

FORK IN THE ROAD

Anguilla for dinner

Tiny Caribbean isle has become a culinary powerhouse

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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Think of the islands of the Caribbean, and images of beaches, turquoise water and steel-drum bands come to mind. Fine dining? Not so much — unless the island is Anguilla, a British Overseas Territory just a 10-mile ferry ride from St. Martin.

In its 35 square miles, Anguilla boasts more than 100 restaurants, from beach shacks to a surprising number of fine-dining spots, some with celebrity chefs. Last summer, the Anguilla National Culinary Team took several gold and silver medals in the Taste of the Caribbean competition in Miami.

The road to culinary fame started when the island began to develop tourism in the 1980s. When its first high-end resort, Malliouhana, opened in 1984, it brought in Michelin-star French chefs Jo and Michel Rostang. Other luxury resorts followed, each with a fine-dining venue.

But not all of Anguilla's noteworthy restaurants reside in fancy resorts. A few independents stand out:

Blanchards (blanchardsrestaurant.com): In 1989, Bob and Melinda Blanchard turned their life upside down by moving from Vermont, where they had launched several businesses, to Anguilla, where they opened their namesake restaurant on Meads Beach. They tell the story of their lifestyle switch in their first book, "A Trip to the Beach," which continues to prompt patrons to show up at their door. "This actually happens all the time," Melinda Blanchard said. "When we first wrote the book, we had no idea it would actually bring people to the island, much less our restaurant." They penned two more books inspiring readers to follow their own dreams, as well as two cookbooks.

The Blanchards use flavors from the Caribbean, Mediterranean, Italy, France and various regions in the U.S. in their cuisine.

"We serve what we like to eat ourselves and always make sure to have several flavors on each plate to make the dish interesting," said Melinda Blanchard. Favorites include a seafood pasta dish and jerk shrimp with sweet potato puree and cinnamon-rum bananas. They recently added a gluten-free menu.

Blanchards Beach Shack opened next door right on the sand in 2011. Its Caribbean cornbread draws raves.

Veya (veya-axa.com): The Blanchards aren't the only culinary couple to decamp from the U.S. for Anguilla. After an Internet search located a restaurant for sale on the island, "we sold our restaurant, house, cars, all personal belongings and gave our three children each a suitcase," said Carrie Bogar, who opened Veya with husband, Jerry, in 2007. "Many, many people told us we were crazy." The chef, trained at the Culinary Institute of America, calls her style "cuisine of the sun," inspired by the Caribbean and other warm climates in Southeast Asia, Africa and India. Among her first courses are shrimp cigars with chermoula and apricot sauce, and conch carpaccio with Indonesian rice salad. Red snapper is a popular second course, as is the local crayfish when it's available.

"Anguilla is the culinary capital of the Caribbean," chef Bogar said. "When we first arrived here, a lot of people spoke of St. Barts as the best island for food, but over the past few years I hear more and more people stating that Anguilla has surpassed St. Barts in quality, diversity and cost."



Casual beachside dining is one option at da'Vida on Crocus Bay in Anguilla.



Blanchards Beach Shack is a casual take on the fine-dining restaurant that Bob and Melinda Blanchard opened after moving from Vermont to Anguilla. Its cornbread earns raves.

De Cuisine (facebook.com/decuisineaxa): Among the newest additions to the island's fine-dining scene is this 18-seat restaurant Denise Carr and husband, Josh Proctor, opened in December. A chef for more than 20 years, Carr worked in four- and five-star hotels in Las Vegas and Dubai before coming to Anguilla as executive chef at CuisinArt

Golf Resort and later as owner of the Sandbar. "I decided to open De Cuisine because I wanted to do exactly the food I love to do," she said, an approach she calls "food artistry." Her menu changes frequently but recently featured foie gras mousse with mango preserve in hibiscus reduction, and lobster carpaccio with lime sabayon, avocado, wakame sea air and browned chili butter.

Tasty's (tastysrestaurant.com): At first glance, this green-and-purple building looks like a nondescript roadside structure. But the beribboned culinary medals and clipings from Bon Appetit,

Travel & Leisure and Gourmet hanging on the walls of the modest dining room testify that Tasty's is a true foodie find. In a local-boy-makes-good story, Anguillan-born chef Dale Carty started his career as a dishwasher at the Malliouhana Hotel at age 15 and was soon hooked on life in the kitchen. "Chefs Alain Laurent and Jacques Borderon saw my passion and potential," Carty said, "and made it possible for me to go to the south of France to train under the guidance of Jo Rostang and, later, his son Michel Rostang." Carty opened Tasty's in 1999 at age 28, fusing the techniques and styles he learned in France with his

Caribbean heritage. Meals start with warm johnnycakes before the menus unfold. Seafood salad, in appetizer and entree portions, has sautéed crayfish, snapper, lobster, shrimp, conch and salmon in a basil vinaigrette dressing. Caribbean curry stewed goat comes with root vegetables and Anguilla's national dish, pigeon peas and rice.



Fresh fish is served with Anguilla's national dish, pigeon peas and rice, at da'Vida, which translates to "the life."



Dinner at De Cuisine, a new fine-dining restaurant in Anguilla, might begin with foie gras.



Generous portions of Caribbean lobster and a killer rum punch make lunch a languorous affair at Scilly Cay.



A trio of coconut, ginger and vanilla creme brulees make a fitting end to a fine meal at Veya, which opened in 2007.



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Da'Vida (daidaanguilla.com): The name translates as "the life," an apt description for this combination white-tablecloth restaurant, beach grill, spa and water sports rental spot on Crocus Bay. Those who think this place is all about sitting under a beach umbrella while sipping colorful tropical drinks — pleasant as that may be — are underestimating it. The fine-dining restaurant won a Wine Spectator award in 2012. Its dinner menu begins with appetizers such as Thai beef salad and expands to entrees of beef tenderloin, rack of lamb and truffle mushroom risotto.

Diners who want something lighter can order tapas in the evening.

Lunch at da'Vida's Bayside Grill might be burgers, barbecue ribs and chicken or fresh fish.

Scilly Cay (scillycayananguilla.com): No discussion of food and Anguilla is complete without mention of this quirky, open-air beach shack on a tiny spit of sand and coral just off the island. For 28 years, Eudoxie Wallace, nicknamed Gorgeous, and his wife, Sandra, have turned this cay into an afternoon's escape of sunbathing, snorkeling and island food washed down with killer rum punches that may prompt patrons to get up and dance. A string band often plays on Sundays. Lobster, fish, chicken and crayfish — when they can get it — are barbecued on oil-drum grills.

Getting there is part of the fun: Stand on the dock at Island Harbor, look toward the cay and wave your arms like a fool. If they're open (Wednesdays and Sundays only), they'll send a boat for the two-minute ride to the cay.

For tourism info, visit the Anguilla Tourist Board site at iVisitAnguilla.com.