



Photo: Magda Biernat

Caribbean Food and Wine highlights local talent

By Neal Turnage

The [Gansevoort Turks and Caicos](#) couldn't have been a better end point for the [Caribbean Food and Wine Festival's](#) Gourmet Safari. Stately gossamer white curtains billowed in the poolside breeze at the luxury Caribbean resort as an intimate group dived into Gansevoort [Stelle Restaurant](#) chef Madhi Eghnam's chocolate soil with yoghurt sponge and vanilla lime marshmallows dessert.

The relaxed, refined setting and emphasis on local talent perfectly captured the essence of the Caribbean Food and Wine Festival now in its third year.

It also captured what sets this festival apart from its Caribbean culinary travel event competitors, [Cayman Cookout](#) and the [Barbados Food & Wine & Rum Festival](#). "The level of sophistication is high, yet celebrating local chefs keeps it from being pretentious," noted a Gansevoort guest.

An interesting twist to the standard culinary travel formula, but no accident. Food wars between Caribbean luxury resorts and Caribbean culinary travel events these days is all about finding the right angle (translation: celebrity chefs) then moving in to lure globe trotting epicurean guests.

Ironically it was celebrity chef [Marcus Samuelsson](#) who advised Caribbean Food and Wine Festival co-chairman Nikheel Advani to take the opposite approach, to "keep it real" by spotlighting the locals. Which, says Advani, who came to the island after running Raffles Hotel in Singapore, made sense.

"When I first arrived in Turks and Caicos [to run Grace Bay Resorts] I could recommend two restaurants," said Advani. "Now I can recommend 20. The talent is here. You don't have to go looking for it."

Advani has taken his unorthodox food and wine festival formula one step further. Rather than pile cash into participating properties and sponsors, he's kept events like wine and cheese pairing seminars intimate (30 people) and made the festival a non-profit.

All Caribbean Food and Wine Festival proceeds, (Advani estimates the Festival generates approximately \$50k from an estimated 500 guests) benefit the island's Little Chef program, which trains aspiring teenage chefs. Throughout the year the kids work with local talent such as Gansevoort's Eghnam and Grace Bay's perennial effervescent chef Wolfgang Von Weiser.

Still, Advani's not averse to sprinkling a few "names" here and there to build the interest. [Momofuku](#) celebrity pastry chef Christina Tosi kept it local (and simple) at the welcome dinner with a pineapple upside down cake (though threw in her Crack Pie option for diehards).



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Wine enthusiasts were treated to an unexpected experience at the festival's "Women in Wine" luncheon where "Top Chef" contestant [Tiffany Derry](#) presided over a lunch with Nelson Mandela's granddaughter, Tukwini Mandela.

"Wine mirrors our family's story," said Mandela of the six-year-old South Africa based [House of Mandela Wines](#), whose collection includes a stainless steel fermented Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz. "There's challenge and struggle in the production. And there's hard work, which speaks to the ideals of our ancestors."

What captivated Mandela during her wine presentations was how a festival, still in its infancy, had become so international so quickly. "I've met people from around the world, as far away as Malaysia. That tells you something about the level of what's going on here."

Must try's:

[Da Conch Shack](#): Beachside conch shack (literally) with fresh conch and rum punch.

[Jammin Gelato](#): Housemade with island flavors (some spiked with spirits).

[Somewhere Cafe](#): Beachside breakfast, lunch and dinner, (punchy cocktails, too), fresh and eclectic -- and a magnificent sunset view from the rooftop.

Chocolate sea salt by chef [Wolfgang Von Weiser](#).

[Stelle](#): Fine dining, fresh local catch in a modern, ultra dreamy poolside setting with DJ Friday nights.