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22

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Worldly Delights: Cayman Cookout

Federica Maraboli feasts on the culinary treasures of Grand Cayman



Muddling drinks at the Ritz's poolside mixology lounge

Nestled like diamonds in the turquoise Caribbean Sea, less than 500 miles south of Miami, are the well known – if somewhat secretive – **Cayman Islands**. With their reputation as a major offshore finance centre, the Cayman Islands also have other benefits, perhaps the best of which is the culinary expertise that **Grand Cayman** offers its visitors, celebrated during the annual **Cayman Cookout festival**.

Now in its third year, this four-day food extravaganza is hosted by the **Ritz-Carlton** and resident celebrity chef **Eric Ripert**, whose restaurant **Blue** is the region's finest and only AAA Five Diamond award-winner (many may recognize Ripert from **Le Bernardin** – one of only five restaurants in New York to be awarded three Michelin stars – where he is the co-owner and chef). Each year, Ripert invites some of his personal friends – a select roster of world-famous chefs, sommeliers and culinary professionals, including chef and raconteur **Anthony Bourdain** of **No Reservations**; **Food & Wine's Gail Simmons**; chef **David Chang** of **Momofuku** and sommelier/author **Anthony Giglio**,

to name a few, to entertain, demonstrate, cook for and schmooze with the local and visiting gastronomes. Earlier this year, I was one of those lucky attendees to experience this epicurean bacchanal firsthand.

'Barefoot elegance' is definitely the vibe in Grand Cayman; at the Friday evening opening event, shoes and sandals were left at the Ritz-Carlton's 'shoe concierge' (nobody needs to worry about their Choo's taking a walk without them) as the guests stepped onto **Seven Mile Beach**. Stations were set up with local chefs who served exquisitely fresh conch and grilled lobster (yes, I had seconds), lamb and certified Angus beef – not to mention a selection of desserts that made the word 'decadent' seem downright prudish. All this was accompanied by a variety of spirits including champagne, wine, beer and of course, Tortuga rum. But this night was merely an *amuse-bouche* of things to come. Like trying to choose from a menu loaded with tempting selections, deciding which events to attend over the next few days proved challenging.



Guests enjoy the cultural showcase



Friday morning, after a de rigueur walk on the beach gazing at the impossibly blue water, I started with a cooking demonstration by chef **Grant Achatz**, the American wunderkind known for his molecular gastronomy skills, who shot to culinary fame before the age of 30. His Chicago restaurant **Alinea** has won numerous awards, including 'Best Restaurant in America' – twice – from *Gourmet* and the AAA Five Diamond award. Apart from his aromatic lobster and pineapple dish made with dry ice, what impressed – and touched – me most was his personal story. Achatz was diagnosed with stage four cancer of the tongue in 2007, losing his sense of taste due to radiation therapy. That he adapted and still creates delectable dishes is testament to his innate passion and skill.

Next up was a cooking demonstration by Eric Ripert, who prepared a sumptuous curried red snapper right on the beach and easily charmed the crowd with his culinary savoir faire and French accent. Sunset rum tasting on a pirate ship and five-course dinner at the Brasserie rounded out the day, which included a delicious pumpkin ravioli with almond butter sauce by chef Cindy Hutson, and a perfectly grilled sirloin with caramelized onions and local greens by Michael Schwarz, owner and executive chef of **Michael's Genuine Food & Drink** in Miami (and now **Camana Bay**).

Day two was a whirlwind of tasting and touring. A morning catamaran trip to **Stingray City** with Eric Ripert provided

an opportunity to play with stingrays in their natural habitat before Ripert prepared tuna tartare with wasabi right on the boat. Lunch was at the luxurious **Caribbean Club's Luca** restaurant: a five-course meal hosted by renowned wine expert, journalist and author Anthony Giglio, who tutored the wine pairings and entertained with funny anecdotes from his Italian childhood.

January is officially the Caymans' culinary month and the pinnacle event, coinciding with the Cookout, is **Taste of Cayman, Food and Wine Festival** at Camana Bay. Camana Bay is a stunning mixed-use development based on New Urbanist principles, where people can live, work and play, and its **Town Centre** is a lively pedestrian hub of shopping, food and entertainment. Reminiscent of Europe, its high-end retail, entertainment facilities and chic 'street-side' restaurant patios and lounges attract all ages. Various wine, beer and spirits booths were set up among the food tastings for up to 60 of the top restaurants, as well as a VIP courtyard lounge sponsored by Veuve Clicquot. The mouthwatering scent of freshly grilled meats and fish wafted through the air and although dinner would soon be served at the **Bourdain Beach BBQ** at **Calico Jacks**, I couldn't help but sample the grilled beef on roasted shallot whipped potatoes served at **Abacus**, a trendy restaurant and bar/lounge. Don't miss this

spot for dinner – and later claim one of its comfortable sofas on the patio to enjoy a cocktail and the sophisticated local scene.

The Cookout wrapped up on Sunday, first with a lavish brunch held at the Ritz, a veritable feast including local fish, sushi and caviar. Two local chefs competed in a cook-off with a mystery basket of ingredients, judged by six star chefs including Ripert, Bourdain and David Chang, for an all-expenses paid trip to New York City and *Food & Wine's* **Best New Chef** event. A poolside 'mixology lounge' in the afternoon was followed by a nine-course gala dinner at Blue, where each of the celeb chefs prepared a main dish.

The next Cayman Cookout is scheduled for January 13–16, 2011 and Canadian restaurant star **Susur Lee** is one of the chefs confirmed on the roster. Ticket prices for events range from \$75 to \$600 and packages will also be available – visit www.caymanislands.ky/cookout. ▣

Getting there

West Jet will offer direct flights to Grand Cayman from Toronto Pearson in November; three times weekly. Air Canada offers direct and connecting flights to Grand Cayman throughout the year.



Abacus, Camana Bay Town Centre