

GRAND CAYMAN

Food from the Heart

by CATHERINE VAN BRUNSCHOT



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“I quit my job in the banking industry to do what I love.”

A RISKY VENTURE, YOU’D THINK, IN ANY CASE.

But here on Grand Cayman Island, that Caribbean jewel of offshore financial services, the decision seems — well — counterintuitive, to say the least.

“I wanted to bring George Town back into the spotlight, to share its beautiful architecture, culture, and food,” explains Marzeta Bodden, owner of **Cayman Food Tours**. Cruise ship day-trippers are apt to make a bee-line for George Town’s duty-free shops, or skip the capital altogether for the lure of Stingray City or Seven-Mile Beach. But this twenty-something business grad invites visitors to linger and discover those vestiges of Cayman culture hidden amid the banks and designer logos. Pearls like the 18th-century step-well that gazes from the plexiglass floor of a cap embroidery shop. Or the century-old Cayman cottages standing stalwart amid the traffic. And, of course, the food that is close to the hearts of those who grew up here.

Close to the heart not only for its flavours, it seems, but also for the hands that deliver it. Case in point is **Guy Harvey’s Island Grill**. A second-floor nautical bistro overlooking the harbour, the Island Grill is helmed by Indika Kumara, named Chef of the Year in 2009 and 2013 by the Cayman Culinary Society. That’s ample distinction in the epicurean hotbed that is Grand Cayman. But an equal draw for local diners is the restaurant’s namesake and owner: lauded wildlife artist, angler, marine biologist and conservationist, Guy Harvey. The Grill is both Dr Guy’s flagship to promote sustainable seafood harvesting, and a weekend dining destination for families bringing in their own fresh catch. What better choice for our first tasting than the fresh-caught Cayman-style snapper? It arrives perfectly cooked with a golden sear, elegantly plated on a tangy sauté of sweet peppers and onions, and traditionally sided with beans ‘n rice and a plantain slice.

Then it’s onward to our next tasting stop, the **Cayman Islands National Museum**. The oldest public building still

standing on the islands, this 1833 wattle-and-daub construction is a poster-child for repurposing, serving variously as a post office, dance hall, courthouse and jail, before its current incarnation as a well curated repository for Caymanian culture. In its diminutive courtyard, we sample two artisanal products drawn from the gift shop.

The first, described by Anthony Bourdain as “one kick-ass pepper jelly,” is a labour of love from the kitchen of Carol Hay, who perfected her recipe during bouts of insomnia in the wake of her mother’s death in 2007. Adorned with snorkel and mask to combat the fumes, Carol hand-crushes home-grown scotch bonnets and seasoning peppers in a weekend whirl to produce 144-jar batches of her **Cayman Pepper Patch** five-pepper blend. The result is predictably fiery, but counters with a complexity of flavour that proves equal to the heat. Marzeta pairs it with tea, locally-blended by a duo of PwC accountants channeling their off-hours passion for the brew into a venture known as **Tea Time in Cayman**. Cayman’s ‘tea fairies’ offer 36 varieties of loose tea in combinations braided with island culture, including ‘Cayman Wedding’ (a black tea laced with hibiscus, the traditional nuptial flower) and ‘The Beloved Isles Cayman’ (a green tea blended with tropical fruits, and named for the territory’s national song).

Fortified, we thread once more through the busy streets, pausing to admire National Trust-designated George Town Post Office, with its hammer-beam framed wood ceiling resembling an inverted ship’s hull.

Continuing beyond George Town’s tourist enclave, we cross a patio extorted from the pavement by a clutch of concrete and lattice — the bastion of Trinidadian food known as **Singh’s Roti Shop and Bar**. Trinidad and Cayman were once components of Britain’s West Indian Federation; while the Federation may have been short-lived, not so Caymanians’ taste for Trini flavours. *Pelau*, oxtail, doubles — Singh’s has it all. Siblings Vera and Darrell originally sold their homemade roti from a local gas station, but fifteen

