

A Return to Ortanique

Cindy Hutson Keeps Her New World Jamaican Menu Fresh
By Mark Goldberg

Sometimes I hate this job. Yes, visiting a different restaurant every week is stimulating and adventurous. But it keeps me from enjoying favorites, often for years at a time. I couldn't believe it had been almost four years since I was last at Ortanique, the Jamaican fantasyland created by Executive Chef/owner Cindy Hutson. I also couldn't believe how much I'd missed.

From atmosphere to menu, it's a treasure of colors and tastes. Rich reds, verdant greens, pale ochre: The 140-seat room gives the impression of a Jamaican garden terrace with fenced-in courtyards, primitive wall painting and large pillars with painted ortanique — Jamaican oranges — on branches climbing toward the ceiling. It's the feeling of the villages and the houses of colonial Jamaica. The look is rich, yet comfortable.

The menu proclaimed some familiar dishes as well as several new ones. Because Hutson changes things around at least twice a year, that's eight menu generations I'd missed. There was some catching up to do.

We began with a creamy Pumpkin Bisque (\$8) special. This thick, rich-tasting pleasure was actually heart-healthy because it contained no cream. Its secret: Most of the ingredients were brought in from Jamaica, whose soil is so intense it brings a higher level to the products grown in it. Like the calabasa pumpkin and the fresh thyme. These are blended with sautéed sweet onions and smoked ham shanks that bring out an extra flavor. Floating atop the bisque is a crema of sour cream and fresh grated nutmeg. The Caribbean Ceviche (Market Price) continually changes, based on the availability of the fish. We were lucky in that corvina was the day's choice, a perfect ceviche fish since it holds up so well to the acid. The ceviche wasn't too hot or tart, the lime giving in to the

contrasts of both scotch bonnet peppers and sweet mirin. The Florida Sun Salad (\$14) featured red beets, slow roasted to intensify their sweetness, and navel orange segments tossed with mixed greens in an orange/lemon/Dijon vinaigrette. Conch Fritters had been off the menu for quite a while, thanks to those hurricanes of the past few years. Now they're back, even though they're a special.

Flanking the salad were two disks of goat cheese, dusted with roasted pistachio nuts and heated just before serving. Conch Fritters (\$14) had been off the menu for quite a while, thanks to those hurricanes of the past few years. Now they're back, even though they're a special. These deep-fried treats are made almost exclusively of lump conch in a light fritter batter (five pounds of Caicos conch to four cups of flour), lightly spiced with scotch bonnet and kimchee, marked with red pepper coulis and served with Mt. Diablo corn salsa. Two new appetizers that could almost be considered entrées were the Rum Braised Short Ribs (\$16) — incredibly tender after four hours in a broth of citrus peel, good port wine and truffles, served with truffle gnocchi — and the Mojo Braised Pork Roast (\$14) — whose pork was marinated in brine for three days; the brine containing lime juice, orange juice, garlic, oregano, olive oil, sugar and cilantro. Braised for four hours, the pork is shredded and placed atop a roulade of sweet plantains wrapped around a mofongo.

Two entrées have been on the menu since before there was a menu, back when Hutson operated Norma's on the Beach. Hutson, being a former fishing captain, knows her fish and is very particular about what she brings into her restaurant. The Pan Sautéed Bahamian Black Grouper (\$32) is marinated all day in sesame oil, teriyaki, lemon and garlic. When prepared, it crisps outside and the interior remains moist and flaky.

Resting on a bed of boniato mash, a creative sauce of ginger/pepper, teriyaki, red pepper flakes, scotch bonnet, Vidalia



onions and Bacardi Limon brings the fish to life. Totally different but equally delicious was the Caribbean Ahi Tuna (\$33), which had been marinating all day in sesame oil, teriyaki, mushroom soy and a collection of those true Jamaican spices. The marinade darkened the perimeter of the buttery tuna, while the interior remained rosy. Dotted the dish were papaya and mango coulis while a wasabi mash brought the dish to life. Dover Sole (\$30) was an evening special, a rustic dish, the fillet lovingly stuffed with crab and a bit of breading, plumping up a usually thin fillet. Joining the dish were fingerling potatoes and calabasa squash, all in a light broth to counter the heaviness of the dish. Hutson, a maven of marine life, also does perfect pork preparation. Her Pork Tenderloin (\$28) arrived at table pre-sliced and cooked to order, tender and with just a touch of sweetness from the currants and port wine demi-glace. Joining the pork was a sweet potato hash and callaloo, called the Jamaican spinach, but much heartier and higher in iron.

Desserts were delicious Estella Perez creations, ranging from a very rich Chocolate Rainforest Terrine (\$9) of devil's food cake stuffed with a dense chocolate pistachio mousse to a lighter razor-sliced Mango Macadamia Nut Tarte Tatin (\$8) with macadamia brittle to a light and chocolaty Double Chocolate Pudding Cake (\$9).

Four years is four years too long to be away from such creative quality. I need to take the occasional time off to revisit my favorites.