



Jamaican Food and Culture

Traditional Foods and Dishes

Jamaica has a deep history of cultural integration because it was under both Spanish and British control, which brought African slaves to the island.¹ Indians and Chinese were also brought to Jamaica as cheap laborers after the abolition of slavery. This melding of cultures created numerous hybrids of religions and culinary traditions that incorporate flavors and foods from all around the world.² Many Jamaican-Americans have adapted their dietary habits and practices to mirror that of American cuisine, but there are still numerous Jamaican dishes and foods that are very popular.³ Some of which are:

- Ackee [the Jamaican national fruit].⁴
- Salt fish [kippered herring or cured cod].
- Curried goat and rice.
- Fried fish and bammy [a flat, baked bread].
- Patties [assorted fillings in flaky baked pastry].
- Turtle Soup.
- Pepper pot [Pork or beef with greens].
- Plantains.
- Rice and peas.
- Cow foot.
- Goat head.
- Jerk chicken.
- Oxtail soup.
- Liver.
- Rundown [stew with coconut milk].
- Callaloo and dumplings [green leafy vegetable with dumplings].
- Mannish water [goat intestine soup].
- Hard dough breads and pastries.
- Pimenta [allspice] and other spice blends, like jerk, make many Jamaican foods spicy.¹

Eating Practices and Traditions

Breakfast: A large breakfast consisting of a main course and some kind of root vegetable, tuber or starchy fruit is customary.¹ One may eat codfish fritters, bully beef [corned beef], salt fish, mackerel rundown [stew] or breakfast patties alongside leafy vegetables or starchy fruit. It is not uncommon for people to have dumplings, yams, potatoes, bananas or breadfruit with their breakfast.

Lunch: The same items served for breakfast can also be had for lunch. Commonly, flaky crust patties consisting of curried chicken, beef or vegetables may be had. At patty shops Jamaicans get stuffed patties and sandwiches made on coco bread, a soft, sweet roll.¹

Dinner: Jamaican dinners are cooked with intention to have company. Large meals consisting of any of the dishes listed above may be made. Scotch bonnet peppers, allspice or jerk seasoning are rubbed onto meats.¹ Additional popular items are steamed fish, curried shrimp, tripe and beans, stew pork and curry goat, on special occasions.

Dessert: Different fruits or dishes that contain fruit are common Jamaican desserts. Star apples or guavas in coconut cream, cornmeal pudding, sweet potato pudding, totos [small coconut cakes] and plantain tarts may be served.³

Coffee: The beautiful Blue Mountains of the northeastern part of Jamaica is the most popular source of Blue Mountain Coffee.⁵ Jamaican's often consume instant coffee with condensed milk or condensed sweetened coconut milk.¹

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Christmas: For many Jamaican-Americans who identify as Christian, Christmas is a time to celebrate with family and food. This special occasion may have roast ham, roast beef, curried goat, chicken, oxtail and rice and gungo peas.¹ A Jamaican-style Christmas cake is made with fruits soaked in rum, this is eaten with a drink called sorrel [hibiscus, cinnamon, cloves, ginger, sugar, orange peel and rum].¹

Easter: Also, popularly celebrated by Christian Jamaicans, Easter dinner may consist of fried or stewed fish dishes or fish escoveitched [vegetables, garlic, ginger and Jamaican spices]. A spicy bread that is eaten with cheese is called Easter Spice Bun.¹

Nine Nights: A cultural tradition intended to provide comfort for relatives of the deceased is celebrated by Jamaicans with different African religious affiliations. Jamaican white rum, bammy and fried fish is often served.¹

Traditional Health Beliefs

The severe conditions that slaves were under lead many of them to rely on their medical knowledge and practices from Africa.⁶ Many of the approaches were intricately linked to African religious beliefs. Folk medicine practitioners had to operate in secret, which limited the distinction between good and bad medicine. The harsh physical conditions of slavery also lead to the development of the farming communities and the practice of herbal medicine. People would seek medical attention from a midwife, herbalist or through Obeah [sorcery or spiritual power].⁶

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In the early 1900's, The Rockefeller Foundation provided assistance that improved social welfare and healthcare for Jamaicans. This program increased health-education, dental care, social hygiene projects, family planning, nutrition and the medical treatment of many illness that had been plaguing Jamaica.⁶

Today, it seems that many Jamaicans consult both western medical professionals and folk medical treatment for many illnesses.⁶ A treatment commonly used for cold and flus are bush teas. Unfortunately, bush teas have been found to mask the symptoms of other serious illnesses. Additionally, teas made from breadfruit tea are used to treat high blood pressure, but can cause a dangerously low drop in a blood pressure.⁶

Current Food Practices

Jamaicans prepare foods in a similar fashion to Americans, utilizing boiling, seasoning, drying, baking, drying and roasting methods.¹

Rastafarian Jamaican's avoid cooking with metals, they try not to consume canned foods, dried foods, additives or artificial coloring. Rasta's use clay and wooden cooking pots and cutlery.¹

Obesity is a major public health issue for Jamaicans and Jamaican-Americans. It should be addressed considering all of the dietary, genetic and environmental factors that contribute to individual conditions.^{1,8}

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Photos

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