

LEVI ROOTS'S GUIDE TO:





JAMAICA.. IN LONDON

The charismatic British-Jamaican cookbook author, TV presenter and musician takes Caroline Baum through the Afro-Caribbean heartland of London and reveals why jerk chicken is set to give Indian tandoori a run for its money.

PHOTOGRAPHY HELEN CATHCART

“RESPECT, BROTHER.”

The phrase echoes down the lanes of Brixton Market, in South London, as a commanding figure with waist-length dreadlocks ambles past the stalls of Europe’s biggest Afro-Caribbean market. As he walks through the crowd, it’s like a royal progress: everyone wants to hug him, share an opinion, or just say hello, fist forward for a knuckle-to-knuckle greeting.

Levi Roots (no, it’s not his real name) is the face of Jamaican food in London. His success on a British TV show (he appeared on *Dragon’s Den*, where he secured \$80,000 funding for his business) helped him launch Reggae Reggae foods, a range including seven spicy sauces, four cooking sauces and drinks. Then there are the cookbooks that champion the flavours that he grew up with in the aptly named Content, a small village in Jamaica, where his grandmother Miriam gave him three large gifts: a love of music that came from her Baptist faith, the secrets of her kitchen, and pride in her Maroon heritage.

Descended from runaway slaves, the Maroons established free communities in the mountainous interior of Jamaica, resisting conquest by the British. Today, scattered through many countries, their diaspora still preserves an autonomous, distinct culture with its own creole language and musical style called *aleke*.

When Levi (baptised Keith Valentine Graham in 1958) was four, his parents joined a wave of economic migrants who came to Britain, leaving him and his five siblings behind with Miriam while they established a new life for their family in Brixton. Today, it’s estimated there are nearly 250,000 Jamaicans in London, mostly in boroughs south of the river. Their food heritage reflects the influences that came to Jamaica from other parts of the Caribbean, West Africa, India, Spain and China in successive episodes of trade and invasion, creating a fusion cuisine that has adapted little to the blander British palate; one concession to colonial power is a shared enthusiasm for drinking tea (despite Jamaican coffee beans being highly prized).

“It’s not unusual for boys to spend time in the kitchen in Jamaica,” says Levi, pointing out that in traditional families, men are in charge of the cooking. Unable to afford schooling, Levi spent his time taking his grandfather’s goats to pasture, going fishing and playing cricket with a ball made from an avocado seed wrapped in tar from the street. At night, he would join village neighbours for storytelling gatherings. No wonder he remembers his childhood as idyllic.

Today the self-made millionaire drives a BMW to the delight and pride of members of the community. They call out to him when





Levi tucks in to a Johnny cake (fried dumpling) stuffed with ackee and saltfish. Left, from top: Scotch bonnet chillies; Ital juice of carrots, lime and beetroot.

JAMAICAN FOOD MAKES NO PRETENCE AT SUBTLETY: IT TASTES OF MODEST INGREDIENTS AND SIMPLE COOKING METHODS. "IT'S FOOD THAT TASTES OF SUNSHINE," SAYS LEVI.

they spot the car with its unmistakable personalised number plate (RR 54UCE); not bad for a boy whose father worked as a rat-catcher for Lambeth Council and who arrived in London at the age of 11, barely able to read and write.

"Brixton was the first time I had seen a market," he says, waving to his favourite stallholders and moving as if to a slow groove. "I had never been to the one in Kingston when I was growing up in Jamaica, so that first experience of Railton Road [a thoroughfare between Brixton and Herne Hill] was pretty exciting. I tried to replicate the dishes that my grandmother had taught me when cooking for my father, as he worked night shifts, but now there are more ingredients to choose from. I was used to a small repertoire of fresh things, but now I've learned to use dried foods, too."

As a homesick teen obsessed with the music of Bob Marley and reggae music, Levi took time to find his feet in London. Wrong turns along the way led to two brief stints in jail, but his love of music and food never deserted him. Embracing aspects of Rastafarian culture, he eventually became friends with Bob Marley himself, playing football with him in Battersea Park whenever his hero came to London. He also ended up singing *Happy Birthday* to Nelson Mandela in a Brixton youth centre.

His strong links to his culture got him back on track; today, he shares that commitment to his heritage at Papine Jerk Centre, a tiny hole-in-the wall 'caff' named after a busy gateway in Kingston, Jamaica, that he runs on a charmless housing estate in Clapham, where workers and kids from the local school come to eat his goat curry with rice and peas, jerk chicken, and *ackee* (the national fruit of Jamaica) and saltfish instead of junk food. It's not glamorous or fashionable, and it's not the kind of eatery that is designed to boost Levi's ego or profile; it's just good, authentic, no-frills home cooking, made the traditional way. "I come from the ghetto, so I wanted to feed my people first," he says.

Out the back, Levi fans the flames on a cut-down oil drum to cook jerk chicken (a barbecue with a lid to keep in the smoke works just as well), basting the meat with his trademark sauce that gets its heat from Scotch bonnet chillies: the lethal ridged chillies that are said to be the world's hottest and that get their name from their resemblance to a Scottish Tam O'Shanter (the iconic floppy hat). "Cook them whole and you get just flavour, but cut them open and you feel the heat," warns Levi. "And be careful, the younger and greener the peppers, the hotter they are."

"The word 'jerk' in Jamaican means smoke. Traditionally the dish was cooked in the earth so that the smoke was not visible to enemy troops," explains Levi, recalling the many battles between the Maroons and British forces. "The kind of wood you use will determine the





Vendors and produce along Electric Avenue in Brixton.

flavour of the food. Traditionally, we'd use pimento wood or hickory, which gives the smoke its distinctive flavour. You can use hickory wood chip to throw on with the charcoal on your barbecue. Pork was traditionally the meat of choice, but now chicken is more popular. First, it is dry-rubbed with a spicy mixture that can include cinnamon, garlic, thyme, cloves and nutmeg, but two key ingredients are essential: Jamaican pimento, also known as allspice, and those scotch bonnets."

The robust flavour of Levi's goat curry includes the silky texture of okra, also called lady's fingers, that are cooked whole to avoid the viscosity that some would otherwise find a bit too slippery. "It's not popular in the West because of its texture, but it has a mild flavour that carries stronger tastes really well," explains Levi. "We use a lot of okra as a thickening agent in sauces and soups, and it's also blanched in salads or served as a steamed vegetable."

Jamaican food makes no pretence at subtlety: it tastes of modest ingredients and simple cooking methods, cooked by mostly rural people. "To me, it's food that tastes of sunshine," says Levi who believes in the Rastafarian quality of *ital*, which translates roughly as 'vitality from the sun's energy'.



“Rastas are very close to nature,” explains Levi. “And also pay strict attention to diet. Many are vegetarians and do not consume salt or alcohol. They also make a strong link between what they eat and their sexual health. So, for example, a woman who is trying to get pregnant should avoid eating fennel. A man who wants to boost his fertility should drink something we call Irish moss, a type of sea vegetable,” says Levi who has seven children, so he should know.

One of the most popular dishes on the menu is the traditional ackee and saltfish, considered to be Jamaica’s national dish, and is eaten either for breakfast or dinner. It combines two ingredients central to Jamaican food. The ackee, a fruit brought to Jamaica from West Africa, most probably on a slave ship, and eventually introduced to Britain when Captain Bligh brought it to Kew Gardens on the *Bounty*. Unripe it looks like a large pink mango and is poisonous to eat. “You can tell when it’s ready because it bursts into a smile revealing yellow flesh and black seeds,” says Levi. “It has a lovely silky texture but it’s expensive, so we often buy it in tins. The second ingredient, salt fish, is also known as salted cod. It’s a way of preserving fish in the hot Caribbean climate. The fish is dried, then salted heavily and, before use, it is rinsed and then boiled a couple of times. We mix the two together with vegetables and spicy tomato ketchup for a very filling dish that you can serve on a bun like a sandwich filling.”

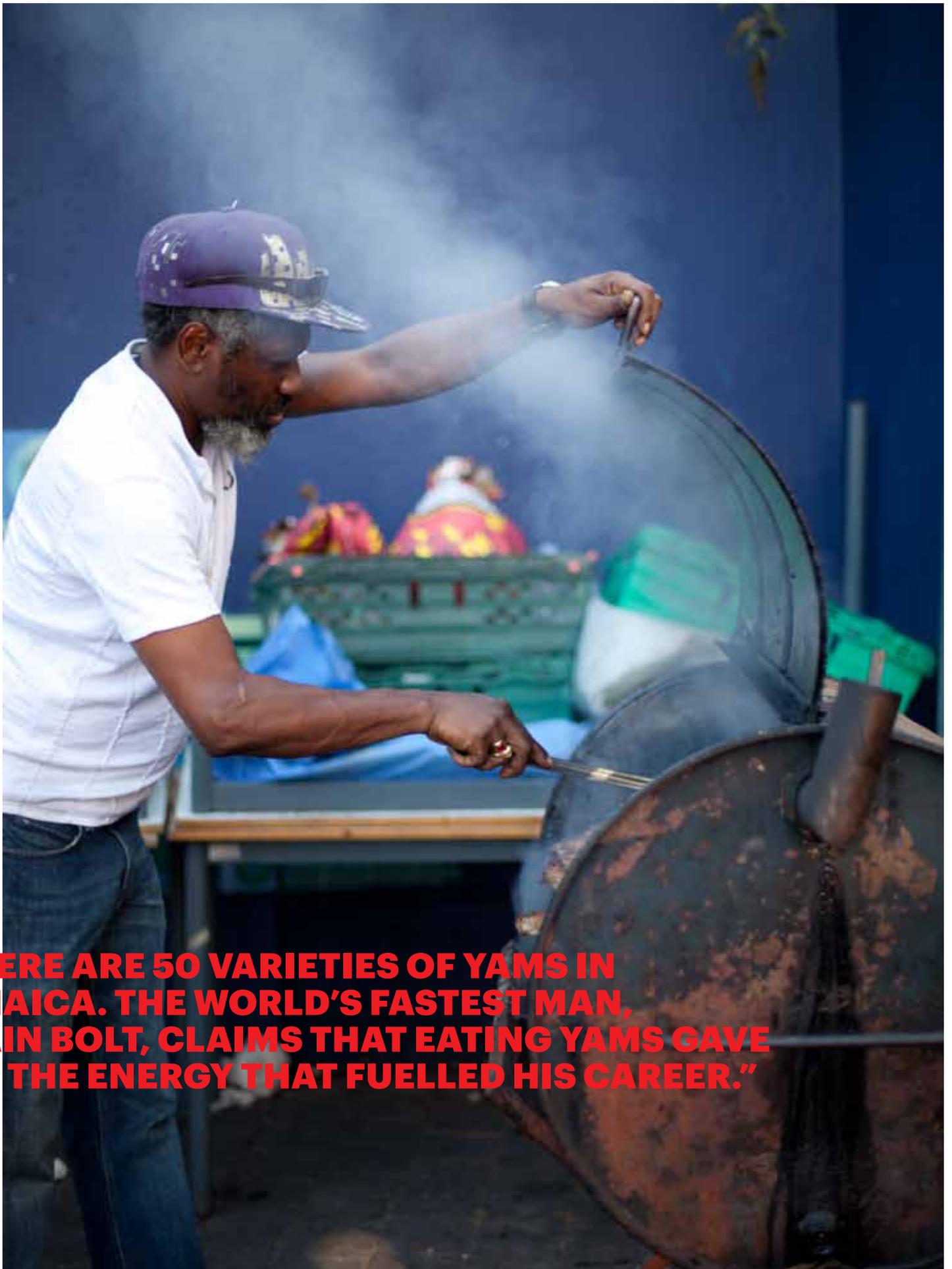
Pointing to a stall selling yams, he explains: “There are 50 varieties of this in Jamaica. The world’s fastest man, Usain Bolt, claims that eating yams gave him the energy that fuelled his career.” The Olympics are on Levi’s radar, with plans for him to open a restaurant in Stratford, near the main Games stadium this year. His ambition? “To make Caribbean food as popular in Britain as Indian food is.”

Jamaicans like their starchy foods: there’s cassava, a tuberous root known as breadfruit that is boiled or roasted like potatoes; christophene, a pear-shaped gourd we’d recognise as choko, that is used in stews and soups, and sometimes eaten raw in salads; and plantain which is fried and served as fritters “especially around the Notting Hill Carnival”, says Levi, who used to run a stall at the event called the Rasta’raunt where fans would queue for his food. “My grandmother’s sauce was my secret weapon,” he says of its success.

He is an annual fixture at the street party in late August when the neighbourhood pulsates to the rhythms of Calypso kettle drums, the throb of dub sounds and jungle beats. As sweet-scented smoke from jerk stalls wafts through the streets and painted floats roll by decked out in strutting dancers, Levi rocks his reggae soul while saying a silent thank you to the woman who taught him to cook all those years ago. No doubt she never imagined it would make her grandson’s fame and fortune. Respect, sister.

A slice of sweet potato pudding at the Atlantic Bakery in Brixton. Right: cooking jerk chicken outside Brixton Village.





“THERE ARE 50 VARIETIES OF YAMS IN JAMAICA. THE WORLD’S FASTEST MAN, USAIN BOLT, CLAIMS THAT EATING YAMS GAVE HIM THE ENERGY THAT FUELLED HIS CAREER.”

RED 'PEA' SOUP WITH DUMPLINGS

SERVES 6

You will need to soak the beans overnight.

400g (2 cups) dried red kidney beans
 270ml coconut cream
 2 carrots, peeled, thickly sliced
 350g butternut pumpkin, peeled,
 cut into 3cm pieces
 350g potato, peeled, cut into 3cm pieces
 240g choko, peeled, cut into 3cm pieces
 1 garlic clove, chopped
 1 Scotch bonnet chilli*
 300g (2 cups) plain flour
 1 green capsicum, chopped
 1 spring onion, green part only, chopped
 1 onion, chopped
 1 thyme sprig
 6 allspice berries*
 2 tsp all-purpose seasoning*
 2½cm-piece ginger, peeled, finely chopped
 30g butter

- 1** Rinse kidney beans under cold running water, then place in a large bowl and cover with 2L cold water and soak overnight.
 - 2** Strain beans into a colander, rinse again and discard any damaged beans. Bring a large saucepan of water to the boil. Add beans to boiling water, return to the boil, cover and cook for 10 minutes. Reduce heat to medium and cook for a further 10 minutes or until beans are starting to become tender.
 - 3** Add coconut cream, carrots, pumpkin, potato, choko, 80ml water, garlic and chilli, cover and cook for a further 30 minutes.
 - 4** Meanwhile, to make dumplings, place flour and 1 tsp salt in a bowl and gradually stir in 150ml water until combined. Knead dough on a lightly floured work surface until smooth. Divide dough into 12, roll each piece into a ball, flatten slightly and shape into oblongs.
 - 5** Stir capsicum, onions, thyme, allspice berries, seasoning, 1 tsp salt, 1 tsp pepper, ginger and butter into soup. Add dumplings and cook for 15 minutes or until dumplings are cooked through. Divide soup and dumplings among bowls and serve.
- * *Scotch bonnet chillies are from selected greengrocers; wear latex gloves when handling.*
 * *Allspice berries are available from delis, selected greengrocers and spice shops.*
 * *All-purpose seasoning is from supermarkets.*
 Note, some brands include MSG.

Below: Veranda's ackee and saltfish moneybags with chive and breadfruit mayonnaise.



Brixton Market
brixtonmarket.net.

Papine Jerk Centre
 8 Lavender Rd, Battersea, SW11 2UG, +44 (0)20 7294 2288.

Veranda
 Run by an-ex music business entrepreneur, this cavernous venue serves an extensive list of flamboyant cocktails (try the lychee and rose petal martini). Chef Anthony Cumberbatch who used to cook for the likes of George Clooney and Mick Jagger before working in leading restaurants and hotels, presents a fusion menu with Caribbean accents. The place really comes alive late with African karaoke nights popular. **30 Acre Lane, SW2, +44 (0) 20 7733 2335, veranda-london.com.**

For information about Caribbean London, visit itzcaribbean.com.

Notting Hill Carnival takes place on Sunday 26 August, 2012. 🎪

