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Caribbean Food . . . A little history



The Arawak, Carib, and Taino Indians were the first inhabitants of the Caribbean islands.

These first inhabitants occupied the present day islands of British Virgin Islands, **Cuba, Dominica, Grenada, Haiti, Trinidad, and Jamaica**. Their daily diet consisted of vegetables and fruits such as papaw, yams, guavas, and cassava. The Taino started the process of cooking meat and fish in large clay pots.

The Arawaks are the first people known to make a grate of thin green wood strips on which they slowly cooked meat, allowing it to be enhanced by the flavor of the wood. This grate was called a **barbacoa**, and the word we know today as **barbeque** is taken from this early Indian cooking method.

The Carib Indians added more spice to their food with hot pepper sauces, and also added lemon and lime juice to their meat and fish recipes.

The Caribs are said to have made the first pepper pot stew. No recipes exist since every time the Indians made the dish, they would always add new ingredients. The Carib had a big impact on early Caribbean history, and the **Caribbean Sea** was named after this tribe.



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Then the Caribbean became a crossroads for the world

Once the **Europeans** brought **Africans** slaves into the region, the slave's diet consisted mostly of food the slave owners did not want to eat. So the slaves had to be inventive, and they blended their traditional African foods with staples found on the islands.

The Africans introduced okra, callaloo, fish cakes, saltfish, ackee, pudding and souse, mangos, and the list goes on.

Most present day Caribbean island locals eat a present diet that is reflective of the main ingredients of original early African dishes, and includes cassava, sweet potatoes, yams, plantains, bananas and corn meal.

African men, being hunters in their homeland and often away from home for long periods of time, learned to cook spicy meats over hot coals.

When **English** soldiers arrived on the island of **Jamaica**, they brought the technique of preserving meat over rocks in the hot sun. Both the African and English meat techniques were refined by the early slaves in Jamaica into the present day technique is known as "**jerk**" **cooking**. The secret involves a slow meat cooking process. Jamaica is famous for jerk chicken and pork, and you'll find jerk all over the island.

After slavery was abolished, the Europeans went to **India** and **China** for labor, and more cooking styles were introduced. Much of the Indian cooking culture remains alive and well in the Caribbean today with the introduction of curried meats and curry powder.

Indians call it kari podi, and we have come to know this pungent flavor as curry. The **Chinese** introduced rice, which is always a staple in home cooked island meals. The Chinese also introduced mustard, and the early **Portuguese** sailors introduced the popular codfish.



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Most visitors to the Caribbean have no idea that the fruit trees and fruits so familiar to the islands were introduced by the early **Spanish** explorers.

The fruit trees and fruits brought from **Spain** include oranges, limes, ginger, plantains, figs, date palms, sugar cane, grapes, tamarinds and coconuts.



Even the **Polynesian** islands played an important role in Caribbean cooking.

Most of us remember the movie "**Mutiny on the Bounty**", but do not know that this particular ship carried breadfruit (*shown above*), which was loaded on board from the islands of **Tahiti** and **Timor**.

In the movie, the crew took over the ship, forced the captain into a small boat to fend on his own. Then they threw the breadfruit, which they considered "strange fruit", overboard.

Another ship was more successful in bringing breadfruit from **Polynesia** to **Jamaica** and **St. Vincent** and the **Grenadines**. Today breadfruit is an important staple of the Caribbean diet.

America is responsible for introducing beans, corn, squash, potatoes, tomatoes, and chili pepper to the Caribbean. In fact these particular foods had never been seen in **Asia**, **Europe** or **Africa**, so America actually introduced these foods to the rest of the world via the Caribbean.

So it's no wonder Caribbean cooking is so rich and creative with the flavors of **Africa**, **India**, and **China**, along with **Spanish**, **Danish**, **Portuguese**, **French** and **British** influences.



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Caribbean island food has been influenced by the cultures of the world, but each island adds its own special flavor and cooking technique.

For an introduction on the *flavor of Caribbean cooking*, we invite you to our site for more information.

If you would like to share the "*History of Caribbean Cooking*" with others, just save this PDF file to your computer, and send via e-mail or print.

Happy Vacationing,

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