



—— FIRST-PERSON, FAR-FLUNG ——

# TURKS AND CAICOS

*At the Caribbean Food & Wine Festival,  
SLOANE CROSLEY seeks to understand culinary  
tourism, with a little help from the personal chef of the  
late Nelson Mandela*

*Photography by CHARLOTTE KIDD*



**LET US** pause for a moment and consider the concept of the food festival. It's no secret that in recent years culinary tourism has seen a massive boom in America (the Food & Wine Classic in Aspen and the Austin Food & Wine Festival being of particular note), drawing big-name chefs and their fans from across the globe. But I have never been among those fans. I always figured attending a food festival would be like going to a festival for water. *May I interest you in this artisanal ice cube?* After all, how much can society dress up the act of eating? Or continue to identify foodies in a tone as culturally self-serious as we identify opera fanatics? I assumed food festivals were merely an excuse for people to eat, drink, relax and go somewhere they'd like to go anyway.

Then I thought: Wait a minute ... that sounds pretty good.

So off I went to get fed, checking myself into the five-star Grace Bay Club at the northeast end of Providenciales in Turks and Caicos. Turks is host to the Caribbean Food & Wine Festival, now in its third year. Compared to established festivals worldwide, it's very new, putting the festival and me on a fairly even playing field of experience. The festival is also new in its approach to marquee names: This year's featured chefs and wine purveyors were all women, a rarity in this world of Bourdains and Batalis. They included Tiffany Derry, of "Top Chef" fame, and Christina Tosi, of New York's Momofuku Milk Bar.

"I've never been to Turks and Caicos before—that's really why I came," Tosi confessed to me with an impish grin. "I mean, it's so beautiful. But you know, there are also the flavors of the Caribbean here—that first bite of fresh pineapple and cream that you can't really get in New York."

Also in attendance were Nelson Mandela's daughter, Makaziwe, and his granddaughter, Tukwini, both of House of Mandela wines. They flew in from South Africa along with the star attraction of the festival: home-cooking guru Xoliswa Ndoiyi, who had been the personal chef to Mandela since before he took office and up until his death this past December, mere months after I met her.

"Who is cooking for your boss if you're here?" I asked Chef Xoli, as she's known. "Has he turned to the microwave?"

"No!" She shook her whole body, her corpulent presence reminiscent of a Persian cat. "I can't imagine this."

"Please," Tukwini said, laughing. "My grandfather has never used a microwave in his life."

The biggest appeal of a festival like this was that any guest could have this same conversation. Because it's still in its nascent stages, all the events were wonderfully small

and the chefs were accessible. The formal opening dinner had fewer than 100 guests, including the premier of Turks and Caicos and a group of friends who founded a catering company in Denver.

The palpable intimacy and exclusivity of the opening dinner permeated the entire festival. But intimacy is not without its drawbacks. One couldn't simply dip in and out of the events, as one might with a larger (albeit more impersonal) food festival. This was not a weekend for the structurally averse. Though the three days of events would vary by venue and menu, each consisted of formally seated meals and lectures, including one that necessitated the consumption of blue cheese cheesecake for breakfast. Each meal, though generally tasty (aside from the cheesecake incident), demanded a three-hour surrender of stomach and palate.

On my way out of a luncheon the second day, having washed down some molten chocolate cake with a second glass of noontime wine, I pondered the blur of cuisine and events I had experienced thus far: foie gras balls and "chocolate dirt" at the Gourmet Safari, lobster salad with candied peanuts at the Welcome Dinner, cheddar cheese and melba toast at the Food & Wine Pairing. Just as I was longing for a bit of local—and unsupervised—flavor, I was fortuitously elbowed by Chef Xoli. She gave me a half-moon of a smile and pulled her shawl over her shoulders.

"Are you enjoying yourself?"

"I think so."

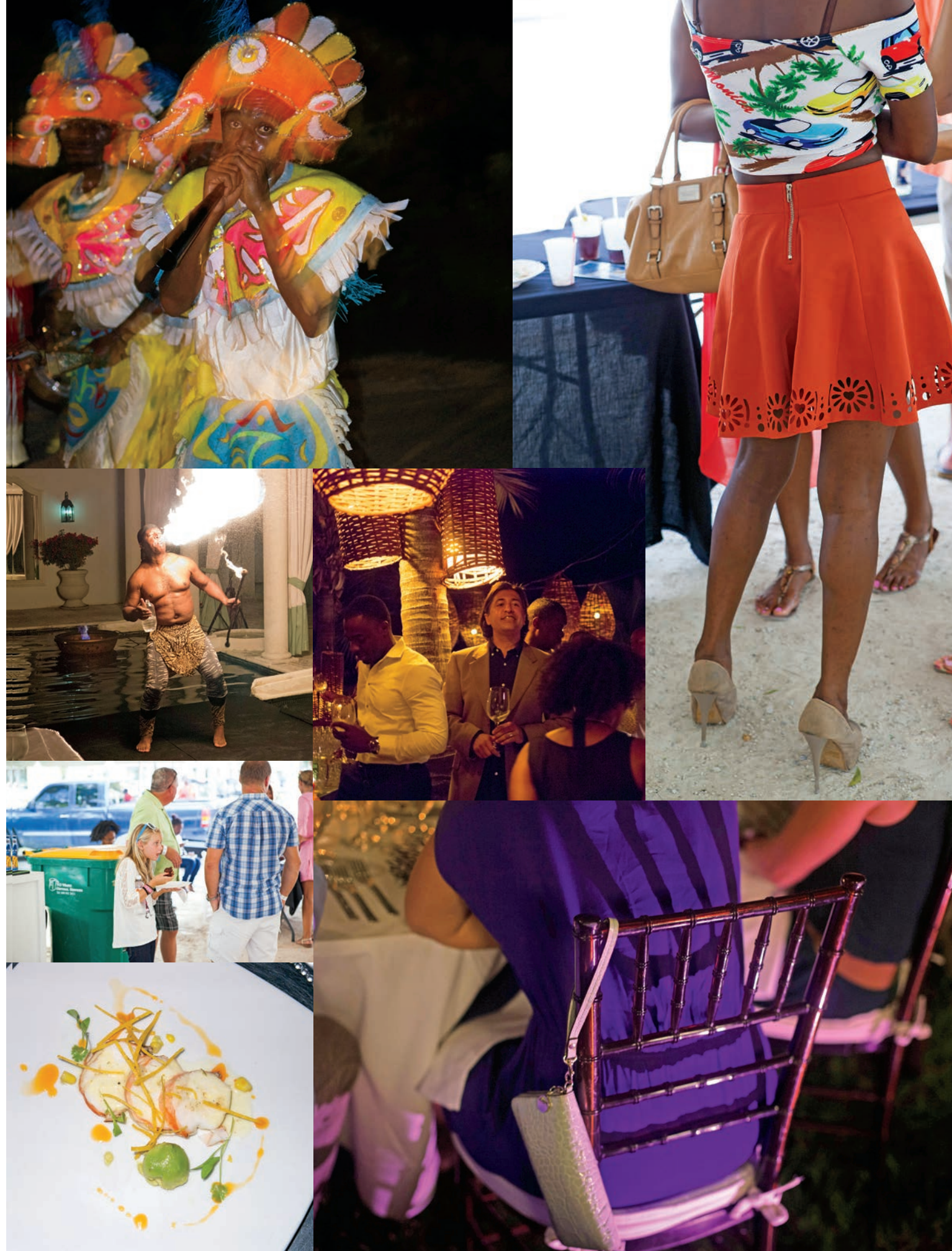
Then she gestured at the two slender Canadian ex-pats who'd graciously let me sit with them—one a dead ringer for Eva Longoria and both wearing Milly dresses and Tory Burch sunglasses—and asked me if I had ever heard "that expression about not trusting skinny chefs." I told her that I had—and that it was why I never trusted sober bartenders.

Something in her laugh led me to believe that she too was craving an off-the-itinerary adventure, one that didn't require her to make long, self-congratulatory speeches about her cooking.

"I like to let the food speak for itself," she said, shrugging.

And so the next day, at her suggestion, we took advantage of our hour of downtime to hunt for flavored sea salt. (Turks and Caicos is famous for it.) Chef Xoli also wanted to purchase hot sauce for her son who thinks "nothing is hot." After selecting a bottle with a promising name, one with an expletive in its title, she wanted to continue exploring but had a meal to plan. She hugged me goodbye and drove back toward her resort. But I wandered on, my stomach and my brain still equally unable to digest the concept of a food festival.

Perhaps it was simply that I like my vacation calorie intake to have the guise of the accidental, and the word "festival" put too glutinous a point on it. And even if I felt no shame, I am a woman, not a cow—I have only the one stomach. Then again, I also have only the one set of ears





and eyes, and music and art festivals have never confounded me. So why could I not get on board with the food version? Perhaps it's because when the art at MoMA starts to blend together and the music at Coachella sounds the same, I can walk away without a bad taste in my mouth. That's when it hit me. By virtue of raising food to the level of art and music, our culture has raised food fans to the level of art and music fans. But the experiences themselves aren't parallel. When you go to a gallery or a concert, you aren't being told how fantastic the fare is by the person serving it to you. Your takeaway is your own. Although I will say that at every exhibit and concert I've ever been to, I've marveled at how fans relish the appearance of dedication, pointedly staring at a painting for 20 minutes and ardently clapping for a second encore when really? All they want to do is go home.

I had walked in circles. Suddenly I heard reggae music floating out of an open-air tent down the road. I remembered that today, the final day of the festival, was the Island Street Food Fair. This was one of the only festival events not held on a hotel property. As I approached, I saw hope—the tent was lined with steaming grills of spicy jerk chicken, trays of seasoned conch, fresh salad with near-neon avocado slices. A crowd had gathered, sucking on local Turk's Head beer and tasting breaded grouper from the aptly named Mr. Grouper's. Like most people, I am a high/low eater, appreciative of Michelin stars and authentic street food alike. I had assumed the Caribbean Food & Wine Festival would blend the two, using the former's haute cuisine flavors and ingredients to brighten the latter. Hopefully, as the festival continues to grow, it will do just that. But for now, I was grateful for the laid-back environment in which to savor a mouth-watering sampling of genuine Turks cuisine.

**T**HAT NIGHT, at the Dinner With the Stars—the final event of the festival—a V-formation of beachside banquet tables was covered in glasses and candles. A warm breeze drifted off the ocean. I spotted Chef Xoli, who patted the empty seat next to her. For this event, the featured chefs had relinquished their signature recipes to local cooks. Chef Xoli had supplied her recipe for chilled green pea soup, which was served with seared diver scallops and caviar. She was visibly nervous, patting her forehead with a handkerchief. Sitting there beside her was the culinary equivalent of watching a plane take off, only to notice the pilot standing next to you on the ground, waving.

After her soup was served, a fashionable Chicago woman across from us exclaimed that it was “the most amazing” soup she had ever tasted, that she “would eat only this every day for the rest of her life” if she could. True, the soup was great, a delicious tribute to the peas that had been split in its name. But even Chef Xoli greeted the woman's enthusiasm with a polite skepticism.

“It's soup,” she said, smiling.

As for me, I was pretty much useless after the first course, having had my fill in more ways than one. I had a dirty secret: On the walk back

from the Island Street Food Fair, I stumbled upon Island Scoop, a picturesque pink ice-cream shop complete with in-use jungle gym outside. I stood on line behind a few Turks kids hopping up and down from anticipation. In a few minutes, they'd be hopping up and down from sugar rush. After trying a few samples, feigning the concentration of a scientist and the palate of a chef, I chose an oversized scoop of plain coconut ice cream. Large chunks of fresh coconut shavings burst forth from around the cool dome. It was, by far, the best coconut ice cream I'd ever tasted, made all the more delicious by my ability to decide for myself that it was the best.

I ate the entire thing. ☺



“PLEASE, MY GRANDFATHER HAS NEVER USED A MICROWAVE IN HIS LIFE.”