

Jamaica's Culinary Roots

Jamaican cuisine is a combination of locally grown and imported ingredients, spices and flavours as well as cooking techniques that are influenced by the major ethnic groups: Tainos, Africans, Europeans, Chinese and Indians. Although there are modern pieces of equipment used in food preparation in kitchens islandwide, there are long-established processes and tools that are indigenous and traditional, which have been used in creating delicious meals for generations. Some utensils such as the Dutch Pot continue to be a popular in Jamaican households. Others such as the yabba are waning in popularity and are considered to be heirlooms rather than cooking tools. Identified here are some of the traditional cooking tools and methods, their places of origin of and the materials used to make these tools.

Cooking Equipment

Jamaican cooking amenities have evolved from open wood fuelled fires to high-end modern gas and electric ranges with ovens. However, some households are still using the traditional coal stove to prepare daily family meals.

Barbacoa - The Barbecue

The original Jamaican barbecue is a Taino invention. The now widely used word "barbecue" is derived from the French word, *babrecot*, which is itself a corruption of the Arawak¹ word, barbacoa, meaning "heated sticks". The *barbacoa* was made of heated pimento wood on a raised platform and was used to "jerk" wild pigs. The barbacoa is no longer used for jerking meat in Jamaica and has been replaced by metal drums customised for slow-cooking meats.



Coal Stove

The coal stove is a small charcoal fuelled cooker with a basin-like top covered by a flat metal grill attached to a long hollowed cylindrical foot. Similar to a single cooktop, the coal stove was used to cook a wide range of foods. Meats could be placed directly on the grill of the coal stove or on sticks laid across the top of the stove to be grilled or smoked. Pots that were usually round and blackened were positioned on coals for cooking. The coal stove is still a primary cooking device for some Jamaican families, especially when roasting breadfruit. Over time, the coal stove has lost its prominence to kerosene, gas and electrical cooking appliances. The cooker was introduced to Jamaica by Dutch traders during the period of slavery. These traders



¹ Arawak was the language of the Taino and Lokono peoples of the Caribbean.



also sold and transported essential tools used on the plantations throughout the Americas.

Cooking Utensils

Highlighted here are the long-established cooking utensils used in Jamaica.

Wooden Spoon or Turn Stick



The wooden spoon or turn stick is one of the most popular and oldest cooking utensils. Found in several cultures worldwide, it is hard to identify a single cultural maker or its origin. The spoons were easy to carve from pieces of wood. They are flat spoons or had a small dip in the middle, concave and oval-shaped with a long handle. The utensil was used for mixing ingredients when cooking or baking.

Dutch Pot/Dutchie



The Dutchie, short for Dutch Pot, is made of heavy cast iron. The Dutchie has handles on both sides and a cover. Like the coal stove, the Dutch Pot was imported

by Dutch traders from Holland in the Netherlands, hence its name. Many Jamaicans know this jingle, "Hell a top, hell a bottom, hallelujah inna di middle", which described the baking method for certain puddings in the Dutch Pot. The Pot was covered with coal or firewood facilitating the pudding being baked from the top and bottom simultaneously. The Dutchie continues to be an essential all-purpose cooking utensil used for frying, boiling and baking.

Jesta Pot

Another traditional cooking tool that was once popular was the Jesta pot or Digester. It is large and deep, made of enamel coated cast iron and fashioned with a long handle. The Jesta is used for making beef and pork pot roasts. The pot is mentioned in the first line of the poem "Roas' Turkey" by Jamaican cultural icon, the Honourable Louise Bennett-Coverley, OM, OJ, MBE.

Gal, run guh wash de Jesta pot, Ketch up de fire, Fred Tell Lou fi sen some seasoning Miss Marie Turkey dead!



² Quoted from the poem Roas' Turkey on Page 74 of Selected Poems of Louise Bennett, published by Sangster's Book Stores Limited, Kingston, Jamaica, 2003 reprint.

Tava Griddle



The tava (pronounced *tawah*) is a large, flat heavy griddle made from cast iron. This tool of Indian origin was used to cook a variety of flat breads. The tava was introduced to Jamaica in the 19th century with the arrival of East Indian indentured labourers. In Jamaica, the tava is used to make the popular unleavened flat bread, roti. This pot is still popular in many Indian homes in the island.

Karahi Pot



The Chinese karahi pot is similar to the popular Chinese wok; however, the cast-iron pot is heavier than a wok. The karahi was deep with a concave shape. The pot was used to execute a wide array of cooking techniques, including stir-frying, steaming, deep-frying, boiling and stewing. Like the East Indians, the first Chinese were indentured workers on sugar plantations in the decade following Emancipation. The karahi pot, though not a popular item in most Jamaican homes, is still an essential cooking utensil in Chinese restaurants.

Food Preparation Tools

A very significant and often time consuming element of cooking was that of food preparation. These traditional tools made the cooking process easier for many Jamaicans.

Mortar and Pestle

Mortar and pestle are a set of utensils, of a wooden bowl shaped vessel (the mortar) which holds ingredients that are crushed by the club-like stick (the pestle). The mortar was often home-made, hollowed out vertically from a solid block of wood

such as the lignum vitae. The pair was once used for pounding foods such as corn, cocoa for chocolate, coffee, cassava and yam. Large mortars were used by farmers in the production of chocolate and coffee while smaller units were used in homes. The small mortar and pestle were used to make the West African dish, fufu.

Kreng Kreng

The kreng kreng is a wire basket or similar container hung directly over a fireplace or stove in a kitchen. It was suspended from the roof to absorb smoke from the fire. Smoking is traditionally used to preserve and cure meat and fish. During the 19th century, Christmas ham was made by curing pork in a kreng kreng. Other names for the kreng kreng were kreng-kre and hangkra.

³ A wok was a bowl-shaped frying pan used typically in Chinese cookery.



Bammy Press and Hoop



The Bammy is a flat round bread made from cassava flour and was a staple in the Taino diet. It remains an important food item in Jamaica today. To make bammy, two tools are essential: the bammy press and the hoop. The making of cassava bread in Jamaica still follows the same method of the Tainos. The skin of the bitter cassava is peeled or scraped off and the tuber is grated. The pulp is put into a bammy press to extract the poisonous juice. The remaining dried mass, cassava flour, is sifted to remove lumps. The small circular bread is made by placing the cassava flour, encased by the bammy hoop, on a hot metal griddle or baked in a cast-iron pot. A popular local meal is bammy with escoveitched fish.

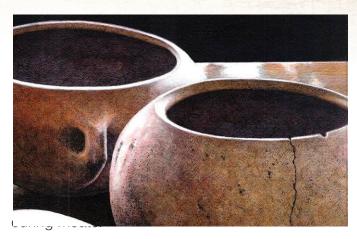
Storage Vessels

In many homes today there are airtight plastic containers used to store food and water. However there are still some homes in which traditional and locally produced vessels such as calabash bowls perform the same function.

Yabba

Yabba, an earthenware vessel of West African origin, was used for a wide range of domestic

purposes, especially for storing water, cooking and serving food. Various types and sizes of yabbas were once made. In Jamaica, yabba refers to the large glazed clay bowls used for mixing cakes and puddings as well as for seasoning, salting and



Calabash

The *Crescentia cujete* is a small tree which bears a large round or oval-shaped fruit on its trunk or main branches. This fruit is known locally as calabash or "gourdy". The calabash is also called opo squash, bottle gourd or long melon throughout the Latin American and Caribbean region. The calabash, when emptied and dried, is used for making dishes, spoons, basins, plates and drinking vessels.





Food Preparation Methods

Food preparation techniques include baking, boiling, coddling, frying, pickling, steaming and vacuum filling. And in Jamaica, there are two innovative traditional culinary preparation methods — jerk and banana leaf wraps.

Jerk



The original Maroons, the formerly enslaved Tainos and Africans who fled oppression during the Spanish-English conflict for possession of the island in 1655, were the creators of the jerk method. The Maroons developed a blend of herbs, spices, hot peppers and pimento leaves which they used when cooking the wild pigs they captured in the Blue Mountains. The spicy pork dish was slow-cooked on the barbacoa of heated pimento wood. Nowadays 'jerk' is applied to a type of seasoning or marinade for meats and is one of Jamaica's most celebrated contributions to global cuisine.

Versatile Banana Leaves

The banana leaves are used as a traditional material in food preparation. The leaves were singed, and then wrapped around a pudding mixture to make duckunoo, tie leaf or blue draws because a blue tint was transferred from the leaves to the small individual portions when heated. The main ingredients of the duckunoo were grated corn or cornmeal thoroughly mixed with coconut milk, sugar and spices. It could be boiled or baked in the oven. It was then stored and served in the banana leaf wrappings. Banana leaves are also used as natural sheets to set the popular Jamaican sweet treat of caramelised coconut known as coconut drops.



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