

[Brandywine Table]

Jamaican Cooking

A STURDY POT + THE RIGHT SPICES

Laura Muzzi Brennan

“TO COOK JAMAICAN FOOD, YOU HAVE TO HAVE TIME and a lot of love,” says Nick Johnston, who along with his father, Bert, co-owns **Miss Winnie’s** in West Chester. Time and love infuse more than the jerk chicken and rum cake at this take-out or sit-in casual. They’re behind the Johnstons’ easy rapport with customers and generous support of local community organizations.

No wonder then that Miss Winnie’s has become popular with everyone from students to business people to food lovers in search of authentic Jamaican dishes. (Editor’s note: Miss Winnie’s won a 2019 *County Lines* Best of the Best Award.)

Cooking for others—and the dream of owning a restaurant—were central to the Johnstons’ family life years before Nick and Bert opened in October 2017. As a child living in Jamaica, Bert learned to cook from his mother, Miss Winnie, known as much for her generous spirit as for her food. When the family immigrated to the United States while Bert was a teenager, their generations-old recipes and spirit of hospitality came with them.

As Bert built his 20-year career in IT, he cooked for pleasure—especially at the family’s annual Christmas gathering where his food drew raves. (A friend from Paris deemed Bert the



Bert, left, and Nick Johnston

best “cooker,” a term he still uses to describe himself.) Nick, whose background is in sales, grew up watching his dad and mom in the kitchen and spending every holiday with his grandmother.

When Bert had to choose whether to leave his IT position or relocate, he and Nick figured it was the right time to pursue their dream.

At Miss Winnie’s, jerk chicken rules the roost. People also flock to the restaurant for the chicken and beef patties, turnovers with a flaky golden crust stuffed with spicy meat filling. The jerk burger—Bert’s popular “spiced up” creation served with pickles and jicama slaw on a potato roll—comes three ways. Hungry diners opt for Miss Winnie’s classic or the Naked burger (hold the slaw), while super-hungry diners tuck into the double-patty wonder called Big Nick.

When diners want to expand their palates, Bert and Nick suggest they stop in for the weekend specials: oxtail stew and curry goat platters. A lot of people believe that goat tastes gamey, Nick says.

But at Miss Winnie’s, it’s cooked low and slow until the “barnyard-iness” is gone, and it falls off the bone with a texture resembling pulled pork. Both the oxtail and goat dishes come with authentic Caribbean sides of steamed cabbage, fried plantains as well as rice and peas. For dessert, rum cake tops the list followed by guava swirl cake and plantain tarts.

When I ask about cooking Jamaican food at home, Bert and Nick make it sound so easy: “All you need is a pot plus water plus heat plus your hands plus the right mix of spices. Just put everything in the pot!”

And even though Bert demurs when I ask him for the specific ratios of his jerk mix, I leave our conversation feeling convinced that with an easygoing attitude—and a sturdy pot—all will be well in the kitchen and beyond.



Miss Winnie



Miss Winnie’s Rum Cake

Fried Plantains

Though plantains look like long, green bananas with thicker skin, they don’t have a banana’s sweetness. Because plantains are starchy like a potato, they’re typically fried or baked rather than eaten raw. How do you know if a plantain is ripe? It’s mostly black with a little yellow and still firm to the touch. Recipe courtesy of Bert Johnston, Miss Winnie’s.



2 ripe plantains

3 C. canola oil

Large skillet or sauce pan

Peel skin off plantains. Slice plantain about a ¼”–½” thick.

Pour oil in skillet to a depth of 1–2”. Heat to about 350°.

Place sliced plantain in skillet and fry until golden brown on both sides. Depending on the size of your skillet, you may need to fry in batches.

Remove and place on plate on paper towel. Serve immediately.

Makes 4–6 servings.

Rice and Peas (Rice and Red Kidney Beans)

Traditionally, this dish is made with pigeon peas—also called Congo peas, Angola peas or red gram—but red beans are easier to find and work equally well. Recipe courtesy of Bert Johnston.



8 C. water

½ tsp. salt

Jerk 101

Even if you know almost nothing about Jamaican cooking, chances are you’ve heard of jerk. It’s the dry spice mix or wet marinade used to create hot, smoky, sweet jerk chicken and pork that Caribbean dreams are made of.

What’s in jerk seasoning?

At Miss Winnie’s, Bert Johnston mixes up 3–4 liters of his top-secret jerk mix every week. Although he can’t reveal his recipe, he says allspice and Scotch bonnet peppers are essential.

Scotch bonnets, so named because they look like the traditional tam o’shanter hat worn in Scotland, are like habaneros but fruitier.

Fun fact: On the Scoville Scale used to measure heat in peppers, Scotch bonnets and habaneros register about 350,000 SHU (Scoville heat units) while the wimpy jalapeño comes in at a mere 10,000 SHU.

Note: It’s recommended to use both safety glasses and gloves when working with Scotch bonnets, and to wash everything they’ve touched with cold water.

Besides Scotch bonnets and allspice, jerk seasoning usually includes some combination of sugar, salt, onion and garlic powders, dried thyme, nutmeg and ground cinnamon.

Where can I find jerk ingredients?

Most ingredients are easily found in your grocery store. Scotch bonnets might require some searching, so look for them in the store’s Caribbean or Latin sections or do as Bert Johnston does and get them online at Spice Jungle.

Why is it called jerk?

There are two main theories. Theory 1: “Jerk” comes from the Spanish word “charqui” (pronounced chahr-kee) which means dried meat a.k.a. jerky. Theory 2: “Jerking” refers to poking holes in the meat so it absorbs more of the marinade.

- 1 C. coconut milk
- 2 scallions (white, light and dark green parts), chopped or sliced
- ¼ tsp. ground black pepper
- ¼ tsp. dried thyme leaves
- ⅛ tsp. ground Jamaican allspice
- ¼ tsp. garlic powder
- 1 C. red kidney beans, canned or cooked
- 4 C. rice

In a large saucepan, bring 8 C. water and salt to a boil.

Add coconut milk and bring to a slow boil.

Add scallions, pepper, thyme, allspice and garlic powder.

Add red beans while stirring. Add rice while stirring.

Bring to a slow boil, stirring occasionally. Reduce heat.

Cover and simmer until rice is cooked, approximately 20 minutes.

Makes 6 servings.



Curry Chicken

You can make this dish spicy or less so depending on the type of curry powder you use. Recipe courtesy of Bert Johnston.

- 2 lbs. chicken legs and thighs or breasts, boneless/skinless or bone in/skin on (cook’s choice)
- 2 Tb. olive oil
- 1 small onion, sliced or chopped
- 3 scallions (white, light and dark green parts), chopped or sliced
- ½ tsp. dried thyme leaves
- ¼ tsp. allspice
- ½ tsp. garlic powder
- 3 Tb. curry powder (sweet or hot)
- 2 Tb. soy sauce
- 2 Tb. olive oil
- 1 C. water
- Salt to taste



Cut chicken in small pieces and place in a large mixing bowl. Add all other ingredients through soy sauce and combine well. In a large saucepan or skillet, add 2 Tb. olive oil and heat over medium heat. Add contents of mixing bowl slowly to saucepan/skillet and stir. Add a cup of water to mixing bowl and swirl it around. Then add to saucepan. Bring to a boil and reduce heat to a simmer, stirring occasionally while cooking. Let simmer for approximately 40 minutes and add salt to taste. Continue simmering for 20 more minutes, until chicken is cooked through and onions and scallions are soft. Makes 4–6 servings.

Jamaican Johnnycakes

Every culture seems to have its fried dough dumplings—what’s not to love?!—and johnnycakes are the Jamaican version. Served with breakfast or lunch, these slightly sweet dumplings have a texture like a cross between a cakey donut and a biscuit. When I made them, I took Bert and Nick Johnston’s advice to heart: I

took out a big pot—in this case my cast iron wok—and believed, despite the fact that I had never cooked Jamaican food, that it was going to be easy. After a little trial and error, I came up with this recipe which I adapted from Saveur magazine. After biting into my third johnnycake, I decided to dust them with powdered sugar—making them less authentic but so very, very good.



- 2 C. flour
- 2 Tb. sugar
- 1 Tb. baking powder
- ¼ tsp. kosher salt
- 2 Tb. unsalted butter, cold and cut into ½” pieces
- ½ C. plus 2 Tb. whole milk
- Canola, grapeseed oil or other oil with a high smoke point
- Powdered sugar, optional

Combine flour, sugar, baking powder and kosher salt in a large bowl. With your hands, work in the butter until pea-sized pieces form. Add milk and mix with your hands to form a sticky dough. Roll into 1–1½ ” balls. Place on a plate or sheet pan in the refrigerator. (I found the johnnycakes wouldn’t crumble if they spent 5–10 minutes chilling.) Heat 1” oil to 325° in a large high sided frying pan. (Note: You can also use a wok.) Remove dough balls from refrigerator and flatten them just a bit with your palm. Working in batches, place dough balls gently in the oil. Make sure to leave enough room for them to expand. Fry until dough balls take on a deep golden brown color, turning them so they cook evenly, about 6 minutes. A caveat here: it’s difficult to keep the oil at 325° if you’re cooking on top of the stove, so the cooking time can vary depending on the oil temperature. Just keep watching for that golden brown color. If necessary, sacrifice one dough ball to make sure the inside is cooked through. Remove with a slotted spoon and place on brown paper bag or paper towels to absorb oil. Sprinkle with powdered sugar if desired. Makes 12–15 servings.

1-2-3-4 Jamaican Rum Punch

Whether you’re mixing up a pitcher for a few friends or a punchbowl for a crowd, this simple rhyme will help you remember the right ratio: One of sour, two of sweet, three of strong and four of weak. The sour is usually citrus (fresh squeezed lime or lemon juice). Sweet is simple syrup, grenadine or other fruit syrup. Strong is the alcohol (white rum) and weak is water, seltzer or fruit juice. If you use a very sweet fruit juice, you may want to do 2 parts water + 2 parts fruit juice. The bottom line: there’s lots of room for creativity! Here are a few combinations to get you started:



- 1 part lime juice + 2 parts grenadine + 3 parts rum + 4 parts pineapple juice
- 1 part lemon juice + 2 parts simple syrup + 3 parts rum + 4 parts apple cider
- 1 part grapefruit juice + 2 parts fruit punch syrup + 3 parts rum + 4 parts mango juice ♦

Laura traces her love of all things culinary to the first time she leafed through her mother’s Betty Crocker’s Cooky Book—which still occupies a place of honor among her 700+ cookbooks. A passionate supporter of local food, she co-founded a farmers market, judges area food contests, and anticipates restaurant openings with the excitement most people reserve for winning a Mega Millions jackpot.



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