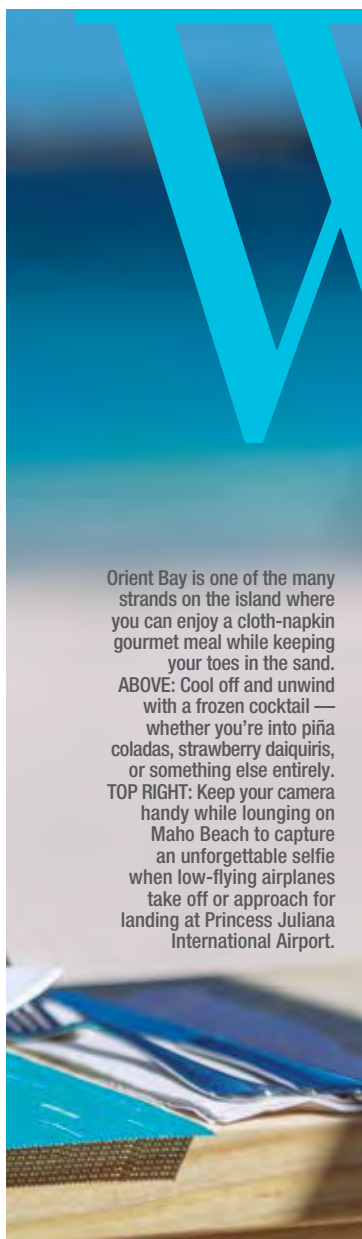


BEACHSIDE GOURMET

BY J.B. BISSELL

THE TRUE PLEASURE OF **ST. MAARTEN/ST. MARTIN'S** SPLENDID FOOD SCENE IS THAT IT CAN BE ENJOYED RIGHT ON THE ISLAND'S EQUALLY MARVELOUS SANDY SEASHORES.





Orient Bay is one of the many strands on the island where you can enjoy a cloth-napkin gourmet meal while keeping your toes in the sand. ABOVE: Cool off and unwind with a frozen cocktail — whether you're into piña coladas, strawberry daiquiris, or something else entirely. TOP RIGHT: Keep your camera handy while lounging on Maho Beach to capture an unforgettable selfie when low-flying airplanes take off or approach for landing at Princess Juliana International Airport.

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We were trying to describe the utterly mouth-watering appetizer we were devouring, but coming up short. Mostly because our collective vocabulary was deteriorating with every bite. It took just one plate of shrimp tempura to go from *the shrimp is so tender, and the batter is so fluffy and light to oh-ma-gosh they're soooo good* to, finally, unintelligible groans of delight.

There were four of us — our good friends, Shawn and Valeria; my wife, Michelle, and I — on St. Maarten, the little island that's split between Dutch and French sides, but unified in that it's arguably the culinary capital of the Caribbean.

Except that wasn't why we were here. We knew about St. Maarten's foodie reputation, but we came for the beaches. Digging our toes in the sand at Orient Bay, Maho Beach, Grand Case, Dawn Beach, Baie Rouge, and as many of the other more than 35 Caribbean strands as possible was our main priority. Don't get me wrong — I appreciate a top-notch dish as much as any wannabe Gordon Ramsay. It's just that after a day of sitting beneath a big umbrella sipping cocktails adorned with small umbrellas, I prefer enjoying a simple dinner to putting on resort-formal attire for a fancy spread.

To our delight, we quickly discovered that we could have our cake and eat it, too. More specific to our preferences, we could enjoy a range of impeccable cuisine without ever setting foot inside the restaurants from which it was served. So, we spent the entire week eating alfresco, partaking in what are now some of my all-time favorite meals, never even changing out of our swimsuits.

THE SPECIALS BOARD

It all started at Orient Bay during our first full day on the island. We arrived late morning and by virtue of where we parked, happened to walk right past a place called Bikini Beach. It's a proper restaurant, but also offers lounge chairs and umbrellas for rent on the sand as an extension of their patio. *This looks as good as anywhere*, we decided. Before long, Paul, the friendly proprietor, delivered a round of Miami Vices (a half-and-half combination of frozen strawberry daiquiri and piña colada), and, drinks in hand, we sat back to enjoy the scene.

There were a few men rigging up kitesurfing gear to our right. Jet skis buzzed across the bay. A retired couple in matching bathing suits sauntered up and down the beach. And a group of kids bounced on a massive inflatable trampoline positioned 20 yards offshore.

We mostly watched, making occasional pilgrimages across the white sand and into the turquoise water to cool off. After a couple of hours, it was time to get something to eat. Paul brought menus and propped up a 3-foot-tall chalkboard — the daily specials board — in front of our chairs. And that's when I knew beach dining on this island wasn't like beach dining elsewhere.

One of the specials was a *salade nicoise* sandwich. I'm more of a cheeseburger guy, but something about the hand-scribed specials board — wedged into the sand, with all manner of people taking part in all manner of water activities in the background — had hypnotized me. "I'll take the sandwich special," I said.

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on porcelain dishes with real silverware and cloth napkins. The top of my crusty baguette was set strategically askew to reveal the vibrant sandwich contents: green lettuce, purple onions, black olives, red tomatoes, and large chunks of pink tuna.

It was divine. And the fact that I was eating it right on the beach made it that much better. It's hard to explain the joyful juxtaposition of noshing white linen-caliber fare — in both presentation and flavor — while your bare feet are caked with sand and your also-bare shoulders glisten with freshly applied sunscreen, but it's something I'm now convinced every beach lover should experience.

JET FUELED

A few days later, we headed to Maho Beach, the most popular stretch of shoreline on the Dutch side of the island. This is where airplanes fly right overhead, and I can tell you from experience that all those pictures you see of people posing with massive jetliners coming in for a landing over their shoulders are not tricks of photography. There's the beach, a narrow two-lane street, and then the runway at Princess Juliana International Airport.

And at the south end of the sand is Sunset Beach Bar. Similar to Bikini Beach, they rent lounge chairs and umbrellas. Their menu is more gastropub than French bistro, but the food is just as satisfying.

Shawn and I both ordered cheeseburgers topped with bacon and egg; Valeria had the sesame-crusting goat cheese salad with candied walnuts, apples, and raspberry vinaigrette; and Michelle went for the vegetable panini.

After our simultaneous first bites, Shawn beat me to the five-star review. "This hamburger is delicious." The ladies were equally impressed, and Valeria pretty much summed up the entire trip (even though we still had a few days to go) with, "All the food here is delicious."

Most meals I've eaten on various beaches around the world are delivered on paper plates or wrapped in heavy-duty napkins. Not at Bikini Beach. When Paul returned with our food, it was plated



By then, we'd had several meals on both sides of the island and had done nothing but rave about them. Seafood, pasta, barbecue, pizza. It was all scrumptious. St. Maarten is known for its food, but I had thought it was because of a few highly rated restaurants. Nope. *Everything's* really good. "It's probably thanks to all those gourmet restaurants that everyone's gotta raise their game, even these casual beach bars," Michelle reasoned.

EPICUREAN DIY

The next day, we decided to raise our own game and pack a small picnic for an afternoon on Dawn Beach. I've always thought part of the fun of staying at vacation ownership properties is having a kitchen because it provides a wonderful excuse to stop at the local supermarkets and various roadside produce stands. And on an island where *all* the food is good, you can score a bevy of fantastic ingredients for whipping up some tasty do-it-yourself snacks.

We strolled the aisles of Le Grand Marché, St. Maarten's grocery chain, which were packed with plenty of the usual suspects — citrus fruits, thick-cut steaks, potato chips, and so on — as well as some things you might not see at your home supermarket: lychees, monk fish, and freshly baked macarons.

We left with a range of Gouda and cheddar cheeses, saucisson,

BACK IN BUSINESS

While things aren't completely back to normal after Hurricane Irma struck and devastated St. Maarten in September 2017, the island has made big strides in recent months. The beaches have been restored, nearly all of the popular land excursions are running (including Rainforest Adventures' Rockland Estate ecopark), and, as of this writing, an estimated 80 percent of the restaurants,

including all of the ones mentioned in this story, are open for business — though, you might not recognize them. Bikini Beach was completely redone and now has can't-miss lime-green umbrellas set up out on Orient Bay. At the other end of the recovery spectrum, Captain Frenchy is reportedly operating out of a modified shipping container — but operating nonetheless, and that's the important part.



Shop for Caribbean-style homemade sauces and dressings at the local markets and roadside stands. LEFT: You can never go wrong in your choice of dessert when dining in Grand Case's restaurant row, the *crème de la crème* of the island's gastronomy.

and prosciutto, and several loaves of French bread (and some of those macarons) for a nice charcuterie board. Before we got to the beach, though, we had to make one more stop.

"There's a little produce stand up here on the right," Michelle said from the back seat. "I want to see what they have."

What they had was homemade hot sauce packaged in a recycled, pint-size bottle of vodka. There was no label, no ingredients — just a friendly warning from the woman who was selling it that it was the "hottest hot sauce you've ever tasted." Turns out she was right. When Michelle made guacamole later, she added barely a teaspoon for a staggering amount of kick.

SHRIMP DOUGHNUTS

The charcuterie picnic on Dawn Beach was a success, but I can't claim it matched our week's final open-air meal. We were on the shore in Grand Case, a town on the northwest side of the island that's renowned for its concentration of outstanding eateries. If there's one place on this Caribbean gem responsible for its culinary reputation, this is it.

Our plan for the day was to relax on the beach and then, finally, after a week of keeping it casual, sit down to a first-class feast at either L'Auberge Gourmande, La Villa, or Spiga.

We never made it. Instead, with lunchtime approaching as we read our books and splashed in the ocean, we ordered a shrimp tempura appetizer from Captain Frenchy. Shawn took one bite and informed our server that we were going to need another plate. "Just keep 'em coming," he said, not even half-joking.

In all, we consumed four orders of the shrimp tempura that afternoon. It was Valeria who finally came up with what we decided was the best description. Midway through our third plate, she paused and said, "They're like shrimp doughnuts."

The label stuck and we've been searching for our next round of "shrimp doughnuts" ever since. Happily, I think it's going to require a return trip to St. Maarten. We've yet to find anything that compares to the on-the-beach alfresco dining that's available seemingly everywhere on the island. ■

Culinary Adventures

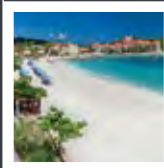
If you're serious about your sustenance, consider joining an organized food tour. Flavors of St. Martin runs one of the most popular jaunts and offers two main excursions: Culinary Road Trip and Philipsburg Foodie Walking Tour. The guided driving journey visits both sides of the island, making multiple stops at some out-of-the-way places where you'll taste homegrown specialties ranging from appetizers to entrees to desserts. If you'd prefer to stay a little active between samples, the walking tour focuses on some of the best spots to eat like a local along the Philipsburg boardwalk.

AREA RESORTS



Simpson Bay Resort & Marina (PRC, PMM, SII)

Located on the beach with spectacular views, the resort features four tennis courts, six swimming pools, a kiddie pool, health spa, fitness center, casino, four restaurants, a minimarket, gift shop, and water sports center. Explore the island's Dutch and French duty-free shopping areas, and sample the cuisine that has earned St. Maarten its reputation for outstanding dining.



Divi Little Bay Beach Resort (LBY)

Situated on a private peninsula between two crystal-clear bays, Divi Little Bay Beach Resort offers stunning white-sand beaches, proximity to popular sights, and plenty of amenities. Enjoy water sports, tennis, or a spa treatment, or read a book by one of three beautiful pools. Also on hand are three fabulous restaurants, beachside dining, and a lively atmosphere every night.

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