

History of Jamaican Cooking

The uniqueness and diversity of Jamaica's food may surprise you!

The island itself is full of people, heritage and cultures from all over the world and, consequently, Jamaica has quite a rich culinary heritage, heavily influenced by the many different cultures that made Jamaica home throughout its history - West African, Spanish, Portuguese, British, East Indian, Dutch, French, and Chinese. All of this history has combined to create some of the most flavorful tastes and cuisines in the Caribbean! The Spanish arrived in 1509 and drove out the indigenous Indians who had lived peacefully on the island since about 650A.D. Arawaks and Tainos used native crops such as fish, corn, cassava and callaloo (similar to spinach) as mainstays of their diet. They had a special way of preserving and marinating meat by adding native peppers, pimento (allspice) and salt to it and grilling it over a pimento wood fire, which became known as "jerk". Spanish Jews arrived with their unique dishes, one of the most well-known being Escoveitch Fish. With the Spanish came African slaves who brought along their own cooking techniques, African yams, spices and recipes. Many of these slaves escaped their slavery to hide out in secluded mountain areas, their descendants becoming known as the Maroons, spreading their cuisine throughout the countryside. Maroons still survive today and are known as wonderful herbalists. In 1655, Spain lost Jamaica to the English who began to transform much of the island into sugar plantations, becoming wealthy and adding again to the cuisine choices. Besides their pudding and porridge influences, the English are credited with the invention of Jamaica's beloved "patties" (the Jamaican equivalent to our hamburger) and with Jamaicans' love for tea. Following the abolition of slavery, England imported indentured laborers from China and East India who brought more diverse spices and recipes with them. In particular, the Indians brought curry and, today, nearly every food in Jamaica is made into curry! The Chinese immigration is responsible for the sweet-and-sour dishes. Jamaica's cuisine is well-known for being healthy as they have a low usage of red meat and, instead, cook with leaner meats, fish, beans and vegetables. Rastafarians, of course, have added their salt-free vegetarian I-tal cuisine to this healthy mix with its nutritional and medicinal value. And, if you've ever thought the meat dishes just taste better when you eat them in Jamaica, it's not your imagination! The chickens and pigs there have a specific diet so their meat has a unique and delicious flavor. We can also top off our meals with world-class Jamaican rums and Jamaica Blue Mountain coffee - among the best in the world. As recently as the 1950's and 60's, most Jamaican cooking was done outside in the open or in outside kitchens on charcoal stoves, covering pots with zinc sheets in the rain. This was "poor people cooking" at its finest and well-to-do people hired poor people to cook for them. In the late 60's, kerosene oil stoves came along but just didn't offer that wonderful charcoal flavor and did not fully catch on. The availability of propane cooking gas in the late 70's, however, was a huge hit and Jamaicans learned to like it. About this time, merchants started to pre-package and sell spice mixes and, today, Jamaicans do use some amount of pre-packaged food when cooking. So, you can see how all of these things influenced the wonderful Jamaican cuisine we are lucky enough to enjoy today. And, if you cannot be in Jamaica just now, you can enjoy making these dishes in your own home and sharing them with friends and family! Source: keepitjiggy.com