

# CURAÇAO BEYOND THE BEACH

*by* ELYSE GLICKMAN



Curaçao

WHERE ON EARTH

PHOTO THIS SPREAD Turquoise waters lure divers and watersports enthusiasts to the ABC islands.



*...Sephardic traditions still influence Curaçao cuisine...*



*LIKE THE MANY CARIBBEAN ISLANDS* dotting the Atlantic expanse between North and South America, Curaçao (which completes the “ABC” island chain with Aruba and Bonaire), has flawless weather, gorgeous beaches, diving, water sports galore and a variety of boutique hotels, b-and-bs, and resorts. But a fascinating multicultural history and a palpable pride of place among its denizens make this Caribbean island a great escape — even for those not partial to beach vacations.



PHOTO THIS SPREAD  
Hilltop view of  
Willemstad.

The Dutch architecture in Curaçao's capital city Willemstad is illuminated in crayon box hues, instantly telling a prospective visitor that it has more to offer than beautiful beaches. While it's tempting to think of Willemstad as 'Amsterdam by the Sea,' walk the streets behind those buildings and other neighbourhoods and villages (such as Pietermaai Smal, Scharloo and Otrabanda) and it becomes apparent that there is more a complex story to tell. In addition to its Dutch colonial history, Curaçao has a fully formed culture that evolved from indigenous peoples who travelled north from South America, Portuguese Jewish communities that started arriving during the Inquisition (1651), and other communities coming from Africa and Europe over the centuries.»



SERVES 4

## Pumpkin Pancakes

*ANGELICA'S KITCHEN COOKING SCHOOL is no longer in operation but luckily I saved the recipe for these delicious pancakes when I visited in 2010! — Elyse*

**Pumpkin**  
400 g, peeled  
and diced

**Cinnamon  
Stick 1**

**Water 1 cup**

**Salt a pinch**

**All-Purpose  
Flour**  
1½ cups

**Milk ¼ cup**

**Baking  
Powder 1 tsp**

**Egg 1 large**

**Sugar**  
½ cup

**Vanilla  
Extract**  
½ tsp

**Raisins**  
¼ cup

**Orange Juice**  
from 1 orange

**Curaçao  
Liqueur<sup>1</sup>**  
1 Tbs

**1 COOK** the pumpkin in the water with the cinnamon stick and salt until tender. Drain.

**2 IN** a food processor add the cooked pumpkin, milk, sugar and vanilla extract and blend to a fine consistency.

**3 SCRAPE** the mixture into a bowl, add the egg and mix to combine.

**4 COMBINE** the baking powder and flour and add to the pumpkin and mix until well combined. Stir in the raisins.

**5 HEAT** a skillet and spray with cooking spray. Take 2 tablespoons of batter and pour it on the hot skillet. Use a wooden spoon to form a round pancake and fry it about three minutes on each side till golden brown.

**6 MIX** the orange juice with the Curaçao liqueur.

**7 SERVE** the pancakes lukewarm or at room temperature, and pour a spoonful of the orange-Curaçao sauce over the top. Add a scoop of vanilla ice cream if you wish.

<sup>1</sup> Not the blue one, use the clear type or substitute Grand Marnier.



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT  
 Morning coffee with a view; Cocktails with cactus at Fort Nassau; Street art in Punda; The Gouverneur's Benedict; Keshi Yena, a dish of chicken-stuffed cheese baked in a small skillet; On the waterfront in Curaçao; Curaçao's famous blue liqueur; A friendly waiter offering the menu at La Bohème; Arepas — rice filled corncakes with a smoothie at La Bohème.



ROSANA PRADA

«Sephardic traditions still influence Curaçao cuisine. They are steeped into one-pot stews, grilled and seasoned chicken and fish, and sides that continue to delight locals and visitors at Plasa Bieu market. Many residents refer to Plasa Bieu as the Caribbean's first food court. Our guide, Emlyn, points out that while the Dutch were the colonizers, Jewish merchant families were in charge of the kitchens. Consequently, island people learned the Portuguese Jewish techniques of stewing meats and vegetables. Even though things changed with the introduction of electric and gas stoves, Emlyn points out there are many small restaurants serving chicken, fish, goat and vegetarian dishes with interesting back-stories.

Plasa Bieu vendors dole out comfort food to the area's workers and professionals during the lunch hour, including goat stew (*stoba de cabrito*) and fish prepared with or without sauce, or served family style with sides of *funchi* (a polenta-like staple), *morros* (rice and beans), *tostones* (banana fritters) and plantains. Wash it all down with *lemonchi* – Curaçao's take on lemonade. If you're heading away from the cities towards the island's fabled beaches, more of those unpretentious local treasures can be savoured at casual hangouts such as Bali Restaurant in Grote Berg, which also serves up popular Surinamese dishes locals have adopted as their own.

Those influences also find their way to higher-end restaurants. Dishes with Sephardic origins have found their way onto menus at eateries running the gamut from mom-and-pop cafes and pubs to bistro and specialized destination restaurants. Some examples include *pasteche*, a type of empanada made for the Jewish spring holiday Purim; *arrepa de pumpkin* (pumpkin pancakes); *pom*, a baked chicken dish Portuguese Jews brought to the island from Suriname in the 16<sup>th</sup> century; and *keshi yena*, heralded as one of Curaçao's national dishes, which consists of chicken-stuffed cheese baked in a small skillet. Vegetarian variations are available in some spots.

At other places, the menu is strictly defined by whatever ingredients are available when its chef is left to his or her own devices. At Cafe Gouverneur de Rouville in Otrabanda, the biggest draws are the picture postcard view of the Punda landscape as well as attractive courtyard seating accented by the historic red and yellow buildings on the block. Fortunately, the food is on a par with the beautiful surroundings, with selections that balance the flavours of fresh produce and spices with generous portions of breakfast dishes that will keep one going well into the early afternoon. Succulent poached egg sandwiches piled high with vegetables, thick yogurt parfaits with seasonal fruit, and decadent lattes add lots of colour and flavour to the views.»





SERVES 8

## Bean, Cornmeal and Coconut Mash

### Black-Eyed Peas<sup>1</sup>

½ lb, soaked overnight in water

### Garlic 2

cloves, whole but smashed

### Butter 2 Tbs

### Onion 1 small, chopped

### Water 2 cups

### Coconut Milk 1 x 14 oz can

### Unsweetened Dried Coconut ½ cup

### Salt 1 tsp

### Nutmeg a pinch

### Brown Sugar 2 Tbs

### Yellow Cornmeal 1 ½ cups

**1 DRAIN** the soaked peas and put them in a saucepan with 6 cups of water and the smashed garlic cloves. Bring to a boil and simmer for about an hour, or until the peas are soft.

**2 MELT** the butter in another saucepan and sauté the onion until it softens. Add the water, coconut milk, dried coconut, salt, nutmeg and sugar and bring to a simmer.

**3 ADD** the drained beans. Pour in the cornmeal and cook, stirring constantly, for about 10 minutes, or until the cornmeal is thick and pulls away from the side of the pan.

**4 PACK** the tutu into a bowl moistened with water then unmold it onto a serving dish. Alternatively, use a smaller bowl or an ice cream scoop to mold individual servings.

<sup>1</sup> Or you can use two cans of black-eyed peas, drained.



PHOTO THIS  
SPREAD Plasa Bieu  
restaurant.

« La Bohème in Punda features impressive fresh fruit and vegetable smoothies, some blended with the island's prime cash crop — Aloe Vera, and Venezuelan-style arepa sandwiches with a variety of tasty fillings, from cheese to curry chicken salad. Williwood, on the west side of the island en route back to Willemstad from the beaches, is known for its famous goat burgers (which taste like fine lamb), curries and house-made fruit wine.

After a morning of browsing wonderful contemporary art at Landhuis Blomhoff, spotlighting the accomplishments of artist/author May Enriquez, and pondering the epic *Cathedral of Thorns* by Dutch artist Herman Van Bergen (whose visual, visceral commentary on religions of the world was documented in *National Geographic*), it's fun to grab a coffee, beet latte or freshly baked pastries in the equally artsy No. Ten cafe and enjoy the natural setting, vibrant paintings and conversation as Enriquez and her husband did half a century ago.

Rock and roll gives way to salsa and merengue every Thursday night during Punda Vibes, a weekly party where anybody who shows up becomes a local. When the sun sets, walk along the bay to Columbus Straat, where revellers pay homage to the island's African heritage. In the street, white clad dancers keep time with Curaçao's traditional folk music. If you wait patiently in line and ask, they will teach you their moves. The melodies and dances harken back to Angola, Mozambique and the Congo, the ancestral countries for much of the island population. However, this is not an historical relic. African culture informs everything in Curaçao, from the penchant for colour to such street foods as funchi-fries and *yambo* (seafood and okra soup).

The bars and restaurants in Punda and Pietermaai Smal are prime spots to meet people and sip strong mojitos. During the all-day happy hour at



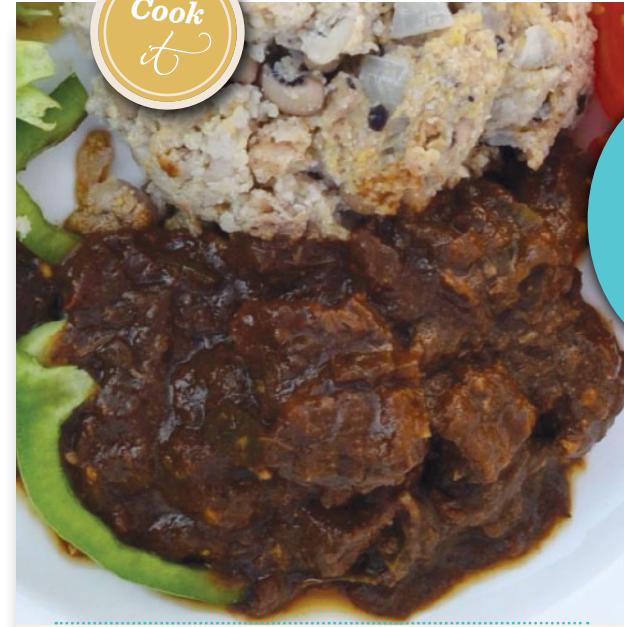
The World's Best Mojito Bar (adjoining La Bohème), the signature cocktails are two-for-one. With drinks this strong, you will need food in your stomach and you can get your fill of barbecued meats at Gordo Grill & Bar. Pietermaai Smal, meanwhile, combines the trendiest entertainment and dining spots with the architecture of Curaçao's past. Twenty years ago, these oceanfront colonial residences and warehouses were returning to the elements. Now Dutch expats are restoring these abandoned buildings to their 18<sup>th</sup>-century splendour.

Around the corner, classic rock rules supreme at 27, a shrine to rock stars gone too soon. Six nights a week, local bands play classic and alternative rock to standing-room-only crowds. To those who left us at age 27 — Kurt, Amy, Jimi, and Janis — Curaçao raises a glass of Dutch, Caribbean, or Venezuelan beer.

Meanwhile, don't be intimidated by the local biker bar, Hogs' Nest. Harley aficionados park their 'hogs' outside and are happy to show off these mobile works of art to anybody interested in checking them out.

Punda Vibes continues at Mundo Bizarro, where customers kick back on wrought iron chairs or old sofas placed on the sidewalk. As its menu includes a large selection of rum, it's a good place to evoke your inner Ernest Hemingway. An enormous stencil of Che Guevara adorns the balcony wall overlooking the entrance to a room decorated in deep reds and burnished gold. It's 1950s Havana again, on the eve of the revolution as couples dance to live salsa.

Weekends in Pietermaai and Punda end at late night venues like Blackjack Lounge and Bar, located steps from the beach. This sleek bar specializes in craft cocktails as well as retro tiki creations. It's a local hangout frequented by young and sophisticated patrons; DJ Doreen Woodz spins the latest Afro Beats and Electronica Thursday through >



SERVES 6-8

## Karni Stoba

### Beef Stew

THIS SLOWLY SIMMERED STEW reflects the influence of Sephardic Jews who came to Curaçao in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, while curry, chile and spices add a Caribbean twist.

#### Stewing Beef

2 lbs, cubed

#### Olive Oil

2 Tbs

#### Onions

2, chopped

#### Garlic

2 cloves, chopped

#### Green Bell Pepper

1, chopped

#### Red Chile Peppers

3, chopped

#### Tomato Paste

1 Tbs

#### White Vinegar

1/4 cup

#### Soy Sauce

1 Tbs

#### Beef Stock

2 cups

#### Cumin Powder

1 tsp

#### Curry Powder

1 tsp

#### Mustard Pickles

1 Tbs

#### Salt and Freshly

Ground Black Pepper

to taste

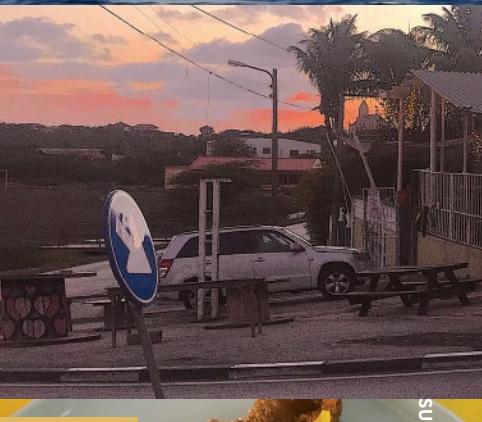
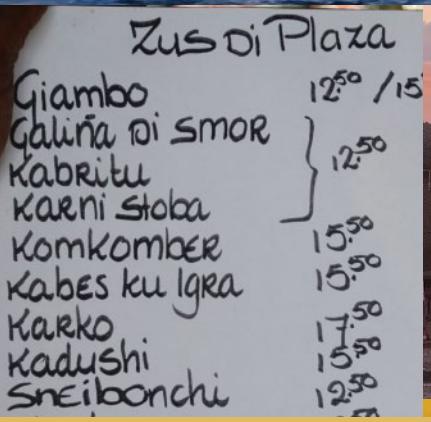
**1** HEAT the olive oil in a Dutch oven or large heavy saucepan and sauté the onions, garlic and green pepper until just starting to colour.

**2** ADD the chiles and beef and sauté until the meat begins to brown.

**3** ADD the remaining ingredients and bring to a boil then turn the heat down and simmer, uncovered for 2 hours or until the meat is very tender.

**4** SEASON to taste with salt and pepper.

**5** SERVE with tutu or rice.



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Willemstad's colourful waterfront; The interior of Restaurant Gouverneur de Rouville; Plasa Bieu local food plate; Chandelier in the Mikvé Israel Emanuel Synagogue; Santa Barbara lobby; Boats tie up near the market; Souvenirs for sale in Punda; Plasa Bieu; Williwood at dusk; Plasa Bieu crumbed fish.



SUSIE ELLISON





**Bali Restaurant Grote Berg**  
[www.balicuracao.com](http://www.balicuracao.com)

**Gordo Grill & Bar**  
[www.gordo-grill-bar.business.site](http://www.gordo-grill-bar.business.site)

**La Bohème**  
[www.labohemecuracao.com](http://www.labohemecuracao.com)

**No. 10**  
[www.numbertencuracao.com](http://www.numbertencuracao.com)

**Plasa Bieu**  
 De Ruyterkade, Willemstad, Curaçao

**Restaurant and Café De Gouverneur de Rouville**  
[www.de-gouverneur.com](http://www.de-gouverneur.com)

**Williwood**  
[www.facebook.com/pg/Williwood.experience/about](http://www.facebook.com/pg/Williwood.experience/about)

**Blackjack Lounge and Bar**  
[www.blackjackcuracao.com](http://www.blackjackcuracao.com)

**Mundo Bizarro**  
[www.mundobizarrocuracao.com](http://www.mundobizarrocuracao.com)

**Cuba Shango Bar & Grill**  
 3 Fuikstraat, Willemstad

**World's Best Mojito Bar**  
[www.facebook.com/Bestmojitobar](http://www.facebook.com/Bestmojitobar)

**27 Bar & Terrace**  
[www.27curacao.com](http://www.27curacao.com)



AVID HOME COOKS INSPIRED by the simple but delicious fare of Plasa Bieu and the sun-ripened produce and fish from the local markets will want to consider a stay at hotels such as Acoya, Santa Barbara Resort, or Blue Bay. Apartment-style villas and suites at these properties include well equipped kitchens or kitchenettes that allow for preparing one's own meals using local ingredients.

**Acoya Resort, Villas & Spa**  
[www.acoyacuracao.com](http://www.acoyacuracao.com)

**Blue Bay Golf & Beach Resort**  
[www.bluebay-curacao.com](http://www.bluebay-curacao.com)

**Santa Barbara Resort**  
[www.santabarbararesortcuracao.com](http://www.santabarbararesortcuracao.com)

◀ Saturday. When you return to your downtown lodgings, you will probably fall asleep to African drumming coming from Cuba Shango, where those who still don't want to go home congregate for the night's last call.

Visitors will need to rent a car in order to fully experience everything that Curaçao has to offer. The roads are well maintained and lit, and drivers tend to follow the rules. Drive across the Wilhelmina Bridge to Scharloo, the historic Jewish quarter, and see the process of renovation. Local muralists have adorned large expanses of walls with a kaleidoscope of tropical flowers, birds and ocean life. Urban street artists have also used murals as a way of drawing attention to a variety of social issues. Residents are gradually rebuilding and repainting, turning ruins into neighbourhoods of sorbet-coloured, multi-purpose buildings and homes.

Once you begin to feel the effects of the equatorial sun and humidity, grab a beer at any local dive bar with a few televisions and a football match in progress. Chances are one of the regulars will strike up a conversation with you about the match or the news of the day. 

**ELYSE GLICKMAN** is a regular contributor to **TASTE & TRAVEL**. **LEYLA MESSIAN** also contributed to this story.