

Spice of life

As Ainsley's Caribbean Kitchen returns to TV, Laura French finds out how to spice up your sales with the region's best foodie experiences

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From fresh seafood to fried plantain, jerk chicken to Jamaican punch, we have the Caribbean to thank for some of the most mouth-watering flavours out there, with exotic spices, fiery sauces and sweet, coconut aromas fusing to create a rich and diverse cuisine that appeals to almost every palate.

Now with Ainsley Harriott's Caribbean cookery show returning to ITV1 on Sunday nights, interest in the region's culinary charm is set to spike. We've rounded up some of the best food experiences

from across the islands to help you sell this diverse region to those wanting to get under its skin.

▶ VISIT OISTINS FISH FRY

For one of the most iconic food spots in the Caribbean, look no further than Oistins Fish Fry in Barbados. This lively, sense-overloading market pulls in locals and visitors en masse every Friday and Saturday night, with freshly caught seafood cooked in every way imaginable, plus local bands, handicrafts and other produce on offer at cheap-as-chips prices.

"The atmosphere is fantastic with locals getting up to perform, and it's easy to get to from hotels on the south and west coast using local buses," says Phillippa Philpot, travel expert at Premier Holidays. "We'd highly recommend it for an authentic experience."

Book it: Premier Holidays offers seven nights' all-inclusive at Turtle Beach by Elegant Hotels (just over a mile from Oistins) from £1,589 per person, based on two adults travelling in June. trade.premierholidays.co.uk 



CARIBBEAN FOOD FESTIVALS

Clients serious about food? Here are some key culinary festivals to look out for

Curaçao Culinaire April 5-6

Oistins Fish Festival, Barbados April 20-22

Nevis Mango & Food Festival July

Breadfruit Festival, Saint Vincent August

Saint Lucia Food & Rum Festival September 19-22

Eat Local Aruba Restaurant Month October

Tobago Blue Food Festival October

Taste of Dominica October

Barbados Food and Rum Festival October

Jamaican Food & Drink Festival October 19-27

British Virgin Islands Food Fete November

➔ INDULGE IN A CHOCOLATE WORKSHOP

Saint Lucia knows how to do chocolate, with cocoa trees scattered across its lush-green landscape, and several resorts offering classes for those wanting to learn how to make it. For one of the most indulgent, suggest Boucan by Hotel Chocolat, where guests can embark on a 'tree-to-bar' experience combining a tour of the resort's 60-hectare Rabot Estate cocoa plantation with a chocolate-making class where they'll come away with their own rich, creamy bar to feast on (\$61 for guests, \$88 for non-guests).

Close by, Anse Chastanet offers its own version with a guided walk around the Emerald Estate - its organic farm, home to more than 2,000 cocoa trees - followed by a workshop at the resort's Chocolate Lab featuring lashings of molten chocolate flavoured with locally grown cinnamon, coconut and cashews.

But it's not just Saint Lucia that goes all out on the chocolate front. For added cocoa-mania, Caribtours recommends heading to Grenada in June for its Chocolate Fest, a nine-day extravaganza during which the island's tree-to-bar chocolatiers offer workshops, beauty treatments and samples.

Book it: Room-only rates at Anse Chastanet start at \$410 a night, based on two sharing, between June 1 and October 31. ansechastanet.com



The workshop features lashings of molten chocolate flavoured with locally grown cinnamon, coconut and cashews

▶ CATCH YOUR OWN DINNER

Clients like the sound of fishing for their food? At Beaches Turks & Caicos, guests can venture out on a 'seaside scavenger hunt' where they're whizzed out on a boat to a secret spot to go snorkelling in search of conch. Once

they've got the goods, they're taken to a deserted island where it's cooked fresh, then served up on the beach for dinner (from \$138).

Meanwhile in Barbados, Colony Club takes things up a notch with 'Bait to Plate', a complimentary fishing trip during which guests go fishing with a chef, who then fillets and prepares the catch back at the hotel, before dishing it up Bajan-style - think rice and peas, salad and lashings of fiery pepper sauce, with a backdrop of lulling ocean.

Book it: Carrier offers a week's bed and breakfast at Colony Club from £1,690 per person, based on two sharing a Pool/Garden View room. The price includes Virgin Atlantic flights from Gatwick on June 8 and return private transfers. carrier.co.uk

▶ FEAST ON A 12-COURSE MEAL

'Farm-to-fork' is the buzz-phrase of the moment, and over on St Kitts, luxury resort Belle Mont embraces it in every way. Some 90% of the food served is grown locally - either on its own 160-hectare organic farm or on surrounding estates. For those wanting to sample the best of it, there's a weekly 12-course menu dishing up local delicacies, from papaya lamb stew to braised chicken roulade, on a 30-foot dining table with idyllic sunset views.

Book it: Room-only rates for a luxury cottage start at \$215 per night. bellemontfarm.com

▶ EMBARK ON A BAHAMIAN FOOD TOUR

Heading to the Bahamas? Suggest



ABOVE: Boucan by Hotel Chocolat, Saint Lucia

LEFT: Colony Club, Barbados



➔ a food tour of capital Nassau. Tru Bahamian Food Tours offers three-hour trips through the city, taking guests off the beaten track to try delicacies such as conch fritters, rum cake, and baked mac and cheese in one-off spots where they'll get to know local chefs and artisans, while exploring the colourful, colonial streets that make up downtown. Recommend it to anyone wanting to see this city in a different light.

Book it: The three-hour Bites of Nassau Food Tasting & Cultural Walking Tour costs \$69 for adults and \$49 for children. It sets off at 11.30am on Mondays to Saturdays. trubahamianfoodtours.com

▶ **EXPERIENCE RICK'S CAFE, JAMAICA**

No list would be complete without mentioning Rick's Cafe, a bar and restaurant perched on a 10-metre cliff in Negril. Cocktails such as rum punch and Rick's frozen rum runner are served against sizzling sunsets, while daredevils jump into the stretch of deep azure below.

Explore visits on its Explore Jamaica trip, which adds in a trip to a Rastafari village to learn about Rasta culture and try a traditional Ital lunch (connected to spiritual beliefs around purity and vitality), with natural ingredients and exotic spices in hearty, flavourful curries. **Book it:** Explore's 11-day trip costs from £2,485 per person, including flights, internal transfers, accommodation, some meals and an Explore leader. explore.co.uk



At Rick's Cafe, a bar and restaurant perched on a 10-metre cliff, daredevils jump into the stretch of deep azure below

RIGHT: Rick's Cafe, Jamaica

BELOW: Tru Bahamian Food Tours

▶ **COOK WITH 'THE CARIBBEAN SPICE GIRL'**

There are cooking classes, and then there's this; an immersive culinary experience with famed Curacao 'Caribbean Spice Girl' Helmi Smeulders, author of two cookbooks and one of the spearheads of modern Caribbean cuisine. Offered as an excursion on Holland America Line cruises, it offers guests the chance to learn all about her food philosophy, while sampling various local fruits and vegetables, before creating their own meal. Dishes include ceviche with lime-tequila dressing, jerk chicken with mango mayonnaise and funchi fries with spicy pika sauce, all enjoyed outside with a glass of wine (from \$300 per adult).

Book it: A 14-day Southern Caribbean cruise with Holland America round-trip from Tampa, Florida, starts at £1,299 per person, based on an ocean view stateroom. hollandamerica.com



AINSLEY HARRIOTT



Ainsley's Caribbean Kitchen started on January 20 on ITV. We spoke to the chef to get his verdict on Dominica, where he spent time getting to know the food scene. "Dominica, nature's island, has been a real eye-opening experience. I've had a lovely time here – the people are so warm, and there's this stillness about it. It's just not as busy as the other islands. You go to a restaurant and it has a casual atmosphere, with people just sitting around. When the food comes, it comes – and when it comes, it's delicious, seasonal and beautiful."



PICTURES: SHUTTERSTOCK; DWAYNE TUCKER; JONNY CROSBIE

Best of the rest

Try making pastry

Travel 2 recommends the adult-only Treasure Beach by Elegant Hotels in Barbados for pastry-making and other culinary workshops (complimentary for guests), as well as sommelier-hosted events in the wine cellar.

Visit the home of the mudslide

We have Grand Cayman to thank for the Kahlua, Bailey's and vodka concoction that is the mudslide. Recommend heading to Rum Point to see its origins.

Cook with rum

For a truly local experience, suggest Nicole's Table in Antigua, where chef Nicole takes visitors to markets, before preparing the produce in her hilltop house, nestled among papaya trees and overlooking the whole island.

Eat lionfish

Anse Chastanet has found a solution to the invasive lionfish species – by serving it up in a six-course tasting menu right on the beach, with creative preparations that span slow-cooked, skewered, grilled and ceviche.

Go rum tasting

Kuoni recommends Saint Lucia's Cap Maison for rum-tasting sessions, while Zemi Beach House Hotel & Spa in Anguilla has a dedicated Rhum Room housing more than 100 single-estate varieties, including premium produce never released for sale.