



A HORSE WITH NO NAME

Equus...De Ranch... That Skewer Place Curacao, Netherlands Antilles

By Louise Wollman

The stocky Connecticut businessman first heard about the place in an airplane lounge. “Now I come every week,” he said, simultaneously circling the courtyard in pre-sunset heat and fielding cell phone calls from friends stuck in Curacao traffic. “Yeah, I’m here. Whadd’ya want? One beef, two mixed. Got it.”

Other would-be diners mill about, some champing at the bit, some feigning nonchalance, all jockeying for advantageous gate positions. When the fence opens at 6pm, they’ll explode inside and gallop to favorite tables.

Word of mouth is how you get here. It’s never, in 16 years, been advertised, even though its owner is a lifelong ad-man. In our case, another cruiser recommended it. I heard something like “huge skewers, roaring fire, barbecued meat, stables.”

Stables?

Enough information for me to propose an impromptu 34-mile passage from Bonaire to Curacao—knowing full well the inevitable on-the-nose slog back—because this place is only open on Friday nights. And what if our future weather window to Cartagena should materialize on a Thursday?

Conversely—and perversely—what my generally genial husband

heard prompted a mini-tirade. “Imagine the business plan for this place. *We’re going to open a restaurant and the entire menu’s a skewer of meat... served on a picnic table. No plate, no knife, no fork, no fries, no salad, no vegetable. Just a skewer and a couple chunks of garlic bread. Oh, yeah, and we’ll open only once a week.* Unbelievable,” he snorted from up on his high horse.

I chalked it up to entrepreneurial envy.

We made the passage. (I *am* the food writer.)

Good that we stopped asking, because nothing prepares you for Equus, also known as “De Ranch,” or “That Skewer Place.” It’s a horse farm that once stabled eight. Nowadays, six brown-planked tables sit on the checkerboard brick-floor alongside five wood stables, mostly used as storehouses for overflow beer, sodas, charcoal, shovels and hay. Except the two that house Lady O and Chispa—elegant Colombian Paso Fino walking horses who lend shiny,



Opposite, Equus's famed sarcophagus-sized barbeque. This page, owners Mirella Christiaan and Roger van Daalan

just-combed authenticity. They've recently acquired a new pen-mate: a portly, snow white hen roosting ostentatiously over their heads like she's their boss...or maybe just their spirit guide.

Now spirits, guardians and the idea of a harmonious universe are subtexts of this category-defying eating establishment. Equus does offer good food—limited in selection though not execution. But primarily it's an evening of pure entertainment—an unpredictable synthesis of dinner theater, art gallery and circus. (Including, in this case, the menagerie.)

Once inside, go to the bar and introduce yourself to co-owner Mirella Christiaan, slight, with cocoa skin and quirky curly hair. A chiseled nose and square jaw signal inner strength, but her wide, white smile could shame a piano keyboard. Give her your skewer order. And then your drink order—she will remember it all night.

Mirella's husband stands center stage, at the waist high, sarcophagus-sized barbecue. Roger van Daalan is a striking man with powerful arms and a ramrod back. An Indian-feather tattoo on his bicep, an arrowhead necklace and the regal slope of his bald head evoke archetypal warrior (even tribal chief), while slim hips and sinewy moves suggest dancer.

Roger rakes a glowing pile of ebony charcoal with a farm shovel and a stance that honors and respects the fire's power. Think of him as the Master of Ceremonies.

Since everything is cooked to order, you've got time.

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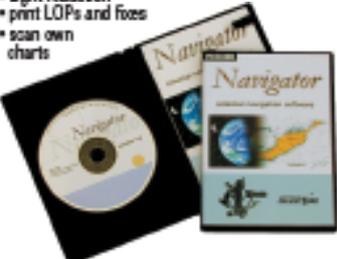
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tures, masks, horse carvings, a painted, tasseled steer head, the sepia face of an impressive Indian chief. Roger and Mirella call these their guardian angels—protectors of the house, the ranch, the restaurant. Some are purchases, but many were

Waiting, watching and listening are part of the drama. Stroll, admire the horses, snap pictures. Like acolytes at a religious convention, guests share “origin” stories—how they got to Equus. Take in the sunset view and a blue water glimpse at the back fence, which overlooks lush vegetation and a squat, vaguely pompous Curacao landhuis—a former plantation home, yellow with its signature red-tiled roof.

Equus’s courtyard “dining room” abuts the couple’s home and private front yard—a profusion of healthy trees, big-fronded ferns, round balls of flowering bushes, a thatched gazebo sprouting cacti, even a delicate orchid in bloom.

Tucked everywhere to ogle shamelessly are primitive artifacts: sculp-

tures, masks, horse carvings, a painted, tasseled steer head, the sepia face of an impressive Indian chief. Roger and Mirella call these their guardian angels—protectors of the house, the ranch, the restaurant. Some are purchases, but many were painted or sculpted by Roger, who is a graphic designer, signmaker and artist—not to mention horseman.

And possibly the prototype Gallop-ing Gourmet.

Back at the grill, Roger threads half-kilos of pre-marinated chicken or beef onto 36-inch skewers. Suddenly he’ll wheel, swivel or boogie to the CD he’s selected—could be salsa, meringue, rock, even the sexy local bump-and-grind called toomba.

Next, skewers hit the grill, where-upon Roger begins a virtuoso performance combining foosball moves and double-octave keyboard dexterity to keep 26 skewers in motion, ensuring they’re cooked evenly and burn-free. His hands fly; they are sometimes invisible as separate entities. Handles spin, skewers are



Opposite, a typical crowd waiting to enter, top, and eating, bottom. This page, a "protector of the house"

turned, shifted, relocated, occasionally cut into for doneness. He'll do about 100 each Friday.

You want to applaud such consummate showmanship. Should he suddenly set a skewer afire and begin passing it down his throat, it might not surprise.

Roger is literally having a blast.

In fact, both owners say they rarely think of Equus as a restaurant. Friday nights are more like get-togethers, their way of socializing. Forget business plan—it all started some 20 years ago, when the Curacao horse set rode weekly to one friend's

ranch for barbecue. But no one ever contributed, Mirella noted. Eventually, Roger and Mirella threw a post-construction party, celebrating the completion of new stables. They've been doing it ever since...with the proviso there'd be no free ride. The Portuguese skewer idea came later, suggested by a friend.

Roger and a retinue of helpers deliver your completed skewers, hang them on a steel rack bolted over your table, and hand out breadbaskets and a white dipping sauce telegraphing garlic and dill.

Your mission is to grab a hunk of bread, surround a chunk of meat, squeeze it down the skewer, dip it and devour it, simultaneously watching restaurant-mates—framed by curtains of skewers—similarly engaged.

Bravo! And too full for an encore...

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GETTING THERE

BUS: Leave your dinghy and catch the bus at the Spanish Waters Fisherman's Pier, arriving about 5pm. Do not board until after the bus makes a short run into a street on its right, then rounds the circle to return up Caracaasbai. Ask the driver to let you off at Tam's Clinic (about 1¼ miles) on the right. Cross the road. Make a left at the first corner, where you will see the blue and white Equus sign with its horse logo. Just around the bend on your left is the Equus gate. Remember to ask the bus driver when the last bus back departs. After dinner, reverse directions and

walk to the small snack/ice cream bar on your right. If you're early, the ice cream is quite good.

RENTAL CAR: From the Spanish Waters anchorage, follow the sinewy path on your Curacao map to Kaminda Bruderman di Bakepoti. Go left when it dead ends at Caracaasbai. Turn right after about 800 meters, just in front of the blue and white Equus sign with its horse logo. A similar horse's head adorns the ranch's concrete wall on your left. Park in the lot just beyond. If you get lost, don't bother asking.



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