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New Ethnicities: Caribbean Cuisine and Identity

Caribbean identity is constructed and affirmed in various ways, including the food production and consumption of its peoples. Caribbean cuisine and Caribbean food products have traveled globally with emigrants of the Caribbean. In fact, contemporary Caribbean cuisine is born from the immigration of people from various cultures, ethnicities, and nations to the islands and the effect indigenous culture, as well as flora and fauna, had upon previous styles of cuisine. The diversity of Caribbean cuisine reflects the diversity of the environment; the bounty of the land, ocean and air; as well as the diversity of the human population.

In the Washington, D.C., area, Caribbean food is presented in restaurants as a unified regional cuisine with predominantly similar menus depending on the size and type of the establishments (ranging from corner stores and bakeries to dine-in restaurants). Using cultural theory to analyze menus and restaurant design at seven Washington eateries, this paper argues that Caribbean cuisine in D.C. is actually a limited selection of Caribbean food (both traditional and contemporary) driven partly by marketing and consumer demand among the non-Caribbean population. This results in a unified front of a regional cuisine that obscures the diversity of regional and national cuisine.

Contemporary Caribbean food has borrowed ingredients, recipes, and traditions from a variety of cultures, but the unification of these cultures within one regional identity and experience has also influenced these recipes to evolve in a Caribbean (and Vincentian, Jamaican, Trinidadian, Barbadian, etc.) context, creating a unique version and incorporation of food traditional to different ethnic, cultural, and national cuisines. Through analysis of the availability
of various dishes served in Caribbean identifying establishments, this paper analyzes what is presented as Caribbean food and explores the history of these ingredients and dishes in connection with various regional, ethnic, and national cuisines.

Postmodern culture and identity theory recognizes the ability of the consumer or receiver to appropriate products, take them out of their previous context, and inscribe them with new meaning through their use in the individual's life, noting particularly the influence of colonization, neo-colonization, and globalization upon groups of people with various identities. The individual is a "de-centered subject" who doesn't think of self in historical terms but as a postmodern or contemporary self of identities that are continually reworked and remade (Kumar 147). Food consumption can be viewed as a 'third space' where individuals recognize various aspects of social identity within structurally defined categories like race, gender, and class, as well as identities based on regional, national, and political boundaries (Langmann and Scatamburlo 128). Many societies still struggle with the negative characteristics associated with modernity, such as capitalist exploitation and social inequality. This third space can be manipulated by marginalized and displaced communities to fuse aspects of personally traditional ideologies and their new local-regional experience. Over time, with continual affirmation, these new identities are essentially a contemporary equivalent to what Back refers to as "new ethnicities" (62). This "cultural turn" of new culture theory focuses on identity as highly pluralistic and complex (Bennett 52).

Cultural production and culture in postmodern theory are understood as social constructions that are constantly being redefined. The multiple identities associated with Caribbean cuisine create a new identity maintained through Caribbean cuisine, where dishes,
ingredients and cooking styles are taken out of the context of other identities and utilized to affirm regional Caribbean identity. Contemporary social and cultural theorists view the individual as the core of cultural meaning and actions, although both producers and consumers play a part, because after a product or image has been produced the consumer chooses to use it and by using it inscribes it with meaning (de Certeau 31). "Rather than existing as a site of exploitation and oppression, everyday life is a site of contestation and struggles; sites on which pluralities of cultural values give rise to competing sensibilities through which individuals reflexively define themselves, their relationship to others and their place in the physical and symbolic order of things" (Bennett 54). The act of consumption is an act of self-realization; in consuming products, one is creating one's self.

This method identifies the potential of the individual to appropriate an image or product, ignore its historical meaning, and inscribe the object with new meaning in the new context (Bennett 76). What was south Indian curry, Chinese Szechuan stir fry, British Cornish pasties and West African Bambula cake (among other things) have become Caribbean curry, stir fry, beef patties and bammies because of their continued production and consumption in the Caribbean. In this framework, contemporary everyday life can be seen as a struggle to win space for the articulation of distinctive forms of identity practice (Bennett 110). In this way, Caribbean cuisine was built from the intermingling of cooking styles, dishes and ingredients indigenous to the islands and practiced by native peoples and carried to these islands with immigrants as they settled in the Caribbean.

Intersection of Cultures
Caribbean shared identity is the product of vaguely similar histories of the intersection of indigenous peoples, colonizers, slaves, and indentured servants, and particularly the struggle for freedom and independence. European exploration of the Americas and colonization led to the creation of a society in which individuals and groups of people of Caribbean Indigenous, Dutch, French, Spanish, Portuguese, British, African, Chinese and Indian heritage interacted. The combination of these cultures in one regional area created a global kitchen, or “positive form of (multi)cultural hybridity,” in which several cultures normally segregated from one another each other shared food culture as one way of intermingling (Ashley 98).

The initial food culture of the Caribbean was defined by natural availability (varying island to island) and the use of these foods by indigenous peoples, particularly the Arawak and the Carib people. Native plants included a diversity of species of herbs, fruits, and vegetables, like chili peppers, ananas (pineapples), sweetsop (sugar apple), soursop, rose plum, cassava (yucca), batata (sweet potato), pumpkin, coconut, and mauby (Grossman 27). Native edible animals included the abundance of the ocean such as whelk, conch, shrimp, grouper, lobster, blackfish, tuna, snapper, shark, whale, and dolphin, as well as species of the land, water, and sky such as crawfish, land crab, coney (rabbits), various birds and wild boars (Grossman 27). Many of these plants and the various local seafood species, especially those unavailable in North American climates, are the main or showcased ingredients in what is presented in D.C. as authentic Caribbean cuisine.

With the arrival of European powers in the Caribbean, many voyagers noted the variety of species and their use by indigenous peoples. With Columbus's second voyage, a physician noted the use of what he termed “chili peppers” by natives to flavor dishes, aid in digestion and
preserve foods (as it is now isolated and used by the modern food industry) (Harris 1). Unfamiliar with the plant and noting similarities in flavor to the Asian peppercorn familiar to the Spanish, the plant was called “chili pepper” (Harris 1). Early invaders renamed many species, including pineapple which was dubbed “la pina de las Indias” (the pine of the Indies) by Columbus in 1493 on the island of Guadeloupe, where local Caribs referred to it as ananas (Harris 2). Explorers and colonizers also renamed the islands and waterways, initially calling the area the West Indies, because of Columbus's hope that he was close to India and its bounty of spices (Harris 3).

Colonizers, though few in number, drastically affected every aspect of Caribbean life, including the cuisine. They hailed from multiple home ports and lands; many islands experienced the arrival of explorers and colonizers of Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English heritage, as well as crews from other colonized lands. Initial changes included the introduction and breeding of domesticated animals, the importation of other tropical flora and fauna, cooking styles from the wide range of geographical areas, ethnicities, cultures, tribes, and nations Britain colonized or had contact with, and of course human trafficking and the movement of people through the Atlantic Slave Trade and indentured servitude. Colonizers regulated food products brought to the islands and the types and quantity of food available, and on all islands the natural environment was used to supplement diets.

Initial flora transplants included orange seeds and saplings brought by Columbus, as well as breadfruit shoots brought from Tahiti by the infamous Captain Bligh (Harris 3). With the colonizers came large-scale agricultural production on plantations, primarily a monoculture of sugar cane or banana. Large tracts of land were blazed, leveled, and planted, supplying a large
portion of the world's bananas, sugar, and sugar products including molasses and rum. This transformation of the landscape also affected the biodiversity of the island, perhaps bringing entire species to extinction, destroying habitats and ecosystems, and limiting land available to native wildlife (affecting the carrying capacity of the islands). While the food prepared for colonizers rarely was consumed by anyone else, dishes cooked by slaves and indentured servants were learned and found their way into the food of the masses (although this food was not necessarily a product of the colony's governing nation). Among specific dishes brought during colonization and eaten in the Caribbean today are beef patties (a unique twist on British Cornish Pasties), black pudding (blood pudding), baked goods and sweets (such as tarts, bread and rice puddings, pancakes, black cake, rolls, and breads), and smoked herring (Carmichael 13).

Colonizers brought with them domesticated pigs, cows, chickens, and horses. Although slaves and indentured servants rarely were able to eat any of the popular products of these animals, many of the unwanted parts of the animals were given to slaves and servants in rations and used in their own cooking. For instance, pig tails are often called for in various versions of Callaloo soup (Harris 31). The muscle-meat of these domesticated animals is popularized today in Western cuisine and acts as a bridge between the foreign flavors of Caribbean dishes to average D.C. Caribbean food consumers and their culinary expectations. While pig tails or knuckles are not found on the menus of D.C. Caribbean food establishments, the same sauces and flavors are applied to chunks of muscle-meat from cows, chicken, or pigs.

Colonizers and their support of the Atlantic Slave Trade inadvertently brought to the Caribbean the culinary traditions of enslaved Africans, as well as bringing African tropical flora and fauna. The Caribbean was settled for the cultivation of tropical climate crops such as sugar
cane and banana. The Caribbean climate is essentially perfect for growing the plants, but it lacked sufficiently large and cooperative native populations for labor in the hot, strenuous, and dangerous conditions of sugar cane processing, as well as the difficult conditions of growing and harvesting the crops. The majority of the slaves that were kidnapped, perhaps purchased, and bound for the Caribbean islands were to produce these crops and the resulting products, including highly profitable processed sugar, molasses, and rum products, as well as the banana fruit itself. Bananas, sugar, molasses, and rum became important foods in the Caribbean, where sugar and fruits are used in both sweet and savory dishes and rum is an icon that takes on various forms (including drinks, confections and marinades).

The African Diaspora is connected not necessarily to a group of people from a shared place, as slaves were kidnapped from various tribes and geographical locations, but is based on the collective memory of the slave trade and the experience of slavery. Before the slaves were brought to the Caribbean their diet included cassava, cornmeal, yams (often confused with batatas), plantains, and bananas. Bambula cake (also known as bammy) is a type of cassava bread still eaten in various areas of West Africa, as well as in the Caribbean and other areas to which migrants moved on. Versions of West African Foo-Foo (cooked and mashed plantain, cassava, green banana or yam) are also staple inexpensive side-dishes with meals, at times making the difference between going hungry or eating a meal for individuals with low-income. They were consumed as an affirmation of Caribbean food identity, and they also made it to the global table and the presentation of Caribbean cuisine in the D.C. area.

From the region of West Africa came pigeon pea bushes, cumin, okra, ackee trees, banana and plantain trees, and a species of domesticated goat. Pigeon peas find their way into a
myriad of dishes, most notably with rice (various forms of pelau, rice, and peas) and stews. Ackee trees produce a red-skinned fruit that after some processing produces pegs of yellow flesh, that when cooked resemble scrambled eggs. Ackee and salt fish is the national dish of Jamaica, however, in the United States the importation of ackee was banned until 2000 because of the danger of poison from unripe fruit. This ban limited the introduction of ackee to non-Caribbean (particularly non-Jamaican) consumers in the United States. Only one establishment in D.C. includes ackee on the menu, served with salt fish. In this instance, the D.C. concept of Caribbean food is limited by import embargoes and other legal regulations.

A cooking style that evolved from the lifestyle of slavery was boiling one pot of food all day. Away from one's cooking fire, working on the plantations from early morning to evening, slaves had little time to care for their personal needs and meals. In combination with tough proteins (the rejected animal parts from the plantation house), lack of personal possessions (like cookware), and the toxicity or inedibility of various plants without long processing (bitter cassava, dasheen), slaves often opted for slow-cooking meals that would simmer throughout the day as one worked (Rubenstein 74). Quick-fried food was also utilized when permitted by the food supply. Cornmeal was utilized to create types of quick cooking breads like festivals (thin lumpy shaped fingers of corn dumplings, deep-fried in oil) or boiled in a liquid-based meal (stew or soup). Slaves were sometimes given small plots of land for cultivation of plants to be used for personal consumption. In these plots Africans were able to supplement their diets, grow familiar plants native to West Africa, domesticate local species, interbreed native and foreign species, and thereby fortify the space in which West African cuisine, flora, and cooking traditions contributed to Caribbean food culture.
After the emancipation of the slaves, colonizers needed another source for free or extremely low-cost labor. Utilizing indentured servitude, plantation owners employed small numbers of emigrants from China and eventually India. Workers often were under contract to pay off the bill of passage. With Chinese immigrants came rice and noodles, various types of greens (cabbage and spinach), taro (dasheen or eddoes), and many seasonings and spices, as well as stir-fry dishes and the culinary tradition of sweet and sour (Grossman 26). China is a highly regionalized country, with distinct differences between regions that are reflected in local cuisine, particularly the daily food of the masses. Indentured servants, like the slaves before them, were given small plots for personal farming, and in this way Chinese vegetables were introduced into the culinary landscape. Chinese immigrants opened many businesses, with two particularly examples prominent being restaurants and food services presenting various Chinese dishes, ingredients, and traditions to the entire community, particularly affecting the extent of race segregation and intermingling of culture, race, and cuisine. Caribbean restaurants in D.C. serve Chinese-influenced everyday dishes, mostly vegetable-based stir-fry dishes, different from the elaborate special occasion dishes popularized in Chinese food establishments in the United States. Within Caribbean cuisine, to the unknowing consumer, Chinese influence can go unnoticed.

The next source of labor was India (a British colony). With the Indian immigrants came a variety of ingredients, dishes, and cooking styles that remain distinct within Caribbean cuisine, most often by retaining the traditional terms for the dishes, most notably pelau (also known as pilaf), chutneys, dal puri, and rotis, as well as curried meats, legumes and/or vegetables. Other additions included varieties of mango, eggplant, ginger, and other spices. India is also a highly regionalized country with distinct cuisines varying by area; this is reflected in the types of Indian
food that are found in Caribbean cuisine. Pelau is a daily dish consumed by many because of its simplicity, ease for substitution, and affordability. Rice and peas (also rice and beans) are popular varieties of this staple, often found as a side dish (in D.C. restaurants as well), although many pelaus serve as the basis or entirety of the meal and often include meat (cubed pork, beef, salted fish, or other seafood) in addition to vegetables and rice.

Dal puri and other rotis are popular as additions to the meal or as snacks. Although a roti can be as simple as a fried lentil-stuffed bread, it can also be as complex as the dish roti, a thin fried bread wrapping a large amount of a curried medley of seafood, meat (traditionally with bones), legumes and/or vegetables. Rotis are a standard at Caribbean restaurants in D.C., often with more than five available variants (including boneless and vegetarian varieties). In these instances, the option of boneless is often for the benefit of those unfamiliar with Caribbean cuisine, with the restaurants adopting culinary styles that conform to the consumer's understanding of what is an acceptable product. Curry is universally available as well; multiple varieties are presented at every D.C. Caribbean restaurant.

The integration of these various cultures and people of indigenous Arawak and Carib, British, French, Dutch, Spanish, various African tribes, Chinese, and East Indian heritage has created a unique cultural and culinary scene. While emigrants from every culture contributed traditional ingredients and dishes from their cultures, the combination of these ingredients and dishes creates a unique culinary fusion. Ingredient availability has created unique variations of traditional dishes that can only be found in the Caribbean. The popular Jamaican patty is a Jamaican twist on traditional British Cornish pasties filled with beef and potato. While Jamaican beef patties rarely contain potato, recipes often include chili peppers and sometimes soy sauce,
both ingredients never found in traditional British Cornish pasties and produced by other national traditions and geographic areas. What is now termed contemporary Caribbean cuisine is a spectrum of dishes and ingredients that have migrated from many areas of the world, intermingling to create a complex and varied regional cuisine.

The various peoples inhabiting the Caribbean during this time of high immigration rates introduced their food identities to others, and, through cohabitation, intermingling, and the passing of generations, a Caribbean people evolved. They adopted new styles of cooking, flavors, and ingredients, as well as dishes, learning about them in a Caribbean context and ascribing them with meanings associated with Caribbean identity, in contrast to their native or traditional regional or cultural identities. In this way a new ethnicity was produced, where the compilation and integration of these various identities is now recognized as Caribbean cuisine.

**Caribbean Cuisine in D.C.**

The Caribbean population in D.C. does not create a driving consumer market; therefore, appealing to people of other cultures, ethnicities, and nationalities is essential for these establishments to survive. (There is a high turnover rate for restaurants; recently there were three Caribbean food restaurants with out-of-business signs on Georgia Avenue alone). Establishments attempt to supply Caribbean food for expatriates and tourists who are already familiar with the dishes while appealing to those who may never have eaten a Jamaican patty or roti but expect it to taste good according to their own personal criteria for good food. One possible approach to the
problem of appealing to consumers with diverse and varying tastes is to add other options to the menu, or be able to moderately change dishes to order.

Few establishments in D.C. serve solely Caribbean food; many are advertised with West African, American, or Latino (and Spanish-speaking Caribbean) food influences. In the menus of the establishments, there is only one mention of French-speaking Caribbean nations, whereas Spanish-speaking nations are explicitly noted, often in contrast to English-speaking Caribbean nations. Establishments showcasing food from the Caribbean specifically mentioned these nations most often: Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago. Rarely mentioned on the menu (once or twice) are the nations of St. Kitts and Nevis, Guatemala, Guyana (the only English-speaking South American country and a previous colony of Britain associated strongly with the Caribbean because of history and culture), the Bahamas (actually in the Atlantic Ocean but likewise associated because of history and culture), Grenada, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. The majority of dishes in Caribbean restaurants are connected to nations that previously were colonies of Great Britain, unless specifically identified. What is presented as Caribbean food are mostly some of the dishes that are consumed in Jamaica and Trinidad, a blend of ingredients, dishes and styles cultivated through a mingling of African, Indian, Indigenous, and British cultures. Establishments that provided menus for analysis are all located within the district: Negril Eatery, Tropicana: A Jamaican Eatery, Spicy Delight, Brown's Caribbean Bakery, The Bamboo Joint Cafe, Red Ginger, and the Islander: Caribbean Restaurant and Lounge.

The menus are quite similar, with differences falling along the lines of cost and location. Red Ginger of Georgetown is among the more expensive establishments and also has a more
complex menu emphasizing fusion cooking of Caribbean, Central and South American “exotic”
flavors and gourmet culinary industry staple ingredients to appeal to foodies and not necessarily
expatriates craving the food of home, even in a regional sense. Here authenticity is presented as
ingredients and flavors from the regional area of the Caribbean and other tropical areas. Most of
the other establishments have similar menus but not necessarily the same taste and flavor. What
constitutes a vegetable roti at Bamboo Joint Cafe is different from the chanu (garbanzo bean),
potato, or chanu-potato rotis available at the Islander. This illustrates that, despite standardization
in the naming of dishes, there is variety within the Caribbean community as to what exactly goes
into the dishes; the proportion of these ingredients; and the size, consistency and shape of the
product itself.

The majority of places serving Caribbean cuisine stressed Jamaican identity specifically
(except for the Islander, with Trinidadian ties). Many of them were take-out only establishments.
It is noteworthy that many of these dishes that are mentioned as pan-Caribbean cuisines by one
venue are described as Jamaican in other menus. Often regional and national labels are used
interchangeably, such as Jamaican Jerk and Caribbean Jerk. This is most likely connected to the
fact that Jamaica is a well-known and popular island, has the largest number of English-speaking
Caribbean immigrants in the area, and so is often perceived as the origin of many dishes. This
simplification obscures the plurality and intersection of various identities when discussing
Caribbean cuisine in the same way that the term American ignores the diversity of the many
nations and regionalized cuisines of North, Central, and South America countries that range
politically from Canada to Chile. What is labeled as Caribbean cuisine is a composition of food
from multiple ethnicities, cultures, and regions, and the impact of these ingredients, dishes, and
people upon one another, resulting in a complex contemporary food culture. In turn, applying the
label “Jamaican” or “Trinidadian” as synonymous and interchangeable with the term “Caribbean” continues to obscure the complex nature of Caribbean regional cuisine.

Prominent terms available at all the establishments included jerk and barbecue meats, one pot soup meals (comprised of protein, vegetable, starch or dumpling), curry, stir-fry, roti, rice and peas (also rice and beans), mixed vegetable salads (often with cabbage), vegetable and meat patties, and macaroni pie (macaroni and cheese). Particular ingredients include rum, seafood (king fish, tuna, red snapper, oysters, crab, shrimp, cod fish, lobster), domestic meat proteins (chicken, goat, beef, oxtail, pork), tropical agricultural products (chili peppers, pineapple, mango, papaya, guava, coconut, plantain, green banana, sweet potato, pumpkin, okra, lentils, kidney beans, corn products, rice), and seasonings (curry mixes and green sauce).

The dishes represent a Caribbean cuisine that is accepted and celebrated in the D.C. area, particularly with the fusion of “exotic” seasonings, fruits and other flavors. Red Ginger adds well-known local, national, and global dishes to their menu, while the carry-out establishments also serve a variety of American-style quick food, mostly fried seafood (shrimp, king fish, etc), barbecue pork and ribs, and barbecue and spicy (jerk) wing meals that are characteristic of inner-city carry-out. Carry-out establishments present an experience similar to the food vendors in the Caribbean, offering certain foods and large snacks on the go. The more expensive Red Ginger is reminiscent of tourist spots, whereas the Islander is similar to the family-run restaurants middle-class families frequent. The consumers at these establishments differ, as location (Brightwood versus Georgetown), cost (five-dollar curry versus 28-dollar curry) and dining experience (carry-out versus sit-down) vary.
In most establishments, the Caribbean theme allows for the inclusion of certain low-class foods as long as the dishes adhere to dominant American standards for acceptable food, particularly types of meat (muscle-meat only, with oxtail and goat pushing the limits of acceptability). Most restaurants exclude some typical dishes and ingredients, with a lack of breadfruit and pelau (pilau or pilaf, both daily standards in the Caribbean, particularly for people living on low incomes), as well as fruits I have only seen in the Caribbean, such as sweetsop or golden apples. This could be an issue with availability, transportation, and distribution, and not necessarily a lack of consumer interest. Traditional one pot-meals have been supplemented with an array of standard side dishes (plantains, rice and peas or rice and beans, greens, macaroni pie, etc.) and combination platters allow consumers to eat a wide variety of tastes in a context different from that Caribbean public and private social occasions where buffet style, multiple dish availability, and food extravagance would match the composition of the entrees. Taken out of the low-income context of many individuals living in the Caribbean (particularly during colonization, chattelization and indentured servitude, and in sight of the economic inequities still affecting many nations), traditionally low-cost food is made more expensive by the cost of importing regional products in abundance in the Caribbean (seafood, fruit, etc.).

Although the majority of Caribbean food is presented as low-income food for low-income consumers, there are certainly a few establishments tailored to the middle class. Where Caribbean food is presented as moderate-income food, low-income mainstays such as pelau and traditional one-pot meals are served as parts of a substantive collection of sides and accompaniments. What is presented as typical Caribbean food is actually the food of Caribbean social functions, where many dishes come together in a potluck or celebratory manner to
comprise a varied plate of several selections, demonstrating the bounty and diversity of Caribbean cuisine and flavors.

Caribbean food in D.C. presents a diverse spectrum of flavors, ingredients and dishes that are combined in unique ways culturally specific to the different island nations from which the recipes have been brought. While national titles are often used interchangeably with the regional term Caribbean, what is presented as a unified regional Caribbean cuisine is actually quite diverse. Caribbean food in D.C. has been influenced by the local consumer and United States mainstream concepts of appropriate types of food (specifically what animals and what parts of animals are consumed) as well as stereotyped and assumed tropical flavors and dish styles associated with the Caribbean by the D.C. consumer. The complexity of these dishes is reflected in the history of the evolution of these dishes and ingredients as they migrated to the Caribbean and evolved from indigenous or migrant practices and uses to the contemporary regional cuisine presented today.

While Caribbean food establishment menus in the D.C. area may not provide information as to the historical and cultural contexts of these foods to the people of the Caribbean, with analysis they do begin to illustrate the diversity and multiplicity of its culinary heritage. Despite menu description and other ways the establishments work to describe dishes and their connection to the Caribbean, it is up to the consumer to accept the product, and to inscribe their roti, patty or red snapper with context and meaning as the Caribbean natives, colonizers and other settlers of the Caribbean utilized their cultural cuisines to create a familiar but new culinary identity.
Works Cited


