



Clockwise from left: a barbecue stall at the Autentico festival; the theatrical chef's table at Infini; Kris discovering *keshi yena*; cactus fruit cocktails and fresh fish cooking at Old Cunucu House



CARIBBEAN PUNCH

The tiny island of Aruba might not (yet) have the glamorous reputation of its neighbours, but based on the food alone, it certainly deserves it, says Kris Griffiths

Are you sure you want to try that hot sauce, sir? It's what the locals eat.' A stallholder at Autentico – Aruba's inaugural island-wide culinary festival, held in October – has spotted me applying an immoderate dollop of their hottest chilli sauce onto the dish I've just purchased, and looks genuinely concerned. After assuring her 'I like it hot', she responds: 'Yes, but it's the real deal – maximum fire!' She's not exaggerating. As the first mouthful of my sauced-up *keshi yena* – a classic Aruban dish made of ground meat and vegetables cooked inside a hollowed-out cheese rind – sends the roof of my mouth into a delicious paroxysm, I reassure her, that having been raised on a spicy diet by my Anglo-Indian mother, it's exactly what I enjoy.

It is Autentico's culminating weekend, in Aruba's capital Oranjestad, that really showcases its national cuisine, and how this tiny Caribbean island off the coast of Venezuela truly punches above its weight on that front. Thankfully, for we hotter-the-



Above: One of the beautifully intricate dishes from Infini's theatrical eight-course menu

better fire-sauce enthusiasts, this bottled potion made with locally farmed Madame Jeanette peppers (closely related to habanero and Scotch bonnet) is ubiquitous across the island, as are the traditional local dishes it complements, and within my week here I've fallen in love with both.

IT'S NOT ALL DUTCH

The *keshi yena* embodies Aruba's dual Dutch-Caribbean identity: its provenance attributed to 17th-century slaves who putatively retrieved the edam or gouda rinds

discarded by their Dutch colonial masters, filled them with meat and vegetable scraps, then baked it all together for a cheap and easy meal. Today's versions often use chicken or seafood, with capers, olives and raisins added to the mix – or prunes, in the case of the festival stand run by Papiamento restaurant. 'Ours is one of the best you'll find here,' asserts their representative. 'We take great care when preparing it, because we live on an island and rely on what's available.'

Aruba – famously referenced in the Beach Boys' song 'Kokomo' – enjoys more sunny days than any of its Caribbean counterparts subsequently listed in those lyrics. Situated outside the hurricane belt, it's constantly cooled by trade winds: the famous divi divi tree its natural compass, always pointing in a southwesterly direction due to those winds blowing from the north-east.

It wasn't until the 1990s, a decade after Aruba became a Kingdom of Netherlands autonomous entity, that it turned into a tourist hotspot for Americans who had discovered its near-perfect weather, pristine white beaches and clear Caribbean waters. ➤

Hotel complexes began springing up, the dollar became accepted everywhere and English is now spoken universally.

Only in 2023, when British Airways launched its first direct year-round route (now sadly ended), did it become easy for Brits to visit, although they are still in short supply compared to American and Dutch holidaymakers – some locals still can't quite place the 'standard' English accent ('Are you from Germany?' a bartender asked me quizzically one evening).

No matter your nationality, one thing you'll find is how small and simple Aruba is to explore, at just 70 square miles – less than a third of the area of the Isle of Man. Yet there are literally hundreds of restaurants to choose from, encompassing the full extent of the island's melting-pot cuisine, from beachside shacks to an eight-course chef's-table experience.

Since the Dutch arrived in 1636, almost 100 other nationalities have called Aruba home, gradually developing a gastronomic tapestry drawing mostly on Caribbean and Latin-American flavours, with a preponderance, unsurprisingly, of fresh fish straight from the sea, served in a soup or with a spicy creole sauce or as ceviche.

Despite the hot climate, stews remain popular, recalling early Arubans cooking with whatever was easily available on the parched island: *karni stoba* (beef stew) and

I eschewed the traditional meat stews for a conch (sea snail) adaptation: the conch meat a more tender version of squid, served in a piquant creole-style sauce, and bracingly washed down with a house-special cocktail of tequila and sweet crimson-coloured cactus fruit. 'On customer feedback alone, we're in the top 10 in Aruba,' affirms manager Mireila afterwards, which I don't doubt for a second.

SAMPLING THE SPECTRUM

Then, in the southern seaside town of Savaneta, I lunched with locals at the unpretentious wharfside joint Zeerover (Dutch for 'pirate'), which has attained island-wide fame for its inexpensive simple menu of whatever their fishermen have caught that day. For just over \$20 (£15) I enjoyed a basketful of huge head-on shrimp caught hours previously, served with fried plantains, *funchi*, pickled red onions (*pika*) and a refreshing local 'Balashi' beer – genuinely one of the most satisfying meals I can remember, eaten with fingers, on a wooden pier jutting into the ocean.

At the loftier end of the scale, on Eagle Beach in the north, sits what is regarded the highest-standard food experience in Aruba. The artistic eight-course meal at Infini is pure theatre: a crack team of chefs prepares each dish in the centre of the room, while you watch from the chef's table, limited to just 12 diners per sitting.

During my week I also visit two of Infini's suppliers: Happyponics, which specialises in hydroponically grown vegetables at a fascinating micro-farm; and Farmacure Fungi, which provides over 35 varieties of mushroom

to Aruban restaurants, all grown in an indoor 'urban farm' that looks like something out of *Breaking Bad*. Both reflect the island's flourishing 'DIY' agricultural sector aiming to lessen Aruba's reliance on imported produce.

It's a fitting finale to see everything come together at the Autentico festival, gathering restaurants and producers from across the island for the first time amongst the colourful colonial architecture of capital Oranjestad. There is live music, mixology demonstrations, a cook-off with a trip to New York as first prize, and a pervading feeling that Aruba's underdog culinary scene is finally awakening and flexing its muscles. ■



Where Kris had one of his most satisfying meals ever – the picturesque pier setting of local favourite Zeerover

'There are literally hundreds of restaurants... encompassing the full extent of the melting-pot cuisine'

cabrito (goat) *stoba* the most prominent. Two side dishes commonly served with these and other meals as a tasty carb are *pan bati*, sitting somewhere between a flatbread and an unsweetened American pancake; and *funchi*, being grilled or fried cornmeal, served popularly as thick 'fries'.

During my week here I sampled superlative examples of all these at some of the best-reviewed restaurants on the island, my personal favourites being the more casual rustic venues and shacks that typify Aruba's more laid-back communal dining experience.

At Old Cunucu House, a 150-year-old traditional venue in the island's north,



3 MEMORABLE MOMENTS

1 UNDERWATER LOVE

Aruba's crystal-clear waters are ideal for snorkelling and observing schools of multicoloured parrotfish and damselfish, or one of the island's four sea turtle species if you're lucky. Day-cruise operators will sail you out to the best snorkel spots as part of their boating packages.

2 ART DISTRICT

If street art is your thing, make sure to swing by the southern outpost of San Nicolas – the former oil refinery town that, since the refinery closed and workers moved out, has become a bohemian paradise, with galleries exhibiting local artists, boutiques selling artisan handicrafts, and over 50 colourful street murals – including the police station frontage.

3 ALOE ALOE

Founded in 1890, Aruba Aloe is the oldest aloe company in the world, and one of the few that grows, harvests and processes its own aloe onsite. You can explore the fields where it's grown and the factory where it's processed, and then buy products like aloe soaps, lotions and gels – handy for Caribbean sunburn!

THE DETAILS

The Autentico Aruba Culinary Festival takes place in October 2025, visit aruba.com for details. Kris stayed at Manchebo Beach Resort & Spa on Eagle Beach. Rates from £345 a night, visit manchebo.com. KLM fly from London to Aruba via Amsterdam from £481, visit klm.co.uk