



Martin-eeky

By Louise Wollman

I assumed the food in Martinique would be terrific. After all it's French, isn't it?

I invented the cuisine I thought would be there. And got shot down. I idealized pinch-of-this, squeeze-of-that Caribbean cooks, decided they'd deflate that French-chef tendency to menu grandiosity, democratize all that pinky-in-the-air pretension. Resulting in significant culinary breakthroughs.

I never considered the possibility of a Mendelian experiment gone awry—that in the cultural cross-pollination recessives could trump dominants. (I was always an indifferent biology student.)

Sure enough, in Martinique the mar-

Martinique French West Indies

riage of down-home and hoity-toity resulted in high-falutin' names but island-time execution.

Everything slowly and in its own good time (frequently approaching eternity) applied to cooking, means haricots verts boiled to near extinction; pasta the texture of porridge; alien cuts of meat grilled diamond-hard; fish filets fried to manhole-cover consistency. Familiar Caribbean standbys—croquettes, fritters and curries come dressed in fancy names: crabe farci, accras du morue, assiette de porc. One orders lambi, expecting tender rack of lamb and gets instead shoe-leather conch.

Well, don't "colombo du poulet,

colombo d'agneau, colombo de crevettes" sound more appealing than chicken, lamb and shrimp curry? Too bad colombos arrive at the table looking universally alike—lumpy, yellowy globules mostly resembling infant poop.

Menus are long but repetitive, beach after beach, town after town, identical as strands of DNA.

And "accras du morue" turns out to be the falafel of the French West Indies: oil-soaked balls of fried dough, maybe exposed to, but not infused with, actual cod.

In this evolutionary testing ground, survival of the fittest became survival of the fattest. Thus, I was go-

ing to recommend steering clear of

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

Martinique if you relish magnificent meals—if you’re the type whose first thought of the day is, “What am I going to eat today?” But I am loath to trash an entire island. Besides, Martinique has much else to commend itself—startling beauty, dramatic scenery, extraordinary gardens, towering mountains.

So instead I’ve developed a north-to-south Meal Plan: some proactive, defensive measures ensuring delicious, if not quite luscious, eats. Slightly more complex than Cruising with Croissants, it requires some rudimentary galley participation.

Starting north, stop in delightful St. Pierre, where bells bong the hour from the twin-spired, terracotta Catholic Church, set against the emerald backdrop of Mt. Pelée. Prowl the morning green market, shaded under lacy steel trelliswork; most days it will provide big starbursts of local lettuces, newly harvested vegetables, super-juicy pineapples and those sweet orbs of heaven: yellow-skinned cantaloupes striated in green found only in the French islands.

Check in at the Internet café—crawl up the narrow stairs to the warren of tables above for a morning coffee and a charming sliver of a harbor view. But do not buy bread: St. Pierre’s best baguette is found at a bakery just two left turns around the corner. A few steps further, around noon, you can buy a plump, caramel-skinned rotisserie chicken—be sure to have the garlicky Creole sauce poured right into the bag. Eat it still hot onboard and you’ve avoided a deadly downtown interpretation of Chinese food.

Pelée is an innocuous looking crumple of green; its peak nuzzles the whipped-creamy clouds so innocently it’s hard to imagine 1902, when its fiery black breath destroyed the entire town and 30,000 people.



The Jardin de Balata botanical gardens—a Martinique must-see. The colorful Le St. Pierre market, opposite

For spectacular proof, spend a few hours at the volcano museum. Then beat it to...

TROIS-ILETS

Adorable as any self-respecting Provence parish, despite the exasperating mud anchoring. The charming square and quaint old homes covered in ruddy fish-scale roofs compensate. Ramble the village, stopping at the boulangerie for croissants and allowing their buttery flakes to flutter onto your shirt like snowflakes. Rush back, shower, then dinghy back to dinner at Les Passagers du Vent, where you may experience the only authentic French meal I encountered in Martinique: haunting food served inside an art-filled old house or on its leafy, brick courtyard. I say “may” because it’s been sold, though into the probably-safe hands of its former sous-chef.

Move on to Anse Mitan, to the Pointe du Bout peninsula, touristy but cute, with trendy French boutiques and expensive, better-ignored cafes. The “free internet” at La Grange means a \$40 lunch of limp salad, insufficient dressing and a carpaccio held together by overdeveloped musculature. Try instead the nearby Saladerie or a harmless

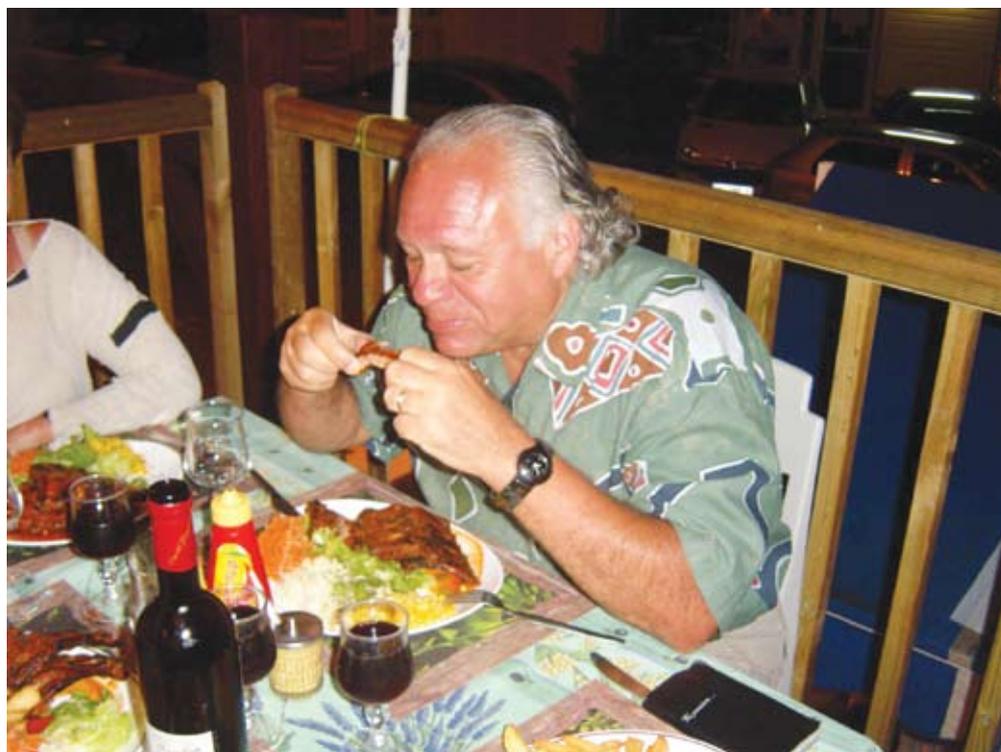
baguette sandwich at Deli-France. Or amble down to the picturesque marina and risk a pizza at La Marine, but be warned the sauce is scant and the crust so limp you may question if anyone bothered to cook it at all.

Alternately, there’s Le Ponton, where you can tie your dinghy alongside an appealing terrace with long picnic-style tables populated by enthusiastic, clearly euro-laden, locals and tourists. Costly, though mostly tasty, you must avoid the lamb ribs: wresting the vestigial coating of meat from those diamond-hard bones requires teeth normally allotted to Bengal tigers.

ROAD TRIP

Alternately here’s a marathon Martinique touring day ensuring good meals and a one-day-only car rental. Start just after O-Dark-Thirty with a Deli-France coffee and pain chocolat. Drive north toward Fort de France (which is a restaurant moon-scape because cruise-ship passengers don’t eat on land). Stop at any one of the monster hypermarchés, say Promo-Cash or Hyper-U, to gawk at the incredible provisioning pulchritude but most especially at the frozen meat department.

Drive on to the Jardin de Balata,



a breathtaking series of tropical botanical gardens, one more astonishing than the next, a labor-of-love project designed by landscape architect Jean Phillippe Thoze around his grandmother's 100-year-old house and 3-hectare property. Thoze culled some 3,000 species of exotic trees, flowers and plants worldwide and mixed them in harmonious carpets of color along serpentine paths, around ponds, over and down lush hillocks, using occasional bursts of aqua sea as accent.

Continue north to Le Precheur stopping at Le Relais Préchotain, a tiny seaside dive where you can eat on the terrace to the music of crashing surf. Sample one of two daily specials—could be a tranche (slice) of popping-fresh, aptly seasoned dorado or an array of peppery sardines, served with red-bean rice, shredded cucumber and ruby, just-picked tomatoes at flavor peak.

The cost of this fine, inexpensive lunch is some backtracking toward St Pierre. Pick up the N3 and drive north, climbing up, around and through Martinique's dense rainforest. When it dead-ends high above the dramatic Atlantic coast, turn left to Grand Rivière, an untrammelled

fishing village with a stunning green backdrop of misty mountains dribbling down to stark black boulders and the endless, restless sea.

A bit more scenic back-pedaling takes you further down the tempestuous east coast and out onto the laid-back Caravelle peninsula, a slender seven-mile strip of sandy beaches. Take in the daily sunset spectacular, then retire to the Hotel Caravelle's La Table de Mamy Nounou, a quirky place where people gather English-manor-house style before dinner in lobby easy chairs. The jaunty owner, Bastien, takes orders, serves drinks and eventually escorts you to the table where your first course awaits.

BACK-ON-BOAT

Skip the rolly "anse" anchorages with their monotonous beach bars and remarkably similar, Knorr-ish colombos. Chug south to Marin, Martinique's boat-work haven, where this "eat-inerary" gets more improvisational, supermarket-driven, galley-intense, cockpit-oriented.

In dock, Mango Bay is a non-option. Deli-France here makes predictable pizza and passable sandwiches. Behind the Capitainerie complex

and across the road, on a woody upstairs porch Le Mouillage provides a prosaic but low-priced plat-du-jour. A walk away in Port Plaisance, Ti Toques is pretty, pretty expensive and does seven-layer-cake ribs: three layers fat, four layers pork in equal stripes.

Save ribs for Le Mouillage—weekend nights only. Above-average ribs, though served with pappy fries and

the familiar drab Creole "crudités"—shredded cabbage, carrots, corn and cardboard tomato. Le Mouillage is tiny and popular, making reservations critical. Plus there's the timing problem:

A 7 p.m. opening makes it a tad late for many cruisers. Worse, they pre-cook, meaning such early birds frequently get cool-to-downright-clammy ribs. When your typical cruiser leaves at 8:15 he snakes down the narrow stairs, squeezing past will-be diners who'll get the hotties. Below is The Rib Guy, standing before a roaring hot fire, laboring over a huge mess of sizzling ribs on a sea of grill and performing for a crowd of onlookers who've got nothing better to do but watch and drool. Me, I'd reserve for 8-ish.

Marin dining is galley-intense but undemanding. Superb French bread is always available; nearby, dinghy-able Supermarket Annette and Leader Price are well stocked with excellent salad ingredients. Dress them in the delicate Dijon vinaigrette found on the shelves in bulbous yellow plastic bottles. From the dairy case and for a three-egg scramble, buy a package of lardons—oversized honest-to-Pete bacon



bits. Assemble a dinner from the magnificent pates, terrines, jamons, saucissons and quadruple-cream fromages. (Slather leftovers directly on your thighs.) At Leader Price, find the squat, green-topped jars labeled

“Poivrons Aubergines,” a remarkable, sweet eggplant-red pepper spread, perfect on crusty baguette slices. At less than two bucks, grab them out—you won’t regret it down-island where the bread’s bad but you can still eat it off your fingers.

You can risk the tuna baguette at the Annette-mall branch of L’Epi Soleil (see *Blue Water Sailing*, January, 2008), but I’d recommend the eight-minute dinghy ride for the original St. Anne version.

Last, but by no means last-ditch, across the parking lot of that handy Annette mall, you will find Ti-Poulet AKA The Un-Perdue. But be sure your chicken gets a healthy dousing of gravy, which—far more garlick than Gallic—is surely the contribution of some pinch-of-this, squeeze-of-that Caribbean mama. ≈

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