



Vie's Snack Shack

By Louise Wollman

The family roots go back 200 years but the garlic-fried chicken originated with Vie herself. The Sewer (rhymes with door) name is familiar in St. John but Vie and her Snack Shack are touted as far away as Madagascar, and in merely 27 years. You won't find her in Doyle, but you will in Fodor and Frommer.

At 18 degrees, 20 minutes west longitude, 64 degrees, 40 minutes north latitude—far from roly Maho, lumpy Caneel and the crowded Cruz's—Hansen Bay is

calm and scenic, a place you can drop the hook, douse the VHF and wallow in serenity.

Good snorkeling is a few breaststrokes away and steps up the beach there's that garlic-fried chicken; Vie Sewer's chicken leg and thigh quarter is crispy, crunchy and mouthwateringly moist.

Conversely, Vie herself is petite and small-boned, her delicate features capped by a signature soft canvas cloche, a good bit of her body vanishing inside a hand-painted apron. But Vie is just the right size

Hansen Bay, St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands

for her wee Snack Shack, a notch above hut, barely housing a fridge, stovetop and Vie's black cast-iron frying pots.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The Hansen Bay ambiance—virgin amid the no-longer-virgin Virgins—is replicated ashore. In an area largely untouched by tourists or crowded safari buses, Vie's Snack Shack sits amid blue-checked picnic tables, shaded and cooled by the branches of old trees. Lunch, a midday snack—or just a beverage stop—is a tranquil pause amid the noisy voices of nature. Countless tiny, aptly named bananaquits twitter and flit about a gnarled tamarind tree, hoping Vie will squirt some honey into the feeder hanging from a frilly branch. Up the hill, an occasional rooster crows. Gentle waves whoosh to shore on the nearby beach. Nine Sewer ancestors, including Vie's great-grandmother, grandmother, mother and father, slumber beneath flower-topped white markers just across the road. Clearly, Vie is partial to flowers: blooming amid the tamarind are several orchids—violet like her name—that she planted and nurtured till they took root.

“My dad remembers that tree when he was a boy and he'd be 106 today if he was alive,” she reports.

The Sewers date their St. John presence back to the 1700s and were, until the late 19th century, one of two families owning the entire East-End peninsula. “Sewer” derives from the surname “de la

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BLUE WATER DISPATCHES



Vie's Snack Shack may be small, but her garlic fried chicken and johnnycake are not; visitors have been enjoying her fare for almost 30 years



Souer,” white Haitians expelled during a 1792 revolution who fled to St. John. In a token of respect, the governor granted them land in the East End, which subsequently developed into what Vie calls the “free-slave area.” The Danes emancipated St. John’s slaves in 1848. The Sewer stake was later protected by the 1917 Danish-American treaty formalizing the Virgin Islands’ purchase.

Various members of the family fished, made charcoal, wove baskets, tailored garments, built boats, sold local fruits and raised cattle for sale to St. Thomas butchers, but the most legendary Sewer was Vie’s grandfather, Samuel, known to just about everyone as “Cap’n Sewer,” who built the island’s first double-masted schooner and ferried workers—Barbadians and Dominicans, Vie recalls—to Panama where they helped dredge the Panama Canal.

The Shack is located just about where Route 10—Centerline Road—trickles off into what is today a posh private enclave. It is this road Vie credits with the business idea she got at age 30.

Before 1979 Centerline was a bumpy, muddy dirt road ending in a typically inviting St. John beach. As paving neared completion it struck Vie when tourists started coming there would be no place to get a cold drink on hot summer days.

She was a newly single mother who needed to earn money. “Sitting on welfare” was out of the question; instead she sat herself on the side of the road with a cooler full of sodas and beers. Her four tots romped about her under the tree.

One problem: “People would stop and ask if I needed a ride to the beach. I figured I’d better make myself a ‘Cold Drinks Sold’ sign.”

In 1989, she built the plywood-sided hut, adding garlic chicken served with a johnnycake—fried bread doused with honey. Conch fritters followed. Vie, committed from the get-go to fresh, hot food, made everything in small batches—still does.

“Worst thing is you wait 10 or 15 minutes for me to fry something up.” But she couldn’t keep up with the next entry: deep-fried beef-stuffed patés (pronounced “pat-ties.”) Eventually—and to considerable disappointment—she replaced these with rice and beans topped by a piquant, curry-spiked ground meat sauce.

FRIED FOOD HALL OF FAME

Within four years mass-media guidebooks were touting her authentic Caribbean fare. She’s typically modest about this rapid-fire success.

“Everybody blossoms in their own direction,” she philosophizes. “My mom lived right here, but

she’d already raised 10 of us and I didn’t feel it fair for me to give her my four while I went off into town to be a secretary. So I just adapted and found a way to continue.”

Over the years menu expansions were limited to a hot-dog entry and homemade tarts—coconut or pineapple. The Shack’s supported her these 27 years. Always a one-woman operation, closed only in August and September, she says she’s never bored and continues to enjoy “meeting people from the world over and giving visitors what they’re looking for—that island taste.”

So succulent is Vie’s chicken (\$6.50 with side) many assume—erroneously—that she butchers her own in the backyard. In my meticulously researched Fried Food Hall of Fame (Chicken Division) Vie ranks right up there with Ruth Greaves (Barbados) and Hallis Clemens (Jamaica.) Rated on flavor and snap-crackle-and-pop crunchiness, these three chicks merely approach my top-seeded Stroud’s of Kansas City, the King of Crisp.

Sorry I couldn’t test Vie’s mettle on white meat—frequently dry and overcooked in lesser hands. But breast meat rarely shows up in the Caribbean—probably all allotted to McDonalds nuggets, Wendy’s tenders and KFC’s strips.

Nonetheless, Vie Sewer has plenty to crow about. ≈