



SPICE ISLANDS

The heat, aromas and flavors of the Caribbean are flowing into Northeast Florida.

STORY AND RECIPE BY JEFFREY SPEAR

When visiting the Caribbean, you'll find that, despite proximity and similarities such as sandy beaches, heat and humidity, each island that peppers this portion of the Atlantic Ocean has its own distinctive culture. It starts with the strains of lively traditional music—some reggae, some steel drums, some brass—all spilling out into the streets and letting you know Cuba is not Jamaica, Nassau is not San Juan. When it comes to cuisine, island foods are as unique as their individual heritages. Some sweet. Some spicy. Many with surprising ingredients and textures.

There's also the allure of the treats in bakery windows, as well as countertop displays full of hand-held specialties, hot and ready to go. While you can certainly hop on a plane and fly to Marsh Harbor, Freeport or Santo Domingo for a delicious dish or two, there's no need. Jax has it covered.

Broadly speaking, the Caribbean refers to the island countries nestled directly below the southern tip of Florida's peninsula in the Caribbean Sea. The largest of these islands are Cuba, Hispaniola (Haiti, Dominican Republic) and Jamaica, with more than 700 smaller islands and cays scattered across the Atlantic. As a result of European exploration and colonization that started in the early 1500s, the cultures on these islands became a fusion of indigenous Taino, African, European and Asian influences. The spices and flavors of East India and the Middle Eastern can be found, as well.

Considering their relative proximity (Cuba is less than 100 miles from Key West), it's easy to understand how islanders found their way onto Florida's shores. In Jacksonville, about two percent of the population identifies as West Indian or Afro-Caribbean American. That's a small number. However, whether from Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, Puerto Rico or other points of origin in the Caribbean, there are a growing number of restaurants around town that reflect a culinary heritage from this part of the world.

When looking at these cuisines, there are similarities—such as the frequent use of beans, rice and plantains. There are, however, noteworthy distinctions in terms of ingredients, flavors and variety of prepared dishes that deserve recognition.

PALADAR CUBAN EATERY & BAKERY



HAVANA JAX CAFE

In Butler Beach in St. Augustine. In all three cases, the decision to open their doors was a tribute to their heritage and the desire to bring high quality, authentic Cuban foods to their community.

"Although I'm originally from Nicaragua, I was introduced to Cuban cuisine when we moved to Miami 50 years ago," says Silvia Pulido, owner of **Havana Jax Cafe**, a long-time fixture of the Jax restaurant scene. Savoring a treasured Cuban cookbook, along with guidance from her Cuban mother-in-law, she adds, "I learned to make Cuban dishes like any house in Havana. Today, when you come to our restaurant, you can taste the traditional recipes and indulge yourself in our home-made desserts." A few of these traditional dishes includes ropa vieja (beef) bowl (\$14), arroz con pollo, and vaca frita (\$20).

Similarly, Rebecca Gonzales, founder of the string of local **1928 Cuban Bistros**, says, "Cuban food is warm, comforting, and flavorful. It brings people together no matter where they're from." When asked about the motivation behind her restaurants, she says, "I wanted to bring that flavor and energy to North Florida and share a piece of where I come from."

A few dishes of note include the Cuban tostada (\$2.50) for breakfast (typically accompanied by a shot of sweetened Cuban

espresso), La Viejita, a sandwich made with ropa vieja (\$14) along with an assortment of appetizers including croquetas, empanadas and yuca rellena. Not surprisingly, the Cuban sandwich (\$13), made with roast pork, ham, Swiss cheese, pickles & Dijon mustard on Cuban bread, is 1928's most iconic offering.

While many of these classic dishes are also available at **Paladar Cuban Eatery & Bakery**, along with a large selection of freshly baked pastries, cakes and breads, you won't want to miss the Frita Cubana (\$13.50), a famous Cuban-style burger first created in Miami. According to Co-owner Isela Gonzalez, "This isn't your everyday North Florida burger. Made with seasoned ground beef, pork and chorizo topped with crispy shoestring potatoes on a house-baked Cuban bun, it's unlike anything you've ever had." She's not wrong. It's delish.

In Puerto Rico, traditional dishes run the gamut from sweet to savory. One of the more popular offerings is tostones—twice fried and flattened green plantains—often served as a side dish or appetizer. Equally popular and a signature of the island is mofongo, made with mashed green plantains mixed with garlic, pork cracklins and spices, as well as empanadas, a pastry turnover, baked or fried, filled with beef, chicken, cheese or vegetables. The sweet versions, filled with guava or dulce de leche, are equally enjoyable.

One of the most widely used ingredients in Caribbean cooking is sofrito, sometimes referred to as sazón. Used in a manner similar to mirepoix in French cooking, it serves as a flavor foundation in a wide variety of dishes. Starting with sautéed garlic, onions and bell peppers, variations can also include tomatoes, cilantro, culantro, oregano, bay leaf and/or cumin. In Jamaica, while sofrito may be used, their culinary foundation relies more on Scotch bonnet peppers, garlic, thyme and allspice. Lacking flavor, they are not.

Many restaurants promote themselves simply as Caribbean, offering foods with varying culinary origins. Although they vary dramatically in terms of size, ambience, levels of service and quality of offerings, Cuban restaurants seem to be the most numerous across the First Coast.

There are three of note that serve Cuban cuisine with undeniable aplomb—Havana Jax Cafe and 1928 Cuban Bistro are based here in Jacksonville while Paladar operates



FLAVORIKANA

LET'S EAT!

There are a number of Caribbean restaurants in Jacksonville, some small and better suited for carry out, others considerably larger, better presented and comfortable for on-premises dining. They all, however, serve an array of exotic foods that are representative of the Caribbean. Included among the places we believe you'll enjoy are:

CUBAN

1928 Cuban Bistro

1928bistro.com

Multiple locations

Havana Jax Cafe

havanajax.com

2578 Atlantic Blvd., St. Nicholas

Mambos Cuban Cafe

mamboscubancafe.com

13770 Beach Blvd., Beach Haven

Paladar Cuban Eatery & Bakery

paladarcubaneatery.com

5575 A1A S., St. Augustine Beach

HAITIAN

Beignets Caribbean Cafe

beignetscaribbeanrestaurant.com

4770 Barnes Rd., Englewood

JAMAICAN

Eva's Jamaican Kitchen

evasjamaicankitchen.com

14333 Beach Blvd., Beach Haven

Spices Caribbean Restaurant

spicesjax.com

1319 Rogero Rd., Arlington

PUERTO RICAN

Flavorikan

flavorikan.com

1803 E. Duval St., Downtown

Latin Creations

latin-creations.com

3505 St Johns Bluff Rd. S., St. Johns Bluff



Other Puerto Rican classics include alcapurrias (yuca fritters stuffed with beef, chicken or seafood), perril (slow-roasted pork shoulder), bacalaitos (cod fritters), pasteles (banana-leaf-wrapped packages similar to tamales), sancocho (a hearty meat and vegetable stew) and arroz con gandules (rice with pigeon peas).

Unfortunately, there are only a few restaurants serving truly authentic Puerto Rican cuisine in Jacksonville. **Flavorikan**, located a few blocks from EverBank Stadium, offers an extensive menu that includes mofongo with pulpo (\$23), perril encbollado (\$14) and a tasty assortment of handheld snacks. There's also **Latin Creations**, a fast casual restaurant in on St. Johns Bluff, serving many of the same dishes including Tostones con Mojito, Mofongo de la Isla con Perril (\$17) and much more.

Sailing west from Puerto Rico in the Caribbean takes us to Jamaica, an island with a

population that's mostly of African descent, inspiring a cuisine that's noticeably different from its neighbors. A few signature ingredients of the mountainous island are Scotch bonnet peppers (the spicy core of Jamaican cuisine), allspice (the backbone of jerk seasoning) and thyme (lending depth and fragrance). This style of cooking also makes flavorful use of ginger, nutmeg, cinnamon, coconut milk, yams, sweet potatoes and cassava. Ackee, a pear-shaped fruit with a flavor aligned with scrambled eggs, was brought from West Africa in the 1800s. Today, it has become an essential part of Jamaican fare.

You can find a wonderful selection of Jamaican dishes at **Eva's Jamaican Kitchen**. According to restaurant owner Nick Ellis, "My mom and I realized that Jamaican foods were not available in Jacksonville. We shared a passion for cooking and had lots of family recipes to get us started." When asked if there are any dishes not to be missed, he says, "You definitely need to try our ackee and

saltfish (\$22). It's the national dish of Jamaica, very healthy and very tasty."

Another Caribbean island with limited culinary representation in Jacksonville is Haiti. With dishes emphasizing the use of rice, corn, millet, yams and beans, there is a resemblance to foods from Jamaica, Cuba and Puerto Rico. For example, Riz et pois (rice and beans) is frequently served at lunchtime while fried pork (griot), considered Haiti's national dish, is popular later in the day. In addition, Haitian puff pastries with meat fillings, known as pate (pronounced patty, not to be confused with Jamaican patties), are also dining staples.

In Jacksonville, **Beignets Caribbean Cafe** is a haven for diners seeking an authentic Haitian experience. Whether enjoyed in their modestly appointed dining room or ordered in advance for carry-out, dishes such as mixed vegetables with beef (\$15), oxtail (\$19), griot, and fried goat (\$19) along with many other Caribbean favorites, are menu standouts. *



LET'S COOK!

If you're looking to prepare Caribbean foods at home, Rowe's IGA operates seven locations in and around Jacksonville and maintains an excellent selection of island staples. Their largest store, located on the corner of Blanding Boulevard and 103rd Street, is impressive. While you can find much of what you'll need at more traditional supermarkets, the selections at Rowe's are considerably larger.

SHRIMP EMPANADAS

Knowing that empanadas are ubiquitous throughout the Caribbean, this recipe for shrimp empanadas is relatively easy to make, a touch spicy and an enjoyable handheld treat.

INGREDIENTS

FILLING

2 tablespoons olive oil
1 cup onion, finely chopped
2 teaspoons garlic, minced
1 1/2 lb. tomatoes, chopped
2 bay leaves
1 lb. shrimp, cut into 1/4-inch pieces
2 tablespoons pickled jalapeños, finely chopped
1 tablespoon pickled jalapeño juice
1 tablespoon green olives, finely chopped
1 teaspoon capers, finely chopped
salt & pepper, to taste

PASTRY

1 cup butter
6 oz. cream cheese
2 cups flour
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 egg, beaten (for wash)
1 tablespoon water (for wash)



DIRECTIONS

1. To make the filling, pour the olive oil into the bottom of a large sauté pan.
2. Add the onions and garlic and cook for 2 minutes. Add the tomatoes and bay leaves and continue cooking until just dry. Add the shrimp, jalapeños, olives and capers and reduce until just dry once again. Transfer the shrimp filling to a bowl, set aside, and allow to cool.
3. To make the pastry, place the butter and cream cheese in a large mixing bowl. Using an electric mixer, beat together until thoroughly incorporated.
4. Mix in the flour and salt, a little at a time, kneading the ingredients together until a dough is formed. Split the dough into two balls, wrap in plastic and refrigerate for 15 minutes.
5. In a small bowl, beat the egg and water together and set aside.
6. To assemble, start by rolling out the dough, making it thin enough to handle without breaking. Using a 4-inch circular cookie cutter (or an empty can), cut the dough into circles.
7. Place a tablespoon of filling on one half of the dough circle, brush the edges with egg wash, then fold the other half of dough over top to create a half circle filled pastry. Press the edges together with the tip of a fork to ensure a tight seal.
8. Bake at 375°F for 15 minutes or until golden brown. Serve warm. Makes 30 empanadas.



1928 CUBAN BISTRO

