

FROM GUERRILLA GARDENING to Creole traditions, it's back to the culinary basics

A true taste of Martinique

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When it comes to colours, the island of Martinique is best known for its white beaches, aqua sea and Creole cottages in bold pastels. Now it's going green, thanks to a fresh crop of grassroots-based culinary tourism initiatives.

"For us, sustainability is a way of life, not a slogan," says Patrick Duchel, the leader of the TakTak Network, an association of farmers, fishermen, chefs and agri-tourism operators who are trying to boost the local economy in a way that sustains the residents' way of life instead of trampling it. They believe that creating links between local farmers and the tourism sector can reduce the consumption of island resources and lessen the dependence on imports.

Martinique's cuisine is an inventive blend of French haute cuisine and Creole traditions drawn from a mix of African, Indian and Caribbean influences. The TakTak Network's strategy is to build upon that culinary diversity.

My epicurean adventure begins in the north of the island, located in the eastern Caribbean. Here, the road crisscrosses past beaches of black volcanic sand, lush rainforest and deep canyons shadowed by cloud-shrouded Mount Pelée, a volcano that last erupted in 1902 with devastating results: an estimated 30,000 people were killed.

At the TakTak headquarters, located in a restored stone cottage, cooking classes introduce visitors to cuisine inspired by the Creole garden. Outside, hummingbirds flit among tangles of dasheen (leafy cabbage), giraumon (squash) and yams.

"Every home used to have a garden that produced enough to sustain a family throughout the year," Duchel says. "Now everyone heads to the supermarket, and we're losing our traditional knowledge of how to grow and prepare food."

Breakfast is a colourful affair. A madras tablecloth of cinnamon, orange and yellow is topped by pitchers of guava juice and a platter of salty/sour smoked fish surrounded by shaved cucumber, carrots and lettuce. A gratin



A shrimp farmer shows a product destined for local restaurants near Le Carbet in Martinique.

of christophene (chayote) and baked ti-nain, a tiny banana, anchors the offerings.

"Smash the banana with your fork, mix in the fish and top it with Creole sauce," instructs Duchel, who is persuasive in his belief that cod is a perfect breakfast food.

Next, we head to Le Petibonum restaurant in the village of Le Carbet to sample contemporary interpretations of local fare under the creative direction of artisan/restaurantier Guy Ferdinand.

One of Martinique's top chefs, Ferdinand is a keen supporter of small-scale farmers. His menu, inspired by the sea and the senses, includes a lusciously smooth avocado purée shrimp cocktail, grapefruit salad and a platter of shrimp, lobster and ouassou (freshwater

crayfish) so dripping with juices that we're forced to bathe in the sea to wash off. Dessert is a warm crème flân. Redolent with natural vanilla, it evokes the island's flowers and spices.

"It's inspiring to revive the flavours of the past and merge them with the techniques of today," says Ferdinand, who relies on artisans such as Ziouka Glaces for handcrafted products like manioc ice cream. The creation pays homage to the island's slave ancestry, which relied on the root vegetable as a dietary staple.

Farther south, at la Savane des Esclaves, a recreation of a slave village in Les Trois Ilets, Gilbert Larose has taken guerrilla gardening to a new level in his quest to preserve island traditions. "In the old days, we'd cook communally and talk

about our troubles together," he says. "Now, we've lost that part of our culture."

In response, he planted a few medicinal plants on an abandoned stretch of land. Then he built huts and communal buildings using the same techniques that slaves would have used in the early 1800s. Now, he offers tours of the two-hectare site and serves lunch, a hearty cabri (goat) stew topped with delicate skewers of dorado. It's accompanied by ti-punch, a powerful aperitif made of aged Martinique rum, cane syrup and lime juice.

Despite growing interest in such grassroots projects, the future holds many challenges. Many experts predict that global warming will have a severe impact on the Caribbean.

Mountainous islands, such as

If you go

Getting there

Air Canada flies between Montreal and Guadeloupe twice weekly. From there, it is a 40-minute connection to Fort de France, Martinique, via Air Caraïbes. WestJet will offer direct flights from Montreal to Fort de France, from Dec. 20 until April, every Thursdays, organized by Club Med (www.clubmed.ca), Vacances Tours Mont-Royal (www.vacances.tmr.com) and Vacances Transat (www.vacancestransat.com).

The food

Creole culinary workshops and boat tours: This full day includes a tour of the Creole garden, a half-day hands-on culinary workshop and a visit to the beach of Ste. Marie and Trinité. Cost is 30 euros for a group of 8 to 16 participants. Contact the TakTak network from Canada: 011-596-696-20-49-05. www.taktak-martinique.com/tabid/2960/Default.aspx.

Le Petibonum Restaurant in Le Carbet: www.babaorum.net

La Savane des Esclaves: www.lasavanedesclaves.fr

Martinique Tourist Office: www.lamartinique.ca or call 514-844-8566.

Martinique, where most of the population lives on the coast, will be particularly affected by changing water levels. The TakTak Network believes the traditions of the past can help islanders deal with such an uncertain future.

The next day, I wind up my culinary tour at a beachfront restaurant just steps from the fishing boats at Grand Anse. Here, I munch on Martinique's version of tapas; accras de morue (crisp fritters made of cod). They're followed by crab-stuffed rock lobster, plantain and boudin noir, a local sausage made of fresh pig's blood, French bread and spices wrapped in intestine.

Despite my reticence, I pick up my fork. When it comes to authentic local culture, there's no better way than to dive in.