



feel the spirit

The food, wine and rum festival in Barbados is a must for gastronomes. **Lisë Stern** finds out more...

The balmy tropics offer a welcome embrace when I step off the plane in Bridgetown, Barbados. The second annual Barbados Food & Wine and Rum Festival is about to begin, and like many of my fellow passengers, I'm here to enjoy a taste of the Caribbean.

Over three nights and three days, the BFWRF features a host of foodie events, including cooking demos, wine seminars and culinary cruises, plus special lunches, dinners and parties. The programme for 2011 also included an extravagant dinner prepared by American celebrity chef Tom Colicchio and held at The Cliff restaurant located on the west coast of Barbados in Derricks, St James. And of course there's rum punch. Lots of rum punch...

Our foodie odyssey begins on Friday night at Limegrove in Holetown, St James. Although Limegrove is a new complex, populated with stores such as Ralph Lauren, Cartier and Louis Vuitton – as well as several fine-dining restaurants – Holetown

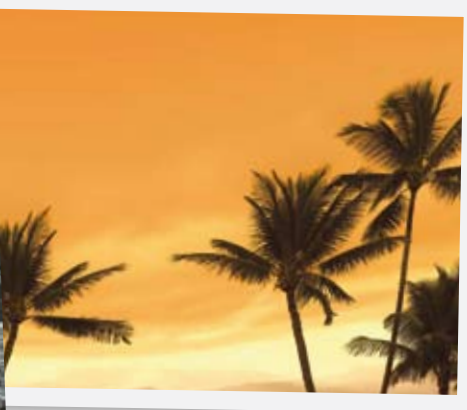
itself was the first settlement in Barbados. So it seems an apt place to start. DJs get the crowd into the Bajan groove at the rooftop party, while a team of bartenders work non-stop to keep the rum flowing. To eat, there are canape-style treats including delicious skewered prawns, smoky aubergine mousse on homemade Cheddar crackers, and shot glasses of curried coconut soup with seafood.

But my favourite is the soursoap ice cream, served on a crispy tuile. This tropical fruit grows locally, and has a sweet-tangy taste like a blend of strawberries and oranges, tempered with coconut. It's a

great match for sweet coconut rum served neat on the rocks.

I spot several of the festival's guest chefs in the crowd, including Bruno Loubet, Boston-based Ming Tsai and Brazilian Vitor Gomes. These big name chefs from around the world are chosen to represent a diversity of cooking styles. They will be doing cookery demos over the weekend as well as cooking at Saturday night's gastronomic multi-chef dinner.

DJs get the crowd into the Bajan groove, while bartenders keep the rum flowing




Back to Friday and it's on to Late Night at The Beach House, also in Holetown. Among fountains, palm trees and exotic flowers chefs are serving up vegetable tempura, sliders, jerk chicken and the like. While local musician Philip 7 and his band Masala play their jazzy alt-rock reggae to keep the party going late into the night.

BACK TO SCHOOL

It's up early on Saturday morning for the first of the day's cooking demos from the roster of top international chefs. These demonstrations, which are held at the gorgeous Sandy Lane resort, cost around £30 to attend and like all the events at the festival are worth booking in advance, as they are hugely popular.

Watching the chefs cook certainly helps to build your appetite for the main event on Saturday night: Ambrosia II, held high in the hills above Bridgetown. Guest and local chefs set up stations around the space, serving up specialities such as 12-hour-braised five-spice Blackbelly lamb, spicy sweet-and-sour yellowfin sashimi, and exotic white chocolate and tamarind mousse. But the longest queue is for the home-style cooking of Oistins. This town on the south coast of Barbados, is famous for its Friday-night fish dinners; and the fried flying fish and mahi mahi, sweet potatoes and breadfruit on offer don't disappoint.

FACT FILE

 **HOW TO GET THERE**
British Airways flies to Barbados from London Gatwick up to twice daily, from £630 return. Flight time is 8 hours 40 minutes. britishairways.com

 **WHO TO TRAVEL WITH**
There are no scheduled festival packages, but you can book in advance for all events on the **BFWRF** website: foodwinerum.com British Airways offers flights plus six nights at the Colony Club hotel, with breakfast, for £1,150pp.

 **WHEN TO GO**
November – this year's Barbados Food & Wine and Rum Festival will be held from 16-19 November.

 **WHERE TO STAY**
Sandy Lane, Holetown, from £720/night; sandyLane.com

 **FIND OUT MORE**
foodwinerum.com; visitbarbados.org

Tonight the rum is supplied by local distillery Mount Gay. The incredible aged 1703 Old Cask Selection is definitely the star of the show: smooth and rich, with the barest hint of sugar-cane sweetness.

Fuelled with rum it's on to the Super Sonic after-party, held in an airport hangar that's also home to a retired Concorde plane. The huge space is pulsating with pink, purple and blue lights, and the sizzling band Nexcyx – led by petite powerhouse singer Mahalia – keeps us there for hours, 'wukking up' (a Bajan dance that involves much hip gyrating).

My favourite event of the whole festival is the Sunday Bajan Fiesta, featuring local chefs showing off their culinary prowess with one particular type of meat or seafood. Each chef has gone all-out to impress; offering local salads and side dishes as well as the chicken, beef, lamb, pork and seafood.

This event provides a real taste of Bajan food culture – both its traditions and its innovations – as well as showcasing the incredible quality of the island's native produce.

From delicious local delicacies to outstanding international cuisine, it's been a heady three days – and I wish the festival would go on for longer. It's certainly very easy to get used to drinking quality rum and tasting a diverse range of dishes on a beautiful island in the Caribbean. Roll on next year!