

FEATURE

A Thousand Tastes of CURAÇAO

A Culinary Caribbean Odyssey

When DAAN VERMEER / TCS took his diving certificate to Curaçao, little did he know that he would not go diving. Or that he'd only spend one afternoon on the beach. Instead, he embarked a voyage of discovery with a difference around the small Caribbean island, with cactus soup, tropical fish in coconut milk, and slices of raw snapper with avocado playing the leading roles. Hunting for lobsters, visiting a fish market, preparing dishes with a chef, eating on the beach, and cooking with a granny, it turned into a trip of a thousand taste sensations that captured the atmosphere and spirit of this little slice of tropical heaven.





The road to Piscadera winds over the island's hills. Cactuses and salt pans with flamingos standing on them shoot past the side windows of the car. It looks just as tropical as the pure white sand, massage huts and sun umbrellas at Playa Porto Mari. That was the beach where, yesterday, I met Michiel. Michiel is anything but a true Curaçaoan. He's a Dutch guy who has lived on the island for about eleven years and is only too happy to eat out, "because on this island they sure know how to prepare tasty fish." When he said that, I was curious. Therefore I'm sitting next to him in his car, heading for his favourite lunch spot in Piscadera. And I'm leaving that divine beach behind.

In Piscadera an old man is standing on the wooden jetty, throwing a net into the water with great dexterity, then quickly retrieving it again. The dozens of guppies trapped in it flounder and flap about together. They look artistic, but you won't get far in the kitchen with such tiny fish. The fisherman laughs: "We use them purely as bait." He shows me a large basket with yellow tail fins sticking out of it further down the jetty. These are Yellowtail snapper, but they call them Grastelchi here - they have golden yellow tail fins and a stripe down the side the same colour. "They make all kinds of good food from those large grastelchi," Michiel assures me, as we walk to the nearby fish restaurant. >





Kadushi Dushi

In the Awa di Playa restaurant today they are making soup from it. “Sopi di kadushi!” chef Wing calls out in a friendly tone. “And you are lucky, because I only make it every first Saturday of the month. The people here are crazy about it!” Kadushi are the dark green cacti I saw along the roadside earlier.

“This soup was made and eaten by the slaves who once worked on the plantations,” he continues. “Simply because the ingredients came from the island.” Now it is the most expensive dish on the menu, and only made rarely, because it takes a long while before it is ready. “It requires two hours slow cooking. And in the meantime I must skim off all the white foam that rises to the surface - it tastes distinctly bitter.”

We eat the slimy cactus soup with a hot funchi: a maize flour cylinder that is comparable to Italian polenta. The soup tastes just as it looks: fresh and light. The seafood chunks are soft and full of flavour. You won't get fresher than this. >





Macerated Snapper

Michiel suggests I check out Le Clochard, a bistro in famous St. Anna Bay. I manage to speak with chef Piet van Ham and get to cook two fish dishes with him. “Not soup and not fried!” he jokes. He chops the red peppers, red onion and green chilli. He gently fries the vegetables while he cuts into the skin of the fish and fills it with garlic and white wine. Together with thyme and the softened vegetables the fish disappears into the oven.

“The second fish I macerate in acid. This will cook the fish, although it is actually raw.” For this he fillets the fish and he puts paper-thin slices into a mixture of lime juice and white vinegar. It reminds me of sashimi, until he adds diced avocado, chopped onion and finely chopped sweet pepper. The bowl goes into the refrigerator, whereupon the acid will do the rest.

After a few minutes, one fish comes out of the oven, and the other out of the fridge. Given

the amount of lime and vinegar in the ceviche, I expect the sensation to be like biting into a lemon. But it certainly isn't: of course the fish has a sharp acidity, but it still tastes like fish. And I can taste the avocado and peppers. The fish from the oven, by comparison, is subtle. I taste the fish first, then the garlic and thyme. No sauce or soup, just the fish itself. I did not come across such purely prepared snappers anywhere else on the island. >

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Two Nights Fishing

Far from the city, somewhere near a small roadside night shop along the road to Westpunt, I am waiting for Edwin. Earlier this week I met him when he was selling fish by the roadside from the tailgate of his pickup.

Everyone here knows Edwin. Maybe that's why he talks and jokes more fluently in Papiamentu than in Dutch. For many years he was an accountant, but for the past two he has lived off his fishing.

At nine p.m. we are sitting on the veranda of a quiet house with some metal pipes, hessian sacks, and a jerry can of diesel. "We'll make torches from these, that we can use to find crabs. It's pitch black out there," Edwin says. "Crabs don't like light. During the day they hide in holes, and only after dark do they come to shallow water to search for food." And tonight, it really is dark, because the moon has also set shortly after the sun.

From the house we walk to the sea - a journey over the ancient salt pans of St. Willebrord, and along a slippery mud path with overhanging branches at shoulder height. Mud crabs run around my feet and mosquitoes swarm round my head, arms and legs. It's pitch dark when sudden thrashing sounds come from the salt pan.

Waves splash against my thighs as we walk along the shore looking for somewhere to start. Pieces of coral and slippery rocks mark the water's edge. There are countless stars in the sky; even the Milky Way is visible. To the west a lonely lighthouse flashes; to the east are the lights of Bullenbaai, an oil bunkering port. Here, on a small beach between the mountains and the sea, we light the torches.

The flickering warm lights give colour to the surroundings. Side by side we walk back through the sea, holding the torches in front of us. We search the shallow water for crabs. The first is less than a metre from the water's edge. The bright red beast sticks out so much on the dark rocks that we see him from metres away.

Fifteen minutes and two crabs later we stop to ease the hessian out of the pipes with a machete. This fishing and fiddling with the torches alternates every hundred metres or so. A large turtle and lobster swim away quickly and thus avoid ending up in the bag. After two hours walking the torches go out for good and we are back in the dark. Good timing, because the bucket is already packed with crabs and dozens of sea snails. Besides, what crab goes out to eat at half past two in the morning?

The soup will be made tomorrow, but sadly I must miss it. Edwin is already licking his lips in anticipation. "Delicious!" he says. I guess I'll just have to experience it on my next trip. ■

