

Badgering, bullying boat boys: "Why you waxin' yourself...taking jobs away from us?" one asked. Two guys hired to clean the waterline attacked with metal trowels, getting the job done faster but scoring a long row of gouges in our hull.

One morning, two separate local skiffs pulled up, knocked loud and long. Later we discovered a hefty

chunk of transom missing.

With grandchildren arriving, I asked to see the children's menu at a hotel beach bar. "Only children can eat from the children's menu!" snapped the hostess. "Didn't want to eat from the menu, only wanted to see how you cook the children," was our (admittedly swallowed) retort.

Jump-ups? Go only in big groups, take a taxi, and leave by nine. A French boat anchored nearby was robbed the night before we left.

"Good riddance, St. Lucia," I thought. "Not coming back."

PURE FUN

But in 2008 good friends e-mailed rave reviews. Exquisite cove, gracious hotel, super food, willing service.

In St. Lucia? No way!
But I trusted their
culinary evaluation; figured probably they were

Sailing On Your Stomach
In the wake of an insatiable food sleuth



Fresh, colorful and delicious: Ti Kaye's fish burger, top, and appetizer spread, below are full of Caribbean flair



experts at civility, being Southern—Annapolis, to be exact, which is virtually the Deep South to a New Yorker.

Okay, I admit it: the hallowed word “burger” also appeared, modified by the word “big.” Blissful, merely implied, but then the bare-naked “B” word can propel my spouse to the winches. Besides, we’d never heard of, much less been to, Anse Cochon. The fact that the French translates to “pig” held promise.

More-than-delivered-on promise, I’m glad to admit.

An expansive cove, startlingly

clear water, a healthy reef and nearby wreck to snorkel. A long swath of curved beach backed by mountains, empty but for 26 unpretentious red-roofed cabins amid the greenery. That would be the tiny resort, Ti Kaye, meaning “little house” in Creole patois, and pronounced Tea Kai, rhymes with “Hi.”

Hell-bent for burgers, we flew to shore, scrambled up to a Crayola-colored porch restaurant. The burger (our first and only disappointment) was a Caribbean burger—super-sized, yes, but mixed with onions, spices and breadcrumbs, so it cooks

up gray and tastes like meatloaf. (Which, essentially, it is.) A good meatloaf but a meatloaf nonetheless. As opposed to a New York burger—super-fresh, red meat, unsullied and fatty enough to taste good.

On the other hand, the *fishburger*—moist, just-caught mahi, subtly seasoned and *huge*. Flawless, really. Coming with house-made, local-ingredient chips—dasheen, yam, cassava, plantain—and served atop *tablecloths* mind you, festive plaid ones.

Entirely apt, that name, Ti Kaye. We felt instantly at home, got treated like we *were* home. Properly lunched, we set about exploring. That meant climbing 167 steps, high up the mountain—an exertion mercifully mitigated by amusing signposts and charming rest stops. We attained the main “house,” an open-sided aerie built of dark-stained Honduras pine with a vaulted ceiling, a huge circular bar and an inviting dining room cantilevered out over the cove, affording *Travel & Leisure* views of our lolling boats.

Who except youngsters—or goats—could holiday at such heights, dashing routinely up and down the hill for book...block...lotion...lunch?

The sheer loveliness dictated a command decision: stay another day for dinner. We request a railing table, obviously prime territory. “Yes, of course,” answers Sonya, the dining room manager, like we’re drop-by royalty, not grungy interlopers.

And please, pretty please could someone pick us creaky old folks up down at the beach...and drop us back later, safe, sound (and only possibly inebriated).

“I’ll do it,” volunteers George, who wafts over wearing an infectious, ear-to-ear grin, wider almost than his reedy torso.

Next night George deposits us on time...into the arms of Ti Kaye hos-



The jump-up at Ti Kaye, above right, has everyone in the mood to dance, including the author (left). Ti Kaye's Nick Pinnock, right



pitality, all smiles, party dresses and invitations.

"Come, join us for a drink," says vivacious Katie, propelling us toward a terrace. "Yes, you must taste our spring rolls," insists bouncy Lilieta, ushering us into the weekly Manager's Party, where we discover the hotel is primarily populated—wall-to-wall, bed-to-bed, if you will—by fresh-faced honeymooners. (A likely explanation for an empty beach.)

Later playful staffers at buffet stations shepherd us through pretty platters of fresh, tasty local specialties.

"Yes, I *do* make the barbecue sauce," says Klent, willingly confiding his secret ingredient: papaya.

Cleus, bartender and Wine Room honcho, remembers our particular poisons—as well as our names...all night. "The wine isn't right? No, it is not OK to be just OK. I will open another."

Even later the newlyweds, the sailors, the staffers get silly together, wiggling and weaving around the dance floor, egged on by a lively band and rabble-rousing MC.

Who exactly was behind such pure join-in fun?

PURE CARIBBEAN

Turns out a rank amateur: no architect, builder, engineer, hotel management or restaurant school graduate. Just a local boy who loved his island, a diver who loved that particular bay. A guy with a vision and a value system.

At just 23, Nick Pinnock bought 15 beachfront acres, figuring someone would come along and build a hotel.

But after 10 years, no one had. "I wanted someplace *I'd* come to, reflecting what the Caribbean is about—hammocks and verandahs and low density. Something that'd suit the land, not destroy it," says Pinnock. His alert eyes and chiseled chin add grit to boyish good looks.

"I thought I'd take a shot. Buy a pair of sandals and throw away the tie and jacket."

In 2000, he and his then-father-in-law committed to doing and designing everything themselves, to keeping away "the pros." Eighteen months later, all 33 rooms, pool and

main building were mostly complete. Ti Manje, the lunch café, sprung up later. Bay-wide Internet and a low-key spa are in the works.

Underscore low-key. Forget "attitude."

"My people don't paint fake smiles on their faces. They understand guests spending big sums want friendly, professional service—and not snobby."

Yachties are welcome; lights are left on at night should cruisers choose to climb up for dinner. George's driver services aren't formally available, but "if we can work it out, why not," Pinnock offers.

"I like working with Nick—he's taught me a lot," says George, en route to the dinghy dock.

Pinnock's people don't see you as a walking dollar bill. They know your present is their future.

With luck, maybe St. Lucia's too. 2