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Orlando Restaurant Owned by USVI Chef Wins 'Best Caribbean Restaurant' For Second Consecutive Year

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Island Thyme Caribbean Grille Executive Chef, Vern Thomnas on the left, along with an employee of the celebrated restaurant.

The Island Thyme Caribbean Grille in Orlando, Florida — owned by a Virgin Islander — has for a second consecutive year won over the taste buds of foodies in the city.

Food critics and customers from across the city of Orlando have again voted "Island Thyme" as the Best Caribbean Restaurant in the 2023 Orlando Sentinel Foodie Awards.

Every year voting is carried out in two categories: by the critics from the Orlando Sentinel, the newspaper of record for the city, and by its readers. This year, Island Thyme secured the most votes in both categories.

Vern Thomas, a native Virgin Islander born and raised on St. Thomas, says his eatery serves dishes inspired by the food and culture of the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Chef Thomas, beaming with pride at his latest win, spoke to the Consortium and reminisced about his time spent growing up in the territory. A product of the Evelyn Marcelli Elementary School and the Charlotte Amalie High School from which he graduated in 1991, Mr. Thomas says he then fell in love with the culinary arts. He spent time leading the kitchens of some of the territory's leading hotels, including stints at the Sugar Bay Resort and Spa on St. Thomas and the then Hyatt Regency on St. John.

Following hurricane Marilyn in 1996, Mr. Thomas moved to the mainland where he helped create menus for successful casual dining restaurants before deciding to open his own in 2017: Island Thyme Restaurant and Grille.

He described Island Thyme as a breath of fresh air, as it brought forward a particular aesthetic and flavor that is not at all common across the city. "For us, it's very important that we were embracing the cuisine of the USVI and helping to educate the U.S. population about VI cuisine as well, because a lot of the time, anytime they see a Caribbean restaurant, they're thinking everybody is Jamaican," Mr. Thomas told our news desk.

Island Thyme offers up excellent Virgin Islands cuisine bursting with tropical flavors, Chef Thomas said, including "johnny cakes, meat patties, conch fritters, curry chicken, a lot of different types of seafood as well." He highlighted the restaurant's notorious 'Rock City Barbeque Ribs' where the ribs are prepared with a special Guava-barbeque sauce.

He said while the award-winning establishment focused on incorporating the essence of the Virgin Islands into its dishes, he did have to adapt his menu to satisfy the palates of those on the mainland. Mr. Thomas said saltfish was one dish from home that did not do well when tested at Island Thyme.

Notwithstanding that rare miss, Chef Thomas said thus far feedback from customers and food critics in Orlando and across the U.S. have been positive.

Island Thyme is rated 4.5 stars on popular food review website Yelp.com, with several highlighting the excellent service provided by the staff.

"Five stars is just simply not enough to give this restaurant," one customer raved. "The flavor [is] what drew me in and it was so delicious."

Another reviewer gushed "This food is so good. It came out hot and fresh. The oxtail was one of the best dishes I've had in a while. So tender, savory and juicy! ... The Johnny cake was the perfect side to dip in the oxtail juice."

On the heels of this latest success, Chef Thomas hopes young food service professionals back home can be inspired to value their craft and make the appropriate investment in themselves. He is urging them to take their education and training seriously; it takes more than just knowing how to cook to become successful in the international world of cuisine, Mr. Thomas fervently believes.

Studying classical cuisine in culinary school in the United States as well as in Europe has enabled him to marry his knowledge of international culinary techniques with the flavors of home to take his skills to another level.

The 2023 Orlando Sentinel Foodie Awards nod for Best Caribbean Restaurant is just the latest for [Island Thyme Caribbean Grille](#), which has previously been featured in articles published on MSN, the Orlando Weekly, The Hungry Black Man, Black Restaurant Weeks, and others.

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