





Nature's Bounty

From coconut-flavoured curries to desserts and distilleries, Laurel Munshower discovers a delectable gastro-bubble in the island nation of Mauritius

As the aeroplane soars over the Indian Ocean, the sight of rippling sugar cane fields and jungle-clad peaks make it clear that visitors are in for a treat on Mauritius. With crystalline lagoons and lush vegetation lining its beaches and mountains, it's already an unmistakable paradise, but it's the island's locavore gastronomy that steals the show.

Mauritian cuisine is inspired by an array of cultures around the world – Indian, African, Chinese, French – but these flavours have mixed and mingled with each other and the island's local products to create something entirely unique over the centuries since Mauritius was first colonised by the Dutch in the 1600s.

Often referred to as Creole cuisine, well known to travellers eating their way around New Orleans, the island's culinary offerings have a distinctly Mauritian identity. And luckily for epicureans touring the island, there are myriad restaurants and *tables d'hôte* offering more than just predictable plates of tourist fare, but novel creations that are paving the way for a new era of modern Mauritian cooking while remaining reliant on using what's at their fingertips.



The Chamarel Falls are the highest in Mauritius, dropping 83 metres within the natural landscape of Black River Gorges

UNESCO World Heritage Site
Le Morne Cultural Landscape
is surrounded by calm lagoons
teeming with marine life
(previous page)

LOCAL FLAVOURS

Driving on winding roads in Mauritius's southwest, the journey to Chamarel in the Black River mountain range is shaded by enormous banyan trees and jungle flora. The greenery occasionally gives way to glimpses – ever more impressive as you ascend – of white shores and turquoise lagoons from Le Morne to the Rivière Noire. A popular destination for tourists due to the famed "Seven Colours of Chamarel" (a natural phenomenon that resulted in a field of multi-coloured sand dunes), the real attraction for foodies is the creative *l'Alchimiste* (+230 483 4980; www.rhumeriedechamarel.com), a tranquil restaurant set on the grounds of Rhumerie de Chamarel – a rum distillery that's worth the brief tour.

With a bucolic hamlet vibe, both the distillery and restaurant are designed with wood and stone to blend with the natural surroundings, but the rustic theme and relaxed atmosphere belie the sophisticated fare coming from *l'Alchimiste*'s kitchen. Featuring produce from the grounds and island game, keeping it all local, according to *l'Alchimiste*'s executive chef Jean Michel Jacquotte, is of the highest importance. "Being proud of the uniqueness of our local products, we endeavour to showcase them as a way for guests to discover Mauritius," he says.



Vibrant purples, yellows, reds and more greet visitors at Seven Colours of Chamarel

Wild boar marinated in Chamarel rum with chocolate *jus* and vegetable gratin at l'Alchimiste



This is immediately apparent in a dish of hearts of palm, which highlights the island's ubiquitous coconut palms. The soft-yet-crispy texture of the subtly sweet ingredient is paired with a decadent portion of foie gras topped with pineapple *gelée* that provides just the right tropical touch. Fusing island produce with ingredients like foie gras is a classic example of how modern Mauritian fare has evolved. Another dish uses wild boar, which is served coast to coast in family homes and *tables d'hôte*, but at l'Alchimiste, Jacquette braises the meat in the distillery's rum before topping it with a gravy of boar *jus* with a hint of chocolate. It sounds like an odd coupling, but it's a clever match to the boar's slightly sweet and nutty aroma.

Dessert comes in the form of a rum baba (a small yeast cake) absolutely drenched in the Chamarel spirit and topped with fresh vanilla cream. This possibly adults-only treat will have you thankful of the chauffeur dutifully waiting to escort you back to your resort.

As for the future of Mauritian cuisine, Jacquette is optimistic – and passionate. "I want our diners to experience something memorable and marvellous, and take l'Alchimiste to the top in a way that makes it synonymous with Mauritius."



Foie gras with pineapple *gelée* and palm hearts at l'Alchimiste



“THE RUSTIC THEME AND RELAXED ATMOSPHERE BELIE THE SOPHISTICATED FARE COMING FROM L’ALCHIMISTE”

DOMAINE DEGUSTATION

Dotted with plantations dating back to the island's French colonisation, which lasted from 1710 to 1810, the so-called La Route du Thé is a brief journey of three colonial-era estates, or *domaines*. Starting off in Curepipe, Domaine des Aubineaux's white-and-blue manor doubles as a museum showcasing the island's colonial heyday through hundreds of vintage photographs. A little further south, the Bois Chéri tea plantation features a factory where Bois Chéri teas are produced to this day; a museum that covers the history and process of creating fine teas; and a restaurant where diners can sample the plantation's teas (the vanilla tea is an island favourite).

It's a good idea time the final stop, Saint Aubin on the southern coast, with lunch to take advantage of its relaxed *table d'hôte* in a stately colonial residence dating to 1819. Here, you can try a Mauritian specialty – the tender venison curry, slow cooked in a rich sauce with hints of cinnamon, chilli and cardamom. Strolling through the rest of the plantation, you will see fresh vanilla being carefully attended from orchid to curing; and the Saint Aubin artisanal rum distillery where spiced, coffee, vanilla and aged rum are just a few of the bottles proffered for a cheeky tasting session.

Le Barachois's pontoon-based dining is surrounded by untouched island nature (above, and opposite centre and lower right)

Small bites at Le Barachois (top right)

Off the tea trail in the north, elegant Château de Labourdonnais (+230 266 9533; www.chateaulabourdonnais.com), the erstwhile home of one of the isle's French governors, Mahé de La Bourdonnais, is also where one of Mauritius's finest contemporary restaurants can be found. The *domaine*'s La Table du Château is run by chef Fabio de Poli, who has created a menu showcasing Mauritian flavours and ingredients with modern European flair – a characteristic cropping up in more and more of the island's restaurants. “Mauritius has had many influences over the past 20 years with a lot European chefs arriving to train local chefs – I am one of them – and I think this has helped reshape the Mauritian food of today,” says de Poli. Foreign chefs aren't taking over, however, he adds. “Mauritian cuisine is beginning to find its base and is evolving with the local professionals who are passionate about cooking and want to show the rest of the world what Mauritius is capable of.” Judging by the fare at La Table, where de Poli strives to work with Mauritians dedicated to the cuisine, Mauritius is capable of quite a lot. Hearts of palm make another appearance in a dish served tartar-style with sour cream, herbs and olive oil atop a slice of smoked marlin carpaccio – a pairing that is a superb mix of crunchy-creamy vegetable with silky-smooth



smoked fish. Making the most of the island's offerings, freshly-caught dorado is served with a light vanilla glaze – an ideal accompaniment to the meaty white fish – and local root vegetables. More than simply highlighting Mauritius's ingredients for the sake of tourists, de Poli recognises the role of locally sourced food's benefits. "We simply wish to make good food and to do that you need the right fresh products, which is fundamental in the development of healthy and flavourful cuisine."

FRUITS DE MER

"As simple as possible, minimum transformation, maximum use of local product – 100 percent made in Mauritius," says Michael Scioli, executive chef at Le Barachois (+230 402 3636; www.constancehotels.com/leprincemaurice), of his goals for the restaurant's cuisine. As much a destination worth visiting for its setting as it is for its seafood, guests stroll down a wooden boardwalk through mangroves where the only soundtrack is the wind rustling through the surrounding vegetation, fish splashing at the water's surface and – if you're lucky to catch a glimpse – Johnny, the resident two-metre shark gently stirring up the lagoon's water. Unlike any other restaurant in Mauritius, the tables are set on pontoons floating atop the languid water.



Scioli's menu focuses on Indian Ocean seafood, but no dish is as simple as just that, and the island's favourite ingredients result in distinct Mauritian fare. "Our customers mainly come from Europe and they wish to be surprised by the flavours they'll find in a country like Mauritius," says Scioli of the importance of including local elements. "This also shows our team that there are beautiful things to do with what they have in their backyard."

Menu standouts include the "faye faye" crab from Saint Brandon (a minuscule Mauritian archipelago) which would be delectable enough on its own thanks to the crustacean's succulent and sweet meat, but at Le Barachois it takes a Mauritian turn, served tartare style with taro root – a local favourite in snacks – and chilli for a touch of Creole heat. Grouper from the island's warm waters is dished up as a Mauritian curry, gently spiced and full of fresh-off-the-tree coconut flavour, showcasing how local ingredients have influenced the cuisine brought over by Indian immigrants.

While diverse Mauritian fare offers enough opportunity for exploration in its own right, an apropos coda to the holiday can be found upon boarding the catamaran *Mis Stress* and setting sail for the west coast with Catamaran Cruises Mauritius (+230 5728 3030; www.catamarancruisesmauritius.com). Beyond the beryl lagoons, pods of dolphins twirl through the air and frolick beneath the crystal-clear surface, at times directly beneath the netting that stretches from hull to hull for lounging. At the wall of reefs that protect the lagoon-lined beaches, diving into the water reveals iridescent rainbow runners reflecting the Indian Ocean sun, and schools of hundreds of vibrant yellow angelfish moving from coral to coral on their own culinary journey. Catching the wind, the crew raise the sails and quiet the motor; the sound of the catamaran cutting through the sea is the sole companion as you sail to a lagoon off the coast of UNESCO World Heritage Site Le Morne Brabant, a 556-m natural monolith. But just because you've decided to spend the day on

the sea doesn't mean that a break from the island's epicurean bounty is necessary. Anchored in this serene lagoon, champagne bubbles in flutes and locally caught lobster is simply grilled, allowing its delicate flavours to take centre stage.

It may be small, but Mauritius brims with restaurants and chefs dedicated to showcasing the island's abundance of local ingredients. And although incredible tropical splendour waits at every turn, travellers coming for the views will surely return for the gastronomy. ☀

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Green islets dot the lagoons surrounding Mauritius