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At Bush Cook, Chef Cook, Sejah Farm Promotes Self-Sustenance as Territory Continues to Import 95 Percent of Food

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Collage of pictures from Bush Cook, Chef Cook, which took place on Friday, Oct. 21 and Saturday, Oct. 22, 2022 at Sejah Farm on St. Croix. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

Twenty-five local and two guest chefs participated in Sejah Farm's Bush Cook, Chef Cook over the weekend, with the two-day event's main function being highlighting the need for food security in the territory, according to organizers.

The first Bush Cook, Chef Cook effort [kicked off in 2016](#), and the concept hasn't changed: chefs from around the island of St. Croix bring their goods and setup tents in a field at Sejah Farms located on Casper Holstein Drive north-west of the National Guard base in Estate Bethlehem.

There, they prepare their food offerings using coal pots and other traditional methods of cooking.

Dale Browne, co-founder of Sejah Farm, told the Consortium Saturday that the main focus of the event remains food security. "We want to let the Virgin Islands and everyone know that basically we're striving to provide food for the Virgin Islands. Not just Sejah Farm, but this is a collective of farmers throughout the territory. Bush Cook, Chef Cook is bringing families, friends, neighbors together on the premise of local foods and local foods only, so what we're trying to do is reverse as the bush cook the statistic of the import that is at 97 percent to at least 80 percent.. So the majority of foods that you will have at Sejah Farm's Bush Cook, Chef Cook are actually more foods coming from the Virgin Islands than outside."

According to [2019 research from the Iowa State University](#), the U.S. Virgin Islands imports between 95-99 percent of its food.

Bush Cook, Chef Cook, which started in 2016, paused in 2017 because of Hurricane Maria, [returned in 2018](#), paused again in 2020 because of the pandemic, and is now back in full force.

"Using traditional methods of cooking food, three stones, hole in the ground, make-your-own-oven, using barbecue grill to add smoked food and to prepare it in a way that is healthy," Mr. Browne said while explaining the concept. "So the only thing that is out there is the electricity just to keep the food warm for health and safety purposes. The chefs are really taking a liking to it. Hole in the ground, pull the pork out. Hole in the ground, cook a soup or stew — it's just awesome. So you have the smell of smoke, the smell of the herbs cooked together is just magnificent."

Chef Christy Brown, the owner of Taste of New Orleans with an Island Flair, said she has been on St. Croix since 2019 and specializes in bringing a taste of New Orleans to the island. Her presentation on Saturday included cajun lamb curry with a mesquite smoked apple roulade rabbit, spinach garlic rice, a medley of root vegetables stuffing for the rabbit, and mixed green salad to accompany the dish. Saturday was her first Bush Cook, Chef Cook participation.

Christ Booth and wife Jessica, the owners of Salt Great Pond Restaurant were participating in their fourth Bush Cook, Chef Cook and showcased homemade pita bread, quick pickled cucumber, charred butternut squash, soursop gravy, and braised local greens among other ingredients. Cooked items were prepared in an earthenware pot.

This year, Bush Cook, Chef Cook included two days of events, with Friday dedicated to the youth with a cook-off between elementary school students, according to Yvette Browne, Sejah Farm co-founder. On Saturday, 25 local chefs were joined by two visiting chefs, one from Jamaica and the other from Kenya to participate in the main competition.

Like her husband, Mrs. Browne stressed the need for food security in the territory. "This showcases our food security system, what we are capable of in the Virgin Islands. Everything you see here are locally grown — we have harvest from licensed farmers to back yard growers around the island and St. Thomas included. We also have some awards that we have created for our chefs. We have first place, second place, third place and of course the bragging rights," she explained. "We have some awesome trophies ready for some of those winners. This event is not just an event to come and have fun. Food sovereignty, food security and advocacy for our local farmers around the island and to feed ourselves within some capacity if the resources are there, and there are certain programs that are put in place to make sure it happens."