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FOR PEOPLE WHO LOVE TO *read*, LOVE TO *eat* AND LOVE TO *travel*

LETTERS FROM THE EDGE

SURINAME

Suriname

Uncommon Medley

by CATHERINE VAN BRUNSCHOT



Suriname

WHERE ON EARTH



THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
 Rambutan; Restaurant at Plantage Fredericksdorp; Minaret and dome of the Keizer Straat Mosque; Neveh Shalom Synagogue on Keizer Straat in Paramaribo; Amerindian dance performers; Hindu shrine on the sea dike near Nieuw Nickerie; Squirrel monkey; Parwa honey for sale; Cacao pod. **MAIN PHOTOS** Harvesting cassava outside Semoisie; Enjoying a waterfall in Brownsberg Nature Park.

STEVE DUNK

STEVE DUNK



PHOTOS THIS PAGE FROM TOP
Honey from Coronie district; Along the Upper Suriname River; A Semoisie villager and a German tourist bond; Dutch-Creole architecture in central Paramaribo. **FACING PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** Chinese supermarket sign; Amerindian children prepare to dance; Cashew fruit; Fish vendor at Kwatta Market; Baka Foto's courtyard brasserie; Roadside stand for cold coconuts.

«**SURINAME**. It's a name that draws a blank from even the most well-travelled. Call it the former Dutch Guiana, and some can place it in the western hemisphere: a wedge pencilled off the northern reaches of the Amazon rainforest; a mangrove-armoured coastline, barely accessible but for the rivers that pierce their way to the Atlantic. It's a country in South America, but not of it — peopled originally by the Caribs and Arawaks, mostly bypassed by the Spanish, and thus sharing little,

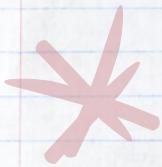
culturally, with the majority of the continent. Instead, the vagaries of history brought Dutch plantation owners and West African slaves to its shores; after abolition, workers from India, China, and Java. Centuries of mingling and mixing have created a true cultural pastiche — and a unique cuisine to match.



STEVE DUNK

HUU VIN DUY

Nowhere is this fusion of ethnicities and flavours more apparent than in Suriname's capital. A city of some 250,000 that sprawls across the Suriname River flats, Paramaribo boasts an 1842-inaugurated synagogue adjacent to its largest mosque, and a central core of Dutch-Creole wooden architecture that is a UNESCO World Heritage site. At its heart is Fort Zeelandia, Paramaribo's oldest building (1640) and home to both the national museum (with a stellar collection of pre-Columbian and Amerindian artefacts) and the atmospheric Baka Foto (with its river terrace restaurant and courtyard brasserie). From here, the breezy *waterkant*, dotted with cafés, stretches through to the city's Central Market.



...Javanese cafés abound throughout the country...

There's no better place to become grounded in the cuisine than in one of Paramaribo's markets, where vendors offer all manner of fresh and saltwater fish, squashes, hot peppers and tropical fruit: think rambutan, tamarind, pomelo, and *sterappel*. Greens feature prominently in Surinamese cooking, including the colossal *tajerblad* (arrowleaf elephant ear) — boiled as a side-dish or chopped into soups — and the ubiquitous *kouseband* (yard-long beans), which appear in everything from Indian-style masalas and Chinese stirfries to Javanese *petjel* and Dutch-inspired stews.

The Kwatta market provides our first insight into the dominant Javanese influence on local cuisine, as we queue up among the vendors of *nasi* (fried rice) and »

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SURINAME



STEVE DUNK



SERVES 6

SAOTO AJAM

THE SECRET TO this wonderfully fragrant and fresh tasting soup is to start with a whole chicken. The skin and bones add richness, flavour and body to the stock, while the gently poached meat remains tender and juicy.

STOCK

Chicken 1 whole, giblets removed

Water 8 cups

Lemongrass 2 stalks, bruised

Garlic 4 cloves, bruised

Kaffir Lime Leaves 3

Ginger 1" knob, bruised

Black Peppercorns 1 Tbs

Bay Leaves 2

Salt 2 tsp

1 PLACE the chicken and all other ingredients into a stock pot or large Dutch oven. Bring to a boil then immediately reduce the heat to a low simmer and cook, covered for 30 minutes.

2 REMOVE the chicken from the stock¹ and place it in a roasting pan or on a rimmed baking sheet and allow to cool.

3 WHEN the chicken is cool, strip off the meat and reserve.² Return the skin, bones and any accumulated juices to the stockpot and bring back to a lively simmer. Cook, covered, for another 30 minutes, then strain the stock and discard the solids.

¹ An easy way to do this is to place your roasting pan or baking sheet next to the pot on the stove then insert the handle of a wooden spoon into the chicken cavity and carefully lift the bird from the hot liquid.

² Don't worry if some of the chicken meat is still pink, it will be cooked again when you make the soup.

GARNISHES

Sliced Hard Boiled Eggs

Fried Shallots

Bean Sprouts

Fresh Coriander Leaves

Kecap Manis

SOUP

Ground Coriander 3 Tbs

Ground Cumin 1 tsp

Black Peppercorns 1 tsp

Ground Turmeric 1 tsp

Vegetable Oil 1 Tbs

Garlic 1 clove, crushed

Ginger 1" knob, grated

Bay Leaf 1

Lemongrass 1 stalk, bruised

Kaffir Lime Leaves 3

Salt 1 tsp

Lime Juice from 2 limes

4 IN a small heated skillet, toast the coriander, cumin, peppercorns and turmeric for about 30 seconds, stirring, until fragrant. Remove the skillet from the heat and set aside.

5 **HEAT** the vegetable oil in a large Dutch oven. Add the ginger and garlic and sauté until softened and fragrant.

6 **ADD** the chicken stock, bay leaf, lemongrass, lime leaves and salt. Simmer, uncovered, for 15 minutes.

7 **ADD** the shredded chicken and simmer for 5 minutes more, or until the chicken is cooked through.

8 **REMOVE** the Dutch oven from the heat and add the lime juice. Serve the soup in individual bowls with the garnishes, or bring the soup and toppings to the table and allow guests to customize their own bowl of saoto.





PHOTOS THIS PAGE
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

Chile peppers at the market; Cassava roots; Fresh-picked coconuts; Fresh cassava bread on the griddle.



STEVE DUNK



«*bami* (fried noodles) for *dawet*, an iced beverage of lemongrass syrup and coconut milk, studded with tapioca pearls. Javanese cafés abound throughout the country, and *sate* and *loempia* (Javanese spring rolls) are sold as snacks everywhere.

Travellers to Suriname will find a phrasebook a useful accessory, as Dutch continues to be the official language and Sranan Tongo — a European- African creole — is common on the street. Speak English and you're sure to raise heads; daily direct flights from Amsterdam mean that the tourist population is also primarily Dutch. English is a popular third language, however, and although the menu at Suriname's home-grown roti restaurant chain, Grand Roopram, is Dutch-only, the English-speaking staff are happy to help you decipher it. Here the strictly local crowd attests to the authenticity and quality of the chicken and vegetarian *masalas*, which are scooped from plate to mouth, *sans* cutlery, with soft folds of roti flatbread. Dishes of Indian origin in Suriname seem to find their primary expression in roti shops, but Martin's House of Indian Food, just outside the city core, ramps up the variety with tasty biryanis, tandoori, and dals.

Moksi aleisi means "mixed rice" in Sranan Tongo, and this Surinamese menu staple — prepared with salt beef, dried shrimp, tomatoes, and a cook's choice of local herbs and vegetables — has its origin in 17th-century slave culture. At Rode Ibis restaurant, the *moksi aleisi* arrives with a side of chicken, but on the waterfront deck of Cafe Broki, it finds an additional accompaniment by way of *pom*. Commonly served at Surinamese weddings and birthdays, *pom* is credited to early Portuguese-Jewish plantation owners, who replaced the traditional potato base of this citrus-juice-and-tomato-laced mash with the more readily available grated *tajer* root.

Suriname's once-prolific plantations have declined since the end of the 19th century to little more than a handful of romantically derelict mills and warehouses. Notable exceptions include its sole remaining coffee producer, Plantage Katwijk (open for tours), and the extensively restored Plantage Fredericksdorp, which offers heritage accommodation and an excellent café amid its sprawling gardens. Fredericksdorp is accessible only by boat, but our Bentley Rondvaarten charter from Paramaribo provides an opportunity to see the pink-bellied Guiana dolphins that »

...More than 80 percent of the country remains swathed in rainforest...

« fish the estuary, while attentive owner William Ritfeld serves up commentary on the riverbank sights — as well as slices of *bojo*, a cassava and coconut cake that is a Surinamese dessert staple.

Three quarters of Suriname's population reside in Paramaribo and its suburbs; beyond the capital district, roads are few and far between. Save for a coastal strip that extends across the northern border, more than 80 percent of the country remains swathed in rainforest, accessible only by plane, or by a network of rivers pocked with rapids.

Heading west by pavement along the country's marshy seacoast, we pause at roadside stalls for smoked fish, fresh coconut water, and cassava chips. In Coronie district, beekeepers offer *parwa* honey for sale, which proves irresistible with its flavour of black mangrove nectar. As we approach Nickerie, the landscape opens into broad rice fields, farmed by artisanal producers as well as the efficient Manglie corporation — who take rice production to unusual new heights, literally, by sowing and treating their crops by airplane.

Our destination is Bigi Pan, a 680-square-kilometre wetland that hosts annual migrations of over half a million shorebirds and a nesting ground for scarlet ibis. Clouds of pink flamingoes wheel over the main lagoon, and in the mangrove along the 8.5-kilometre access canal, we spy pygmy kingfishers, linedated



PHOTOS THIS PAGE FROM
TOP In Suriname's rainforest; Smoked fish at a roadside stand. PHOTOS
FACING PAGE FROM LEFT Plantation ruins; *Tijerblad* for sale at a market.

STEVE DUNK

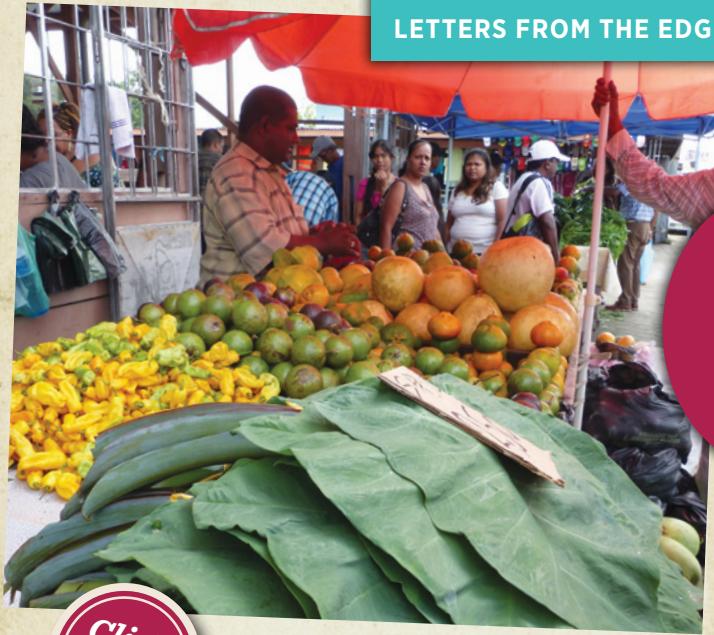


woodpeckers, and kiskadees. Our accommodation — a bare hammock shed on stilts in the middle of the lagoon — poses particular challenges for cooking. But chef-guide Rogier Wiratma proves up to the task with a pot of iconic Javanese *saoto*, rich with chicken broth, galangal, and lemongrass, topped with crisp vermicelli, bean sprouts, and hard-boiled egg.

From Nieuw Nickerie, a trip up the Corantijn River brings us to the indigenous Amerindian villages of Orealia and Klein Kwamalasamutu. Here we are treated to a dance performance and a traditional meal of *pepra watra*: a soup of cassava water and Madame Jeanette peppers, into which we are encouraged to crumble pieces of crispy cassava flatbread. While fish is the standard protein in this dish, our version features paca, a large rodent that is widely hunted. The soup is a delight for those with a yen for habanero-like heat; the chaser of *casiri* (cassava beer) we deem an acquired taste.

Access to Suriname's wild interior is provided by a nascent eco-tourism industry, which ebbs and flows with the country's economic and political tides. The ebb is apparent at Brownsberg Nature Park, a mountain preserve woven with hiking trails and sparkling waterfalls — but whose research facilities show obvious signs of decay. Howler monkeys sound their hair-raising chorus regularly here, and a small troop appears in a treetop one day. Agoutis, toucans, and black curassows make appearances, too, and night brings a symphony of toads and tree frogs.

The economic ebb gets more personal at Blanche Marie, where the once-flourishing Guesthouse Dubois, with its riverside cottages and alfresco dance-bar, has withered to a dream that died with its owner. Accommodations may be reduced to hammock shelters and a self-catering kitchen, but the dual treasures of Blanche Marie and Eldorado Falls, and a forest endowed with eight monkey species, still draw those willing to tackle 315 kilometres of dirt roads and 4x4 track. Here, Cook Rogier comes through again, with *bruine boenen* — hearty Dutch-Creole beans, laced with salt meat and allspice.



We probe still further into the country's interior. On the Upper Suriname River, we motor by *korjaal* (dugout canoe) past villages from whose shores women wash laundry, dishes, and children. The women's bright *pangi* wraps whisper of Africa — and well they might. This is the realm of the Saamaka, the largest subgroup of the Maroon people, descended from slaves who escaped plantations in the 17th and 18th centuries to carve their own communities out of the jungle. Upstream, the remarkable Saamaka Marron Museum provides insight into the rich African traditions that persist here.

Some villages offer rustic tourist accommodations. Our package at the comfortable Anaula Nature Resort includes medicinal plant walks, village visits and night-time caiman spotting. But as the first tourists to stay at Semoisie village, we are embraced by its residents, coached in cassava breadmaking from garden plot to woodfire griddle, and plied with homey Maroon cooking featuring the bounties of the season: sweet potatoes and pumpkins, river-fish and chicken, *tajerblad* and bananas, and everything peanut.

Back in Paramaribo for our final meal, we head to the *Blauwgrond* district to restaurant Jakarta: Taste of Java. The gracious decor and refined menu are a stark contrast to our upriver noshing — but a fitting end to our tour of the country's cultural, culinary, and geographic potpourri. Like Suriname itself, my *ajam daging santen* (redolent with curry, coconut milk, and local vegetables) is multi-layered and globally-inspired — and begs for a return sampling. 

Calgary-based writer **CATHERINE VAN BRUNSCHOT** last feature for **TASTE & TRAVEL** was about the Camargue region of France.



Baka Foto
www.bakafoto.com

Grand Roopram
www.grandoopramroti.com

Martin's House of Indian Food
www.appartementenbina.com/EN/martin.htm

Rode Ibis
www.hosta-appartementen.nl/red-ibis

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