

# EXPERIENCE

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## LIFE: CONNECTED

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ISLAND TIME WITH AMERICA'S TOP CHEFS + RUSSIAN ARTS RENAISSANCE  
THE LEGACY OF RENÉ LALIQUE + *SHARK TANK* STAR ROBERT HERJAVEC



# ISLAND FLAVOR

Every January, top chefs and foodies come together for four days of raucous beachside celebrations on Grand Cayman. What ensues is a culinary event like no other.

BY NATASHA MEKHAIL

*“I want the readers to get a glimpse of the true joys of making really good food at a professional level. I’d like them to understand what it feels like to attain the child’s dream of running one’s own pirate crew.”*

— ANTHONY BOURDAIN,  
KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL

When Christopher Columbus caught the first glint of sun off the Cayman Islands, his mind didn’t conjure the future tourist paradise or offshore investment haven. His 16th-century view was a bit more pragmatic. The waters off the islands were alive with the bright green backs of sea turtles. And once he spotted them, instead of envisioning all that this new world would become, the sea-weary explorer instead saw... lunch.

Columbus recognized a source of food for his men, making this a place where they could hole up in comfort for months. To mark the discovery, he named the islands in the turtles’ honor: Las Tortugas.

The name proved short-lived, but the islands’ reputation as a place of abundance carried on. Pirates, including Blackbeard, used Cayman as a recharge station, stowing their booty in its many limestone caves while stocking up on turtles, fish and fruit for their long stints at sea. Skip ahead a few hundred years and if there is one thing that continues to set these islands apart from the rest of the Caribbean, it’s the food – of course, now there’s a little more on the menu.

The annual Cayman Cookout is the best example of where the British overseas territory, 150 miles (240 kilometers) south of Cuba, ranks as a modern culinary destination. Started eight years ago by Eric Ripert (of New York’s famed Le Bernardin and Grand Cayman’s Blue) as a gathering of his heavy-hitting chef friends, the event brings four days of seaside cooking demonstrations, wine tastings and barefoot feasts to the Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman each January.

At this Caribbean foodstravaganza, the roles of buccaneers are played by a cast of culinary mavericks: names >

**SEAFARERS**  
Guests arrive to Rum Point by yacht and catamaran for Cookout’s seminal event, the Beach Bash.



**BAREFOOT LUXURY**

Chefs dole out tasting portions of dishes made during their cooking demonstrations; (opposite) Cookout founder Eric Ripert takes grilling steaks to a whole new level: sea level; staff put the final touches on a seafront setup at host venue, The Ritz Carlton, Grand Cayman.



like Anthony Bourdain, José Andrés, Daniel Boulud – chefs so far up the food chain, they don't actually need to cook. But at Cookout, you find them Bermuda-short-clad, drink in hand, serving dishes straight off the barbie. It's that intimacy – seeing the pleasure of making and sharing food through the eyes of a star chef – that has brought me and a collection of international culinary diehards to Grand Cayman. Call it the child's dream of, if not running the pirate crew, at least being able to say we ran with it.

To understand why Grand Cayman is a gastronomic capital four days a year, it's necessary to understand its food philosophy the other 361. We begin the night before Cookout at The Brasserie, chef Dean Max's restaurant in Cricket Square. Tonight, guests cut through the interior dining room and head out into the back courtyard, where two long dining tables are laid out under clusters of white Chinese lanterns. One Thursday a month, Max, who helms seven dining establishments from Dallas to the Bahamas, stages a Harvest Dinner here. Aside from the fun of eating alfresco, these gatherings are meant to introduce patrons to The Brasserie's organic kitchen garden, whose organized chaos of green lies just behind the tables.

Max hands a few of us early arrivals a cocktail of rum and house-made sorrel (a sweet hibiscus syrup), and leads us on a walk through rows of boxes overflowing with leafy greens, vegetables, herbs and fruit – there's even a chicken coop. Heirloom beans grip poles on a skyward climb, while other more exotic fruit-bearing vines flow downward from hanging pots.

"Barbados gooseberry," says Max, popping a grape-sized orb in his mouth. We follow his lead, taking in the berry's mouth-puckering tartness. "I use them to make a barbecue sauce. And this," he says, turning towards a shrub covered in habañero-like pods, "is seasoning pepper. It has all the flavor of scotch bonnet, but without the heat. Like bacon grease, you put it in a dish, it tastes great, and no one knows why."

Outside of Cayman, he says, it's rare to nonexistent to see Caribbean islands doing their own food in a fine-dining context. Instead, we see

resorts replicating the steaks and brulées they *think* cater to visitors' palates when, in fact, it's quite the opposite: Diners aren't after food they can have at home (usually better). "When people travel," says Max, "they want local flavors."

Our group certainly fits that description and, very quickly, the edible cacophony of the tour rouses our appetites. Max takes us back to the table, where we dine on family-style servings of local wahoo fish, braised shortribs and a whole roasted pig, all served with greens and vegetables harvested steps away.

**O**n the Friday of Cookout, I head to the Great Lawn of the Ritz for the kickoff event, guided by the irresistible scent of barbecuing meat. The Rundown presents Cayman's best restaurants in 20-odd grazing stations. Guests have already begun converging at tables under large white umbrellas. Sheltered from the midday sun, they sip rum punches and local brews.

"Rundown" is a play on words. It represents both the idea that the event's MC, Anthony Bourdain, will introduce each dining establishment in turn, and it's the name of a Caymanian stew in which flavors "run down" as it slow cooks.

Bourdain causes a bit of a stir when he arrives, looking a good 30 pounds lighter than most remember him on his show *Parts Unknown*. (He's off the carbs, he says, and into Brazilian jujitsu.) In his characteristic off-color style he dishes on the show's upcoming season (Ethiopia, with chef pal Marcus Samuelsson), his eagerly anticipated eponymous food center in New York (modeled after an Asian hawker market), and that city's best delis (Barney Greengrass, Russ & Daughters). And with that, the sampling begins.

I stop at The Brasserie's stall where Dean Max is hard at work again. The remains of the roast pig from last night have become tacos today with pickled radish and the promised Barbados gooseberry sauce.

On it goes, with dishes from local restos such as Ornatique, Andiamo and Kaibo. Even Tortuga, the Caribbean's ubiquitous >







rum cake, made right here in Cayman, has a presence. Particularly impressive is newcomer Le Soleil d'Or, whose 20-acre organic farm and luxury boutique hotel has ushered in sustainable tourism on the relatively undeveloped sister island Cayman Brac. Packed with flavor, Soleil d'Or's dish of grilled compressed watermelon with balsamic seaweed and garden gaspacho proves a refreshing show-stealer on this searing day.

It's wise to pace oneself at Cookout. Events start at 10:00 am and run a full 12 hours. Between José Andrés' annual paella kickoff (he arrives in a line of Samba dancers; another year it was by jetpack) and that evening's Barefoot BBQ, my friends and I will attend a full slate of eating and drinking events. They include a tasting of beach-friendly wines with *Food & Wine* editor Ray Isle, a DBGB beach-cooking demo with Daniel Boulud, a session on low-country Southern cuisine with Sean Brock and an auction of vintage Bordeaux hosted by Ripert.

Needless to say, we are in high spirits when we arrive at the evening beach event, where guests kick off their shoes and eat with their hands on dishes from the ad hoc food stalls of America's culinary greats. It's a who's who to which patrons line up as much for a chef-flanked selfie as for the food. And it makes me think of a line from Bourdain that morning: "There are so many top chefs here, it's a security issue," he said. "God forbid anything should happen to us, or no one would eat in New York."

The night concludes with a raucous dance party fueled by Champagne and Patrón-pops (yes, that's tequila in popsicle form). Getting up the next morning might have been difficult were it not for the anticipation surrounding Cookout highlight, the Beach Bash.

At lunchtime we set sail in a hired yacht for Rum Point across North Sound. This 20-minute journey has a requisite stop, however: a swim at Stingray City. Around 140 rays have long occupied this sand bank, an old stopping place for fisherman who once cleaned their catch in the water, inadvertently attracting the creatures with the tempting refuse. Now a popular destination for squid-proffering tourists, the



These are chefs so far up the food chain, they don't actually need to cook. But at Cookout, you find them Bermuda-short-clad, drink in hand, serving dishes straight off the barbie.

**CLOSED CIRCUIT**  
Intimacy is what Cookout is all about, whether enjoying the company of friends at its relaxed event spaces or interacting with top chefs like Anthony Bourdain.



Caymanian government recently clamped down on feedings as the rays were – how to put it? – losing their kite-ish figures. (Clearly, Las Tortugas' abundance extends to all.) Today the rule is one pound of food per vessel, whether you're in a 150-seater tourist boat or a yacht with eight aboard, like us. And so we enjoy VIP access to the rays, stroking them, holding them and placing whole squid below their Hoover-like mouths until it's time to move on.

When we arrive at Rum Point, we find a similar seaside setup as the night before but with a backdrop of colorful Caribbean beach shacks – and about half the attendees. *Perfect!* We tuck in once again. This time to Angus beef steam buns by Tony Biggs, chicken tacos by Sean Brock, and Ripert's "Le Bernardin" fish kebabs. Meanwhile, mixologist Charles Joly fixes rum punches and spiked ice teas.

By the end, we feel a bit like the stingrays before their intervention. But resistance is futile. Our afternoon feeding is followed by a night-time dine-around that takes us to Ortanique in the recently completed town-square development of Camana Bay. The Caribbean tapas restaurant is run by self-taught-chef Cindy Hutson and her restaurateur partner Delius Shirley (son of Jamaican-born Norma Shirley, whom *Vogue* called "the Julia Child of the Caribbean").

There may be plenty more meals planned before Cookout wraps up – including a Champagne-soaked Sunday Brunch and a seven-course dinner at Eric Ripert's Blue – but this one does it for me. The grilled Caribbean lobster, served with conch, sweet pea, breadfruit and local pumpkin in a spiced hollandaise reminds me that, with ingredients this good, one need not look elsewhere for culinary inspiration.

Ortanique, The Brasserie and other venues embracing local flavors, are a sign perhaps of what the Caribbean's food scene could be if each island channeled its inner Las Tortugas.

Going back to basics is good, as any modern chef will tell you. Just look at Bourdain. In his 2000 tell-all *Kitchen Confidential*, he was the restaurant rogue, who wrote that the classically trained Ripert wouldn't "be calling [him] for ideas on tomorrow's fish special." How things have changed! When it comes to cuisine today, it's the pirates running the ship. ■

**MADE TO ORDER**  
Grazing stations have elevated appeal when manned by the Michelin-starred; (below) Blue by Eric Ripert is the chef's ode to the freshest raw and nearly raw seafood.

## Stay

The Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman, is the home of Cookout. Located on Seven Mile Beach, it offers both a beachfront resort and residences. Highlights include a front-row seat to the action during Cookout (tickets go on sale October 15) as well as cooking classes in the resort's test kitchen the rest of the year. The hotel's La Prairie spa provides the ultimate in relaxation. Try the Diamond Perfection, a diamond-powder scrub, followed with a finish of caviar body soufflé. (Yes, much is food-themed at this culinary-focused hotel.) Eric Ripert's on-site restaurant Blue, the Caribbean's only AAA five-diamond restaurant and the venture which led him to inaugurate Cookout, focuses on the diversity of flavors found just in the local seafood. The carte is organized as a series of tasting menus ("Almost Raw," "Barely Touched," "Lightly Cooked") representing the presence or absence of heat in their preparation. Sure, there's a little foie-gras thrown in for good measure, but the star is always the fresh catch.

