

Caribbean



ESSENTIALS

Getting there

British Airways (ba.com) flies to Grenada from Gatwick via Antigua twice weekly and offers a six-night stay at Calabash Luxury Boutique Hotel from £5,897pp including breakfast and flights, for travel in March

Touring there

The L'Esterre Estate Tour (esterreorganicgrenada.com) costs £45pp and lasts approximately three hours, including a 90-minute walk through the estate and farm-to-table picnic-style lunch, plus the chance to take home any fruit you pick from the estate

Entry requirements

Only fully vaccinated visitors are allowed entry into Grenada. Arrivals must obtain a negative Covid PCR test result a maximum of three days before travel and complete an online health declaration. See gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/grenada/entry-requirements

More information

Grenada Tourism (puregrenada.com)

◀ Rich mix: the Grenadian capital St George's

If you plant a cricket bat here, it will grow'

Spice connoisseur Rachel Walker gets a taste for nutmeg on the lush, bountiful island of Grenada

The pursuit of the perfect mouthful has long inspired adventures: whisky buffs make pilgrimages to the Scottish Highlands; truffle connoisseurs stalk Piedmont's oak forests; ham lovers head to Andalusia, driven by a porcine lust for melting Ibérico ham fat.

My perfect mouthful happened soon after we landed in Grenada. It was our first breakfast on the beach at Calabash Hotel, which lies close to the capital St George's: thick slices of French toast with a custardy-warm centre, cold creme fraiche and nut brittle, the whole dish alive with fragrant, freshly grated nutmeg from nearby L'Esterre Estate.

It was this nutmeg that had brought me to Grenada. Since I founded the single-origin spice company Rooted Spices, the tri-island Caribbean archipelago known as the Spice Islands had been firmly on my radar. Despite being no bigger than Jersey, Grenada is one of the biggest global producers of nutmeg and is thought to have some of the best spice-growing conditions in the world.

Without much arm-twisting, my husband and two-year-old daughter came along for the ride. So as the sand on L'Anse Aux Epines Beach started to heat

up, we piled into the Toyota hatchback we had hired for the week, pointed it towards the island interior and headed off in pursuit of my quarry. In minutes we were winding round tight hairpin bends and climbing steeply into Grenada's lush highlands where ferns, cocoa and soursop grow rampantly. Temperatures hover at 30C year-round, rain comes in short, tropical bursts and the volcanic slopes make for good drainage – perfect nutmeg territory.

I am acutely aware that spice sourcing trips have not always been so idyllic; they form some of the uglier chapters of history, wrought with conflict and exploitation. Nutmeg was a particular point of contention. Before the 19th century, the entire world's nutmeg supply came from the Banda Islands: 11 small, volcanic outcrops in modern-day Indonesia. The Dutch had a monopoly and the limited supply meant that prices rocketed as Europeans were, in the words of the food writer Elizabeth David, "quite serious nutmeg addicts".

Cakes, custards and cured meats were crammed with alarming amounts of Banda nutmeg until the mid-19th century – but as new trade routes opened and new growing regions were discovered, spices seemed to lose their lustre. Perhaps it was changing tastes or wider availability, but the broader picture since has been one of growing commoditisation. Now supermarket spices are listed as coming from "countries of multiple origin" and cheap jars of pre-ground nutmeg gather dust on pantry shelves.

Only a backlash is brewing. As with coffee and chocolate, more home cooks are appreciating what a difference provenance makes. Buying "single-origin" spices means sourcing them from countries with the best growing conditions, the best climate and generations of local expertise to get the most from harvests. The proof is in the tasting – and it is that which brought me to L'Esterre Estate, where I intended to find the best nutmeg and bring it back to British kitchens.

As we pulled into the hilltop plantation on the east of the island, my first impression was of overwhelming lushness. Single leaves sprouted into vast canopies and branches bent under the weight of ripe fruit. "My uncle says that if you plant a cricket bat here, it will grow," said Bobbie Garbutt, the fourth-generation nutmeg grower who recently took over running the estate. Her enthusiasm was infectious – she was talking nutmeg before I even got out of the car.

When nutmeg seeds first arrived on the Caribbean island in 1843, it was introduced as an ornamental tree rather than a cash crop. But when the Banda Island plantations were decimated by myristica blight in the 1850s, canny Grenadians got planting and by the late 1870s the country was a global player. As spice production continued to boom, Garbutt's great-grandfather, Lawrence "Ram" Ramdhanny, a pharmacist descended from north Indian immigrants, spotted an opportunity and branched into commodities trading, allowing him to buy L'Esterre Estate in 1949.

It cannot be overstated how important the crop has been for the island. Nutmeg is infused throughout national dishes, bright nutmeg motifs adorn walls and co-operative nutmeg processing plants dominate town centres such as Grenville and Gouyave. At the turn of the 21st century, 30 per cent of Grenadians' income was linked to the production of nutmeg and the small island produced 20 per cent of the global nutmeg supply.

In 2004, all this changed in one night. Hurricane Ivan tore across the island and in the space of 45 terrifying minutes desecrated its nutmeg crops. Garbutt drove around in the aftermath. "There were only palm trees left standing," she said. "Everything else was flattened." The shallow-rooted nutmeg trees are not designed to withstand high winds – and certainly not gusts of 165mph.

Over lunch in the estate's buchan (plantation house), Lauren, Garbutt's aunt, described how its zinc roof was whipped off: "We never found it." She sheltered in a back room with a group from her church while the rain poured in and destroyed her piano. As we listened, with barely a breeze blowing, it



▲ Bake escape: enjoy a spice-infused breakfast on the beach at Calabash Hotel

seemed unfathomable. Around us were trees planted after the hurricane that had since reached maturity.

The family recently opened up the estate for the first time, offering tours to anyone keen to learn more about the island's favourite spice. We began ours at the buchan, where "Auntie Lauren" poured us glasses of cold sorrel juice on the wraparound veranda and sweetly fussed about the suitability of the tour for our young daughter and my pregnant self. Insect repellent was found and our footwear deemed appropriate – Auntie Lauren rolling her eyes at recent cruise ship visitors who came in flip flops.

It all gave the impression the tour was going to be perilous. Instead, Garbutt led us down a gently sloping track, lined with clove, guava and tonka bean trees. It presented my daughter with a veritable feast: she sucked on slimy, sour cocoa beans, devoured a whole hand of small sweet bananas and slurped coconut water from a shell cracked open by

Single leaves sprouted into vast canopies and branches bent under the weight of ripe fruit



"Mister Mark", who has spent most of his working life on the estate.

Garbutt knelt in front of an apricot-shaped fruit that had fallen to the forest floor and split open like a conker. A dark nutmeg kernel was bedded inside the cream flesh. It was wrapped in a bright red, leathery mace web and glistened in the high sun. The air was filled with that distinctive sweet-spiced woody scent that once sent explorers wild.

"You can't miss the rich, full presence of good-quality nutmeg in a dish," said Garbutt. "Cheap nutmeg tastes weaker – it disappears like sparkling water. You have to search for the aroma." She should know: a self-confessed addict, she eats it on toast and said she would happily wear a grater on a chain round her neck to ready herself for a nutmeg eventuality.

As with all crops, what differentiates a great nutmeg from a good one is the climate and how plants are cared for. What might be described as "intercropping", "biodiversity" and "regenerative farming" is just how they have been growing nutmeg in Grenada for generations. Forget neat rows of intensively-cultivated trees; here several species are grown together, each tree in the mixed forest bringing something different: some providing shade, others with roots that retain water – the different varieties all enriching the volcanic earth.

Once the crop is harvested, nothing is wasted on the island. Dried nutmeg shells are often used as loose paving, like gravel. The inner cream flesh that surrounds the kernel – the pericarp – is made into a pulp and boiled into jams and jellies. The mace and nutmeg kernel are celebrated by island chefs: nutmeg sings in fish and chicken stew; it flavours ice cream; pancakes are merrily drenched in nutmeg syrup.

Back at the buchan after our tour, we found Auntie Lauren had laid out an Indo-Caribbean feast. There were hot, crisp *pholourie* (deep-fried, spiced split-pea balls) spiced lentils, rotis, guava pie and fresh-from-the-oven nutmeg cookies. It was the perfect way to end the tour – and as heady nutmeg aromas wafted in from the kitchen, I was in no doubt I had found my new supplier.

As we prepared to head home, there was the delivery of L'Esterre Estate nutmeg to look forward to, and my pledge to start cooking more like a Grenadian. Instead of a modest grating of nutmeg over our winter greens and in a béchamel sauce, I promised Garbutt my tin of whole nutmeg would have a permanent place alongside the salt and pepper on my kitchen table – ready to capture the warmth and generosity of the island with a liberal and celebratory grating.



▶ Foraging fun: Rachel and her daughter discover some of the delights of L'Esterre Estate

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About the expert

Helen Yemm, former author of The Telegraph's *Thorny Problems*, has written several books about gardening and is also a lecturer, teacher and broadcaster.

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