
FOR A GOOD TIME...

Sunshine Daydream

THE AUTHOR RECALLS HER TIME ON TORTOLA AND
RECONSTRUCTS THE FISH CAKES THAT FOLLOWED
HER HOME

By Serena Bass

I arrived in Puerto Rico on Husband Number Two's dime, so I was in first class. As far as I know, having never left the airport, the very best thing about Puerto Rico is the buffet in the first class lounge. After scoring a *free* plateful of chopped, deep-fried pork belly with a side of crisp and sticky-sweet plantains (only pan-fried in half an inch of oil, not deep-fried I hasten to add), I wondered why you would

ever get on a plane and leave this heavenly lounge with its oil-friendly buffet to go somewhere else.

The smiling servers were fascinated by my greed as I went back for thirds. They nudged each other, torn between strict airport manners and macho approval at behavior that would soon build me a much more bootylicious body, suitable for a "real man" who wanted more woman to love.

I pondered whether I could, like Tom Hanks in *The Terminal*, actually live in the airport. But sadly my flight was eventually called, and I had to go.

Tortola Flats

I had been sent to fix problems with a house that Husband #2 and I were building on Tortola, one of the British Virgin Islands. I had been there before but always *à deux* and therefore

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had never appreciated anything myself, or made an independent decision. Or so it seemed to me.

The little airplane chugged

along, finally banked, and started a wide downward arc to the building that was ambitiously called the airport. Seen first through

ragged clouds, the island — patches of green with blond, sickle moon beaches and every shade of turquoise sea — shortly became real.

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Houses, cars, palm trees,
dogs, litter; we landed.

As soon as the air
conditioning was turned off,
the cabin filled with

humidity. I peeled off my
cardigan and left the plane.

Halfway down the steps to
the tarmac, I had to stop and
gulp in the air, which swirled

with gardenias, salt water,
lush leaves and hot tarmac.

An almost tangible blue
wind pummeled my bare
arms and whipped my hair; I

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was in sensory overload. You know how it is when you arrive somewhere and suddenly feel at home; you know the place and it knows you. Well that's how it was.

This was 1992, pre the advent of the cruise ships, and the island was still fabulously scruffy and radically laid-back.

The house's problem-fixing efforts were moving along like molasses trapped in a glacier. Every day, I would leap from my bed and drive a clapped-out truck to pick up our workers. As I rattled at top speed around the serpentine sea road, my first cigarette of the day burning orange in the wind, there would be on the radio at exactly 5:59:30 a.m. a 30-second mix of songs, all

about the sun. "Good Day Sunshine," "Here Comes the Sun," "You Are the Sunshine of My Life," "Sunny" — and on cue that flaming ball of fire would bust through the horizon and rise into the sky. How gorgeous everything was.

I would drive by a little hut set on a rocky promontory, but it was always deserted. A couple of plastic tables were roped to the railing, and a tattered Union Jack flapped on a pole, which was usually capped by a watchful cormorant.

HammerTime

There was lots of sitting around with friends discussing what to do because I couldn't find any

three-inch nails on the island. And where exactly were our green roof tiles? The ones that looked just like the new green ones on the governor's house. And what to do about the most recent mudslide, which had slithered down the mountain overnight and engulfed our new windows that had been dumped on the driveway a month earlier?

"So where *are* all the windows?" a visitor asked after looking around.

"In that giant cowpat," I said.

Someone else said knowledgeably that during the month the windows had spent on the ground, the termites had probably found them anyway, so perhaps the mudslide really wasn't such

a problem. Tortolan logic at its best.

Then, after a lot of commiseration concerning the vagaries of construction on a Caribbean island, my friends and I reached a consensus. Why didn't we just forget the mud and, in ex-pat speak, bugger off to Elizabeth Beach and go surfing? Why not indeed?

Vim and Vigor

One night, driving a bit more slowly, due to a consoling number of beers, I noticed there was a light on in the hut. I thought it would be an excellent idea to stop and investigate. Two local women were inside, scrubbing. The floor, the woodwork, the little fridge, the plastic tables, and a little

stove — nothing could hide from their zealous application of vim and dedicated vigor. There were six new plastic folding chairs and a battered cooler. I recognized Jimmy Cliff singing and some kind of fish spattering brightly in an electric frying pan. The moon on the sea — as always, its silver reflection leading right to our feet — was so bright that the two naked light bulbs seemed a bit silly. Nature had trumped Edison, in spades.

So much for sobering up. We all sat down and opened more beers. The ladies were excited. They were a mother and daughter who had just bought the hut and had big plans. They had some carrot salad in the cooler, and the

fish in the pan turned out to be fish cakes.

“Ya'll try ma fish?” the mother said. It was not so much a question as a statement, “Ya *never* 'ad cakes like dese!” I was informed in the heaviest Island-ese.

I went across the road and picked a couple of limes from a dusty tree. The white plastic knife proffered for cutting wedges snapped almost before touching the lime, so what'cha gonna do? I cut them with a rusty machete and a Samurai-inspired shout of *Hai-ya!*

A squirt of juice over the carrot salad and we started in on the fishcakes, which I gingerly held in a wafer of paper napkin. I took a bite and she was right, I never

'ad!

Big surprise, I never had fishcakes stuffed with (blazing hot) tomato chutney. Brilliant I thought, one-stop shopping. No need for ketchup on the table in this particular hut.

The mother's chutney was laced with Scotch bonnets — the eat 'em and weep of the Capsicum clan, which cleared every passage in my head like a slug of Drano.

Here is my sanitized, back-in-the-USA version with salmon instead of king fish, ginger instead of Scotch bonnets, and Sting playing somewhere in the background.

Questions or

Comments? E-mail

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SALMON FISHCAKES

The forming of the filled fishcakes sounds tricky, but I swear that after the first one or two, you'll be able to do it while whistling "The Harder They Come."

Makes 10 fishcakes.

- 2 whole Idaho potatoes, washed
- 1 pound center cut salmon filet
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
- Salt and pepper for seasoning the fish
- 2 medium onions cut in small dice
- 3 tablespoons flour

- 1/3 cup flat-leaf parsley, minced
- 1 1/2 teaspoons salt
- 3/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 extra-large eggs, whisked
- Vegetable oil for frying

1. Position the rack in the middle of the oven and preheat to 350 degrees F.

2. In a medium pan, cover the potatoes with well-salted water; bring to a simmer, cover, and cook till a skewer enters the potatoes without meeting resistance (30 to 40 minutes depending on their size). Drain and set the potatoes aside to cool.

3. Pick off the outer skin and, holding the whole potato in the palm of your hand for support, grate slowly and firmly on the largest holes of a grater into a wide, shallow bowl.

4. Rub the salmon with 1 tablespoon butter and season well with salt and pepper. Lay the filet on a sheet pan and bake for 15 – 20 minutes, depending on the thickness of the salmon. It should be nearly cooked through but still a little translucent in the middle. Set aside to cool slightly, but do not refrigerate.

5. Melt the remaining tablespoon of butter and add the onions and ½ teaspoon of salt. Cover and sweat for 5

minutes. Set aside.

6. Flake the salmon gently onto the potatoes. Scatter on the onions, flour, parsley, salt, and black pepper. Pour the eggs over the top and, using your hands, gently toss all together till just mixed.

7. Cover the mixture and refrigerate for at least an hour and up to overnight.

8. To make into filled fishcakes, take 2 ounces of mixture in your left hand and form a 3-inch-wide disk with a depression in the middle. Put a tablespoon of chutney (recipe follows) in the depression, then pick up 1 ounce of the mixture with your right hand and (one-handedly!) make a flat

cap to flip on top. Pat around the edges of the cake and check to see if any chutney shows through. If it does, patch with a little of the mixture.

9. Fry in 1/8-inch oil over medium-high heat for 3 minutes on each side, or until crisp and golden brown. If the mixture is cold from the fridge, the cakes might take a little longer.

TOMATO GINGER CHUTNEY

NB: This will last, refrigerated, for 6 months.

Makes 6 cups.

- 10 cloves garlic, peeled and chopped

- 5 tablespoons peeled and chopped fresh ginger
- 3 cups red wine vinegar
- Two 28-oz cans crushed tomatoes (preferably Sclafani brand)
- 3 cups white sugar
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground allspice
- 1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper (or to taste)
- 1/4 cup golden raisins

1. Put the garlic, ginger and 1/2 cup of the vinegar into an electric blender and process at high speed until you get a rough purée.

2. In a 4-quart, heavy-bottomed nonreactive pan, put the purée, the tomatoes, the rest of the vinegar, the sugar, salt and cayenne pepper.

3. Bring to a boil, then lower the heat and simmer gently, uncovered, stirring occasionally with a flat-bottomed wooden spatula, for about 1 1/2 to 2 hours, or until the chutney becomes thick. You may need to lower the heat as the liquid reduces and be sure to scrape the base of the pan, as that is where the chutney could start to stick.

4. Remove from the heat and add the golden raisins. Stir through and set aside to

cool. 🍷