

Worldly Delights: St. Croix



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Along with the aquamarine waters we imagine when we think of the Caribbean, or the lush, less-travelled tropical groves inland, the islands also have no shortage of great cooks. Their food may feature **floral black peppercorns**, **sweet curries** with a long African and Asian lineage, and **fruits** as sumptuous and rich as moist pieces of tender meat.

To honour Caribbean fare, St. Croix stages an annual **Food and Wine Experience**, an elegant, week-long bacchanal organized into imaginative and ambitious programs that bring together chefs, vintners, restaurateurs and epicures.

Celebrating its 10th anniversary in April, the festival begins with a three-restaurant crawl for a wine-matched course at each. **Champagne** accompanies dessert to make the meal's finale even grander.

Difficult choices begin to emerge on the second and third evenings. There are two wine dinners hosted by another two restaurants, and on the third day there's a chef's cooking demonstration that brings to mind a twist on an old adage: you can present a gastronome with numerous opportunities to eat inspired meals, or you can teach her to make them herself and enjoy the experience again and again.

Then comes the jewel in the crown of the food festival: a cooking competition representing 55 island restaurants from **St. Croix**, **St. Thomas**, **St. John**, **Water Island**, **Puerto Rico** and **Tortola**.

Taking a prize for one of his plates is one of St. Croix's shining culinary lights, **Brian Wisbauer**, executive chef of **Zebo's Wine Bar and Restaurant**.

Gastronomy and eco-farming make the tiny island of St. Croix a serious contender in the culinary world
Stephanie Ortenzi

Wisbauer is a New Jersey native who cut his teeth cooking in Manhattan eateries before making St. Croix his home. Wisbauer brings an adventurous sensibility to his cooking. He gets a lot of attention for his truffled macaroni 'n' cheese, but his true strength is his use of indigenous ingredients, like the papaya and local honey in his dish for another cooking competition earlier in the month. Wisbauer crusts **red snapper** with grated **cassava**, and stews it with **tomato**, **coconut water** and local **honey**. The finishing touches to this plate are a classical French-inspired **quenelle** made of **chicken** and **papaya**, and what he calls 'egg salad,' essentially a cream-rich **frittata**; julienned, tossed with herbs and dusted with toasted coconut, with the fish's braising liquid as its dressing.

On the fifth day comes the **Cork & Fork** series of wine dinners. It's worth noting the jaw-dropper first, the coveted \$1,000 per plate dinner priced to match the calibre of the food, wine and venue, and the company you'll be keeping during dinner. This past April, guests broke bread with Iron Chef **Kevin Rathbun** from Atlanta, and Mondavi vintner **Gustavo Gonzalez** from Napa.

The next two Cork & Fork dinners are held in private homes, and they sell for \$500 or \$750 per plate, once again reflecting the luxury of both the ingredients and the venue.

Finally, for \$250 per plate, dinner is served at the **Creque Dam Farm**, in the 84-square-mile island's northeast, arrived at by way of a winding drive through a

rainforest. The organic farm has 100 acres of rolling hills, and it's the heart and soul of the **Virgin Islands Sustainable Farm Institute**, which calls St. Croix home.

Appropriately, both the institute and the farm are completely solar powered and off the grid. The farm takes on interns and apprentices who come to learn about sustainability. Forestry, community-shared agriculture, food production, environmental chemistry, gravity irrigation and biodiesel technology are some examples of the expertise on the institute's team.

Founder **Ben Jones** got started with his own five acres of chilies in his native Georgia. He also eco-farmed extensively in Ecuador and Cuba. Jones began planting on St. Croix in 2003, while developing the institute's infrastructure as a learning institution and an agricultural and ecotourism hub. The institute offers U.S. college-accredited studies in anthropology, ecology, forestry, and soil and crop sciences.

On the culinary map of the St. Croix Food and Wine Experience, Creque Dam Farm offers something you can't get anywhere else. In the case of a Cork & Fork dinner, there's gastronomy with the surround-sound of a rainforest. Apart from the food festival, the institute hosts a 'farm stay' in a private solar-powered cabana constructed from local sustainable wood. There is of course a gastronomic component: a romantic meal in the field, prepared by a chef. The Caribbean gets its due credit for the richness of its island beauty, and the meal tastes simply delicious.