

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bush Cook, Chef Cook Will Keep You Coming Back For More, And More, And More

Culinary / **Published On October 21, 2018 12:19 PM /**

Ernice Gilbert **October 21, 2018**



ST. CROIX -- Saturday on St. Croix was just the kind of day to take a long, island-wide drive by yourself or with friends and family, soaking in the beauty of the 82 square mile piece of earth in what was one of the clearest, sunniest days of the week. What with white, sandy beaches spread about the island, and with nothing too far away from home, where's the opposition?

But while an island tour would have been a good option for many, there was an event that grabbed the attention of those who attended during the first go around in 2016 -- including this reporter -- who vowed not to miss a single one. The affair instantly built a loyal following of foodies, and the aura of the thing -- along with the personal and simple

arrangement that somehow commanded a perception of grandeur -- was unique, inviting, memorable and delicious.

Yes, the event was delicious. Don't debate me. Instead, you should make it your business to attend Bush Cook, Chef Cook, in 2019, as its organizers are promising an occasion even more imposing next year.



Chef Ricky Dean Andrews shows off his offerings during Bush Cook, Chef Cook, 2018 (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

So what's Bush Cook, Chef Cook, you ask? When posed with this question in 2016, creators Dale and Yvette Browne, owners of Sejah Farm, which is located on Casper Holstein Drive north-west of the National Guard base in Estate Bethlehem, said the Bush Cook, Chef Cook concept was simple: You take St. Croix's best chefs, caterers and home cooks "who like to brag," and place them on a farm, give these chefs a coal pot, three stones, a hole in the ground and "all the different produce that we have in the market," and let them have at it.

This year, Mr. Browne said the event is "actually a revolving around food. It's a food movement; it's a conglomerate of all the industries that are included in food production."

Mr. Browne pointed to chefs who boast a variety of cooking styles, and are eager to show these styles off. "So we partner with chefs, and we partner with those agencies who would like to see an advancement of the agriculture industry, because it doesn't just include eating food, but eating food that is healthy, eating food that is closer to you nutrition-wise that can alleviate a lot of disease, sickness, and other illness that people have."

The field at Sejah Farm used for the event was lined with three rows of tents that stretched from north to south. There, a number of chefs, some representing themselves and others on behalf of restaurants, served small portions of their best offerings. Found on some menus were exotic, locally grown tastes, along with more familiar yet unique servings.

The showstopper of yesterday's affair was Bes Craft & Cocktail Lounge's cooked pig, whose method includes digging a hole in the ground, lighting a fire with coal in the hole, wrapping a pig -- in yesterday's case a quarter of a swine -- with banana leaves, placing the pig on a coal pot mesh, covering the hole with dirt, and allowing it to cook for hours (the swine for yesterday's Bush Cook, Chef Cook remained buried for 8 hours while it cooked).



A crowd gathered when the time came to remove the cooked pig, and as the men dug and eventually removed it from the ground, onlookers cheered and clapped.

Frank Robinson, founder of Bes Craft Cocktail Lounge, spoke of Bush Cook, Chef Cook's importance to the local culinary scene. "It brings chefs in a way that ties them back to St. Croix itself. It ties them into our history, our culture, and also the use of our own natural resources," Mr. Robinson said.

Donna Decaille, a member of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, a 51-year-old nonprofit that started during the Civil Rights Movement and founded by black farmers facing discrimination, lauded the event. A native Crucian who lives in Atlanta, Georgia, Ms. Decaille traveled to St. Croix just to be a part of the experience. Because of her connections (she serves as director of communications at the nonprofit), Ms. Decaille was able to lobby support for St. Croix farmers who were struggling in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, and secured \$500 for each farmer.

It's been awesome," Ms. Decaille said of Bush Cook, Chef Cook. She spoke of the creativity of the chefs and the variety of local food available now that she did not experience when she was younger, growing up on St. Croix.

The Brownes highlighted organizations and individuals who helped in making the occasion possible, including the Department of Tourism, both Plaza Extras, the Department of Agriculture, Diageo Rum, and others. She said the event's committee will commence meetings in January 2019, as it plans for a more spectacular showing next October.



Bes Craft Cocktail Lounge chefs roasted a quarter of a pig during Bush Cook, Chef Cook, 2018. (Credit: Cruselda Roberts, VIC)

Bush Cook, Chef cook was cancelled in 2017 because of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Maria. Sejah Farm sustained widespread damage, but with the help of volunteers from the mainland, who are part of an organization benefiting farmers, immense support was provided, allowing the farm to reopen in February, 2018, according to Mr. Browne.

Yet even with all the help, there was a lot of work left to do before the farm could be fully restored, and therefore putting on Bush Cook, Chef Cook this year was still a challenge -- a challenge the Brownes were willing to take on nonetheless, noting the importance of the event and what they believe it can grow into.

"The persistence comes because we advocate for the development of agriculture in the Virgin Islands, and by doing so we've got to be resilient, relentless, and actually show those that always speak of agriculture and do nothing, that it's more than a word. It is actually life, it is social and economic development of the territory," Mr. Browne said.