



The Light of Morning

In a town in northwest Haiti, putting good food on the table is both a serious business and a reassuring ritual

By Jocelyn C. Zuckerman Photographs by Ramin Talaie



The truckers, the priests, the foreigners and NGO folks who rumble through this dusty outpost—they all turn up at Madame's Ideal Bar Restaurant at one point or another. It's a comfort in a place with few of them

THE ROOSTERS in Gros-Morne start their screeching around four in the morning, which might explain why life in this Haitian town is already well under way by six. Motorbikes are zipping down the rubble-strewn roads, their drivers honking tinny horns as they navigate around pedestrians and potholes and donkeys. Schoolchildren march by wearing backpacks and neat uniforms; women balancing giant bundles on their heads gossip en route to market.

I've come to this part of Haiti to learn about the mango industry—what many see as a bright spot on otherwise grim economic and environmental fronts—but what I mostly hear about is Madame Ti Roche. The deputy mayor? He eats at her Ideal Bar Restaurant whenever his wife isn't around to cook. The head of the region's leading mango cooperative? Sunday nights invariably find him picking his way through a plate of Madame's chile-flecked *poisson rouge*. The truckers, the priests, the foreigners and NGO folks who rumble through this dusty outpost—they all turn up at Madame's at one point or another. It's a comfort in a place with few of them.

When I flew to Haiti to do some reporting just after last year's earthquake, I'd expected things to be rough. But returning this time, I had allowed myself hope for some improvement. On the four-hour

drive from Port-au-Prince to Gros-Morne, though, the misery pretty much assaults me at every turn. There are the shantytowns materializing on the hills outside of the capital, slapped-together communities of cardboard and bedsheets and bright-blue foreign-issue tarpaulins. There is mountain beyond mountain denuded of plant life; endless stretches of road bordered by nothing but dirt and debris; plastic bottle-clogged rivers; men far too old for work, sweating beneath the weight of medieval-looking carts.

But there is also the sun-sweetened papaya I pick up in Saint-Marc, and the Madame Francis mangoes that will become the staple of my diet over the next few days. Wildly aromatic, they are also intensely juicy and hopelessly stringy—hard to eat, but impossible to resist. In Gros-Morne (or Gwo-Mòn, in Creole—Big Mountain, in any case), I wander the open-air market, where women sit beneath plastic canopies minding bundles of cilantro, thyme, and parsley, little pyramids of oranges, passion fruits, and mirlitons. From a young girl I buy a gloriously sticky cluster of peanuts and cane syrup vibrant with the zing of fresh ginger. Women motion for me to inspect their garlic and shallots, their plastic basins, enamel plates, and preworn blouses, in a way that suggests they expect something from me, but not really.

Sheriline and Magda Petit-Homme at Ideal Bar Restaurant in Gros-Morne, Haiti. Previous pages: women in the town's open-air market.

FOOD SEEMS TO dictate the rhythm of the day. By the time I arrive at Madame's at seven in the morning, the doors have been

thrown open and she and her cooks are out back at work. Shuffling around in canvas sneakers, short braids poking out from beneath a jaunty cap, Madame Ti Roche moves from the braziers of the open-air kitchen to the shadows of the enclosed one, checking on the contents of various saucapans sitting atop glowing coals in wrought-iron stands. She shaves beets with a sharp knife, dropping the scraps onto an upturned pot lid, while another cook peels plantains and hunks of snowy cassava. An older woman in a ragged dress and head kerchief stirs a sizzling pot of *epis*, the Haitian flavor base of garlic, shallots, and chiles, while a fourth breaks down a goat carcass into bite-size chunks. A girl of seven or eight in a Dora the Explorer nightie cuts onions by a storage shed housing a pile of plantains and three noisy chickens.

The conversation is minimal, though when I ask how to make the *mayi moulén* (cornmeal porridge with pinto beans) simmering in one of the pots, the younger cook patiently walks me through the recipe, my friend translating from her Haitian Creole. Madame's place has neither electricity nor running water, but it's one serious operation: in the height of mango season, when the truckers descend on Gros-Morne, the Ideal Bar Restaurant will send out scores of plates in a day.

Chatting on the dusty stoop out

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front with Madame's husband, Wesnel Timothe, I learn that she hasn't always been a cook. She and Timothe grew up together in Gros-Morne but left in 1978 to find work in Port-au-Prince. After saving what they'd made at the textile and shoe factories that employed them, says Timothe, a burly man in his 50s with a skinny gray mustache, they moved back home and found work as a seamstress and a tailor. They opened their restaurant in 1984, posting a menu not unlike the handwritten sheet you'll find taped to the Caribbean-pink wall today: *poulets creole* (spicy, citrusy stewed chicken), *cabrit* (goat's-head stew), and a half dozen other classic Haitian dishes.

But life was better then, says Timothe. "We used to have electricity. Then it became sporadic, and now we hardly have it at all." People also had faucets in their yards. Now he and Madame, who haven't had a tap since 1986, have to pay for water—and for someone to deliver it. In addition to helping run the restaurant, Timothe drives a truck and farms, but he and his wife and six kids still have trouble making ends meet. "We do our best," he shrugs.

It isn't easy. Though Gros-Morne is part of Haiti's fertile Artibonite region, this place faces the same environmental problems as the rest of the country. (For the past several months it's also been battling a cholera epidemic.) Whereas in 1923, 60 percent of Haiti was forested, by 2006 trees covered just 2 percent of the land. "Gros-Morne used to be very green," Deputy Mayor

Ruben Beaugé tells me later in the morning. "But when people wake up and don't have money for food or school fees, they chop a mango tree and sell it for charcoal. Or they sell it to a dry cleaner or a distillery." Despite reforestation efforts and the introduction of solar cookers, Haitians still rely on wood and charcoal as primary sources of fuel, and the impact has been devastatingly apparent.

And then came the earthquake that rocked the capital last January. In the days following the disaster, Gros-Morne's population swelled by more than 5,000, says Beaugé, taxing the city's limited resources even further. "People who hadn't been back for 15 years have now come home," he says. (Among them is Madame's niece Sheriline Petit-Homme, who jumped from the second floor of her Port-au-Prince school and was hospitalized for eight days before decamping to the countryside, where she now helps out at the restaurant.) The World Food Programme showed up with a convoy, but after locals rioted, donors stayed away. "People are starving here," Beaugé says.

He is a regular at Madame Ti Roche's, and he envisions a day when more locals will be able to appreciate her talent. "Most people here can't pay 200 gourdes [five dollars] for a plate of food," he says. Even so, today the 20-seat place is filling up by noon, as men drop their weary bodies into the molded-plastic chairs. (Other than the staff, I'm the only female in the place.) I'm trying to work out the logic behind the products displayed on the shelves—laundry detergent, straws, cornflakes,

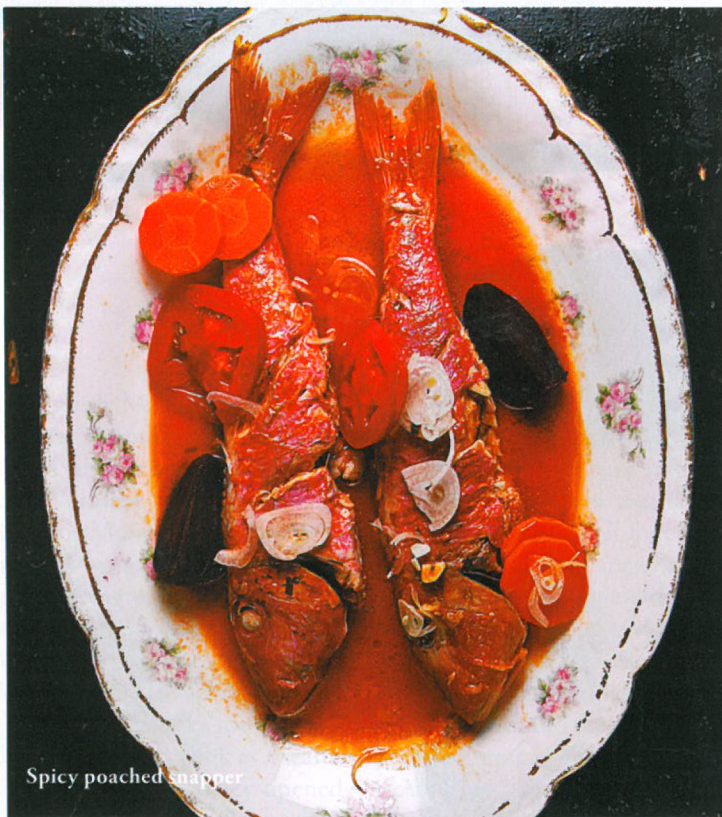
canned sports shakes, Bermudez, El Dorado rum—when a teenager in cutoff denim shorts and patent-leather flip-flops approaches to tell me what's available. (The posted menu represents the Platonic ideal of what might be on offer on any given day.) Staticky West African music floats up from a transistor radio; a faint breeze blows the ivory curtains in and out of the open door. Eventually she returns and sets a plate on the plastic place mat.

My poisson rouge, a whole red snapper from the nearby seaside town of Gonaives, swims in a brick-colored sauce rich with garlic and the heat of Scotch bonnets; it comes with hunger-busting mounds of rice and cornmeal mush and dense cylinders of boiled plantain and cassava. The preacher at the next table stops dismantling his cell phone the moment his goat's-head stew is set down, and he doesn't look up until his plate is clean. In fact, with food on all the tables, conversation in the place has come to a halt.

Hours later, as the sun begins to ease its way behind the mountains, and smoke from cooking fires rises in the distance, Madame and her crew are still at it. The women at the market have begun to pack up their wares and head for home; the men are throwing back beers in the local shipping-container-cum-bar. By ten, the staff of Ideal Bar Restaurant will finally clamp shut the padlock and step into the moonlit night. The roosters will be crowing before they know it. 🐔

A cook at Ideal Bar Restaurant in Gros-Morne, Haiti.





Spicy poached snapper

Poisson Rouge

(Spicy Poached Snapper)

Serves 2–4

This flavorful poached fish is topped with a salad of fresh and boiled vegetables to balance the piquant broth.

- 2 1-lb. red snappers, scaled
- 1 cup thinly sliced shallots
- ½ cup fresh lime juice
- 1 tbsp. finely chopped scallion
- ½ tsp. mustard powder
- 1 sprig thyme
- 1 Scotch bonnet chile, split
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- ¼ cup canola oil
- 6 cloves garlic, chopped
- 1 tbsp. tomato paste
- 1 tbsp. sugar
- Boiled sliced carrots and beets
- Sliced tomatoes

1. Score sides of fish; place in a shallow dish. Whisk together half the shallots, lime juice, scallion, mustard, thyme, chile, salt, and pepper in a bowl and pour over fish; marinate 30 minutes.

2. Heat oil in a 12" skillet over medium-high heat. Add garlic and cook, stirring, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add tomato paste and

cook until it begins to caramelize, about 2 minutes. Add 1 cup water and bring to a boil; cook, stirring, until almost evaporated, about 8–10 minutes. Remove fish from marinade and set aside; add marinade and sugar to skillet and cook, stirring, until shallots are soft, 4–5 minutes. Add fish and ¾ cup water and cover skillet; cook, turning once, until fish is cooked through, 8–12 minutes. Transfer fish to a large serving platter. Season cooking liquid with salt and pepper and pour through a fine strainer over fish. Garnish with remaining shallots; serve with carrots, beets, and tomatoes.

Poulet Creole

(Haitian Stewed Chicken)

Serves 6–8

This traditional poultry dish owes its bright, spicy kick to a tart marinade of lime juice and fiery Scotch bonnet peppers.

- 1 3–4-lb. chicken, cut into 8 pieces
- 1 tsp. kosher salt, plus more to taste
- 3 cloves garlic
- 2 scallions, roughly chopped
- 2 sprigs parsley
- 1 sprig thyme, stemmed
- 1 Scotch bonnet chile, split
- 1 green bell pepper, stemmed,



Haitian stewed chicken

- seeded, and thinly sliced
- 2 tbsp. canola oil
- 1 large yellow onion, halved and thinly sliced
- ½ red bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and thinly sliced
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 2 tbsp. tomato paste

1. Place chicken in a shallow baking dish. Purée salt, garlic, scallions, parsley, thyme, Scotch bonnet chile, half the green bell peppers, and ½ cup water in a food processor and pour over chicken. Chill for 4 hours.

2. Heat oil in a 6-qt. Dutch oven

over medium-high heat. Scrape marinade from chicken; reserve marinade. Add chicken to pot and cook, turning once, until browned, about 10 minutes. Transfer chicken to a plate and set aside. Add remaining green bell peppers, onions, and red bell peppers to pot, season with salt and pepper, and cook, stirring, until soft, 8–10 minutes. Add tomato paste and cook, stirring, for 1 minute. Return chicken to pot, along with reserved marinade and 1 cup water. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to medium-low, and cover pot slightly; cook, stirring occasionally, until chicken is tender, 25–30 minutes. Remove from heat and season with salt and pepper.

Fruit and Fire

You could substitute another kind of chile for the Scotch bonnets called for in these recipes, but it's worth seeking out the real thing. A variety of the species *Capsicum chinense*, the Scotch bonnet is so closely related to the habanero that the two are often confused. Typically red, orange, or yellow when ripe, the Scotch bonnet is shorter and rounder than the habanero; some say it got its name because of its resemblance to a Scottish tam-o'-shanter hat. It is one of the hottest chiles around—as much as 60 times as hot as a jalapeño—but it's got flavor as well as heat. Widely used in both Haiti and Jamaica, the Scotch bonnet has a distinctive floral, fruity character perfectly suited to the spicy-sweet curries and citrus marinades of the Caribbean.



—Beth Kracklauer