

By Timothy Dugdale

The Jewel Box

Barbados is an island of many riches. On the west side, you can find more than a few places asking a pretty penny for a jewel box. The south side, however, boasts its own contingent of merchants selling bling of a different kind. The box isn't much to look at – it's styrofoam – but what's inside is certainly a prize.

One can sample those gems at the Oistins Fish Market, tellingly right next to the boatyard where many well-worn fishing trawlers await rehabilitation or resurrection. For 20 Barbadian dollars, you get a big piece of grilled fish set atop a bed of rice or grilled potatoes, accompanied by a myriad of side dishes that speak to the honest simplicity of Bajan cooking and the reality of limited arable land. Don't expect to dine on china or have five waiters swirling around you in obsequious hustle. You take your box and brimming plastic cup of libation and retire to a communal picnic table, either out front or out back. If you come without pretense or preconceptions, you will enjoy a meal that will singe your memory better than a Michelin star ever could.

Any visitor to Barbados can't help but hear of the Friday Night Fish Fry. It's a party like no other. Vendors set-up make-shift bars and revelers cut loose as a DJ blasts tunes. But Oistins should be on your itinerary earlier in the week as well. And earlier in the day, for that matter. The various vendors who run the food stalls in the market prepare a set amount of vittles every day. When an item runs out, there's no more until tomorrow. And that's how it should be. Savvy visitors should bide their time as they cruise the stalls, rum in hand, eying the chalkboards that list what's available. Don't let that devilish perfume of woodsmoke seduce you before you're ready to offer yourself up.

Just as it did in the American South, the slave trade left its mark on Bajan cuisine. A number of vendors specialize in souse, Bajan soul food that utilizes the offal components of traditional headcheese, reworked with tropical ingredients such as lime juice and chilies. Those stalls are often the most raucous as they attract seasoned veterans of the cuisine and the earthy lifestyle it conjures. On a recent Friday night, after a miserable day of perpetual rain that discouraged all but the most intrepid seekers, I dined next to a madhouse souse stall that almost shamed me into trading my grilled marlin for some cold pig knuckles. Souse is a macho kick.

That said, vegetarians and those abide restrictions imposed by doctors, gurus or conscience need not worry about going hungry or suffering the culinary indignities of health food gruel. Ask and ye shall receive a box overstuffed with creamed yams, fried plantains, split peas and rice, fried sweet potatoes, cornmeal cou-cou and various salads.

To properly plug into the vibes of Oistin, I recommend taking a reggae bus from and to your digs, no matter how posh. A taxi would be a mistake. The buses are cheap, safe and teeming with the dignified but joyous street life that makes Barbados such a winner with discriminating travelers. Oistins isn't just about good food. It's a beacon of good living, made even better by the hospitality of a people who want to share the best of their island with you. Consider yourself wealthy.

