

CARIBBEAN CUISINE BY LAND & SEA

BY CAROLYN O'NEIL

Elegant Eden Rock-St.
Barths luxury hotel on
St. Jean Bay

Photo courtesy of
Eden Rock



**THEY SAY A VOYAGE
ISN'T JUST ABOUT THE
DESTINATION: IT'S ABOUT
THE JOURNEY. BUT WHY
NOT SAVOR BOTH?**

If incredible food excites you when you travel, choosing a cruise ship itinerary featuring curated culinary experiences both onboard and ashore is one of the best ways to take your taste buds. Celebrating its tenth anniversary partnering with the esteemed James Beard Foundation, Windstar Cruises maintains its commitment to haute cuisine on the high seas.

Various cruises throughout the year showcase chefs associated with the Foundation. Visiting chefs lead shore excursions to local food markets, conduct recipe demonstrations, and curate special dinners. The menus on all itineraries include courses created by James Beard Foundation chefs, dishes crafted with regional ingredients, and always an innovative selection of plant-based options. Whether you fancy a filet mignon, grilled mahi-mahi, or mushroom risotto, the ship's galley stands ready to serve. You can even take a behind-the-scenes galley tour to see how the chefs keep their kitchens shipshape.

I chose the Caribbean as my culinary classroom at sea, sailing on Windstar's *Star Pride*, one of the cruise line's all-suite yachts. Windstar's vessels host around three hundred guests or fewer, enabling them to visit exclusive ports that larger ships cannot accommodate.

SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO

The voyage from Puerto Rico to Barbados included multiple port stops to explore the vibrant and diverse cuisines of the Caribbean islands.

Before setting sail, I delved into the lively gastronomic scene of San Juan, starting with dinner at Cocina al Fondo, where traditional Puerto Rican cooking and cocktails are celebrated in a charming house and garden setting. Chef Natalia Vallejo, the 2023 James Beard Award winner for Best Chef South, states, “Fondo is a happy place, not a formal place with the people’s food.” This was an immediate culinary immersion with delicious bites of crispy tostones made with the root vegetable yuca, ceviche with fresh coconut, and roasted chicken with chayote squash.

Just a short drive from the city takes you to Frutos del Guacabo, a small farm that grows delicate microgreens for San Juan’s top chefs and offers visitors an al fresco lunch, among other experiences. Dedicated to sustainable agriculture, farmers lead guests on walking tours, allowing them to taste and smell their way through the gardens. Some plants, like mangoes and papayas, were familiar, while others, including the pineapple-like soursop and spiky red rambutan, expanded my knowledge of Caribbean produce. Even the tropical flowers tell a story. “Everything here is tied together,” said owner Effen Robles. “We use edible flowers to garnish the plates, but they also attract the bees that pollinate our farm.”

Award-winning chef Carlos Portela transforms produce from Robles’ farm into culinary masterpieces at Orujo restaurant. A semi-finalist for the 2025 Best Chef South James Beard Award, Portela is recognized for his experimental Puerto Rican tasting menus paired with similarly unusual wines. He brings the dishes to the table to explain the concept behind each carefully crafted course. “Three components create harmony to become one. It’s the wine, the textures, and the ingredients. And it must look good to harmonize.” Be prepared to slowly savor this intimate dining experience, and as the hours pass (yes, hours), another harmony emerges as guests are encouraged to visit the small kitchen and get to know each other during their evening together.

ALL ABOARD!

What better welcome aboard than a glass of Champagne and an invitation to settle into spacious staterooms before a week of exploring Caribbean islands that are scattered like jewels across the sea? With visions of seafood ahead, I went in the opposite direction for my first dinner in the ship’s main dining room, Amphora, and ordered the Beef Wellington, perfectly medium rare, served with bright steamed vegetables and mashed potatoes. Bon voyage indeed.

SAINT THOMAS

The first morning presented a bounty of breakfast options, ranging from watermelon and beet

smoothies to smoked salmon bagels. This was followed by a catamaran and snorkeling excursion to the stunning beaches of St. John. Back on board, lunchtime on the open deck featured crisp salads and grilled chicken accompanied by various barbecue sauces and local Caribbean beers on ice—all while enjoying the view of the turquoise sea.

SAINT BARTHELEMY

Good morning, mega-yacht neighbors! *Star Pride* was the only cruise ship in port, and the vessel’s swim platform was open for anyone who wanted to dive directly into the deep blue waters of this fabulous French island.

Today’s agenda included a very special visit to Eden Rock-St. Barths for a tour of the resort’s recently refreshed public spaces, spa, and sumptuous seaside suites. A lunch of local spiny lobster salad with avocado and Champagne truffle vinaigrette, served with a bottle of Eden Rock’s special cuvée of Château Minuty Rosé and a gentle sea breeze from St. Jean’s Bay, had me wishing to return here for a much longer stay.



Tableside celebrations at the Eden Rock-St. Barths Sand Bar

Photo courtesy of Eden Rock



SAINT KITTS

For a closer look into the heart of local cuisines, Windstar offers cooking class excursions. On Saint Kitts, the “foodies afloat” opted for a trip to the Fairview Great House and Botanical Gardens for a West Indies cooking class. Chef Chey Lake described the blend of African, European, and Indian cooking methods, featuring ingredients native to her island. She prepared green banana salad, pan-seared grouper, jerk chicken, and bread pudding with coconut milk and “happy raisins” soaked in local rum.

DOMINICA

Now, it was time for hands-on cooking! A short drive through the flower-filled jungles of Dominica led us to the home of Daria Eugene, author of *Caribbean Cooking with Daria*. In the open kitchen surrounded by lush gardens, we donned aprons to create the lunch menu together. What appeared to be shredded cheddar, turned out to be raw pumpkin, which was added to

Opposite top right: A beach barbecue with Windstar

Photo courtesy of Windstar Cruises

Right top: 02 Beach Club, Barbados

Photo courtesy of 02 Beach Club & Spa

Right bottom: Farm-to-table fare at Frutos del Guacabo

Photo courtesy of Discover Puerto Rico

Left to Right: Experimental Puerto Rican cuisine at Orujo
Photo courtesy of Orujo

Lobster served with style on Windstar
Photo courtesy of Windstar Cruises

St. Barth’s breakfast at Eden Rock
Photo courtesy of Eden Rock





Small ships star on Windstar

Photo courtesy of Windstar Cruises

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FROM THE SPICE CABINET TO THE MEDICINE CABINET, DARIA ALSO SHARED THE POTENTIAL HEALTH BENEFITS OF TROPICAL INGREDIENTS AS PART OF CARIBBEAN CULINARY HISTORY.

rice slowly cooked in coconut milk. We learned when to use fresh and dried spices, that citrus pairs best with fish while vinegar complements meats, that there's a difference between hot peppers and seasoning peppers, and how to slice a plantain at an angle. From the spice cabinet to the medicine cabinet, Daria also shared the potential health benefits of tropical ingredients as part of Caribbean culinary history.



Everything tastes better with a tranquil Caribbean view at the Eden Rock-St Barths Sand Bar!

Photo courtesy of Eden Rock

GRENADA

Known as the 'spice isle,' Grenada is the perfect destination to replenish your kitchen. The vibrant spice markets are filled with stalls selling nutmeg, paprika, cinnamon, vanilla, cloves, chili pepper, bay leaves, mace, and much more, providing a lesson in enhancing flavors in cooking. Did you know that mace comes from the lacy layer surrounding the nutmeg seed?

BARBADOS

Waving goodbye to the *Star Pride*, I spent my last two days exploring Barbados to deepen my understanding of Caribbean cuisine. Now, I was in the heart of Bajan cooking. Say hello to fried flying fish and macaroni pie, accompanied by a daiquiri made from sorrel, bright red flowers that impart a citrusy flavor.

The O2 Beach Club & Spa served as my beautiful beachfront home in Barbados. Breakfast featured Bajan treats like plantain fritters and salt cod with scrambled eggs, while evenings brought stunning pink sunsets and innovative cuisine at Oro restaurant. An island tour of the must-see attractions included a visit to the Bridgetown neighborhood where Rihanna grew up, a drive past her impressive mega-mansion, and a stop at the Caboose food truck, which serves the island's best 'cutter' fish sandwiches paired with rum punch and live beach music. ▣

Visit WindstarCruises.com to learn more and see more destinations, itineraries, and culinary offerings.