

Bermuda's best fare makes spring break trip to island paradise special

By Cindy Bradley

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Seeking a last-minute spring break destination that didn't involve hordes of partying college students, I found a great deal online for a resort in Bermuda. My husband Craig and I had fond memories of our first visit there more than 30 years ago, and I particularly remembered eating lots of delicious fish. Inspired more by thoughts of fishes galore than the beauty of Bermuda's pink beaches, I booked the resort and secured plane tickets.

After a couple of short, hassle-free plane rides, Craig and I, along with daughter Kathleen, arrived at our destination. As we were being driven to our resort (nonresidents are not allowed to drive), we had plenty of opportunity to admire the coastline, where pink sand meets turquoise sea.

This was the sea whose abundance of fin and shellfish provided those delightful meals so many years ago. Back then, a common sight along the roadside was a couple of men with fishing poles dipped into one of Bermuda's many bodies of inland saltwater. Their catch probably included the ever-popular rockfish, the star ingredient of Bermuda Fish Chowder.

That fish chowder was definitely on my list of things to eat while on the island, but I was actually most looking forward to that iconic Bermudian dish, Curried Mussel Pie. When I first encountered this pie, I was taken by its inviting browned crust and the enticing aroma of curry wafting from the bowl. I was somewhat taken aback, however, by the accompanying condiments: a bottle of Gosling's Black Rum, and another of Outerbridge's Sherry Peppers Sauce.

As I later realized, the rum and the sherry peppers are indispensable on the Bermudian table. A splash of each goes into the mussel pie, into the fish chowder, into just about every savory dish. It is a brilliant combination of flavors, with a hint of sweetness from the rum, and a bit of fruity heat from the pepper sauce. Nothing conjures up the essence of Bermudian cuisine like the smell of these two ingredients. (Happily, you can find the Sherry Peppers Sauce at Goods for Cooks, and the Gosling's Black Rum at Big Red Liquors.)

Superficially, not much has changed in Bermuda over the years. The people are still friendly and extremely polite. Public transportation is efficient. Rum and sherry peppers are ubiquitous. The fish tale, however, is rather sad. What was once an abundant resource has become scarce. Over-fishing has taken a heavy toll on both fin and shellfish populations.

It's still possible to find delicious fish chowder; indeed, I ate it just about every day for lunch. There was a surprising range of preparations: one was a thin broth with discernable chunks of fish and vegetables, others were more of a thick puree. All were excellent, but not, I think, made with the traditional rockfish.

Rockfish (also known as black grouper) has just about disappeared from Bermuda's waters. They were once so abundant that people thought there was an infinite supply. There wasn't, of course.

Another unpleasant side effect of overfishing is the shockingly high price of seafood. Food in Bermuda has never been cheap, as almost all of it is imported; but when a fish sandwich costs \$18 and a small lobster \$80 at a rather ordinary restaurant, the point is driven home with a vengeance.

The most disappointing food aspect of the trip was my utter failure at finding a restaurant that still serves mussel pie. Thirty years ago, this dish was on just about every restaurant menu. Despite enquiring of cab drivers, waitresses, and little old ladies in supermarkets, I came up empty-handed. The mussels, once so plentiful and



Mussels, along with Gosling's Black Rum and Outerbridge's Sherry Peppers Sauce, are some of the flavors of Bermuda that can be enjoyed even in Indiana. David Snodgrass | Herald-Times

cheap, now have to be imported, and are way to expensive for the humble mussel pie.

Despite the food setbacks, we had a lovely, relaxing time in fair Bermuda. There is a cautionary tale in this experience, though: no food resource is infinite, and we need to nurture what we have. (See note below.)

On a happier note, my two favorite Bermuda dishes are easy to prepare at home, and armed with Gosling's Rum and Outerbridge's Sauce, you're good to go.

Note: If you're concerned about the sustainability of the seafood you eat, check out Seafood Watch at montereybayaquarium.org.

Bermuda Fish Chowder

If you plan to serve this unpureed, cut the vegetables, including the tomatoes, into small, similarly sized pieces. If you're going to puree the soup, just roughly chop everything.

- 2 (24-ounce) cans low-sodium chicken broth
- 2 (8-ounce) bottles clam juice
- 1 large carrot, chopped
- 1 celery stalk, chopped
- 1 large potato, chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 (28-ounce) can plum tomatoes
- 1 tablespoon mild curry powder
- 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme leaves, minced
- 1 pound fresh fish fillets, such as snapper, grouper or halibut, cut into chunks

Place all ingredients except the fish in a large pot, place over medium-high heat and bring to a boil. Lower heat to medium-low and simmer until vegetables are tender, about 45 minutes. Add fish and cook another 15 minutes. Puree using an immersion blender or food processor, if desired. Serve with Gosling's Black Rum (see note 1) and Outerbridge's Sherry Peppers Sauce (see note 2).

Note 1: Available at Big Red Liquors.

Note 2: Available at Goods for Cooks.

Curried Mussels

These are delicious served over rice, but they're best served in individual soup bowls, topped with any baked pastry squares, such as short-crust, puff, or even biscuit).

- 2 quarts mussels, scrubbed and de-bearded
- 1/2 pound bacon, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 2 medium Bermuda (or other sweet) onions, chopped into 1/4 -inch pieces
- 3 tablespoons mild curry powder
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves, chopped
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 cups cold water
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 large baking potato, cut into 1/2-inch cubes

Preheat oven to 450 degrees. Place mussels (without any liquid) into a heavy pot with a tight-fitting lid. Roast until shells open completely, five to eight minutes. Discard any mussels that do not open. Pour mussels and any liquid onto a large platter, and set aside to cool.

In the same pot, cook the bacon until well-browned; using a slotted spoon, transfer bacon to a paper towel-lined plate to drain. Pour off all but 1 tablespoon of the bacon fat. Cook the onions in the bacon fat until soft, five to 10 minutes. Add the curry powder and thyme and cook, stirring, a further 30 seconds. Add salt, pepper, water and sugar to the pot. Cover and simmer 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, shuck the mussels and carefully cut them in half. Add the mussels, accumulated liquid, and bacon to the pot. Heat through gently, being sure not to allow the mixture to boil.

While the mussels are heating, make a roux in a small saucepan by melting the butter and whisking in the flour. Cook, stirring, for two minutes. Gradually whisk in 1 cup of the hot mussels liquid, then pour this mixture into the pot containing the mussels. Stir until thickened, about two minutes. Serve with Gosling's Black Rum and Outerbridge's Sherry Peppers Sauce. Serves four.

First Mate's Sauce

Pour this sauce over seafood, chicken, or pork before roasting.

Equal amounts of (about 2 tablespoons per serving):

Ketchup

Worcestershire sauce

Butter

Gosling's Black Rum

Mix ingredients in a saucepan and simmer, stirring frequently, until the consistency of barbecue sauce.