

## Grace Before Meals Falmouth Harbour, Antigua



### *Finding Caribbean food heaven is as easy as saying grace before meals...and then taking yourself there*

by Louise Wollman

**Y**ou can't miss Grace Before Meals—in a wee bungalow painted raucous shades of orange, royal blue and yellow on the road between Falmouth and English harbors. There Grace Piper serves up divine island fare at blessedly good prices.

Eventually everyone finds Grace, whether drawn by the sunny colors, the glad aromas or her ample reputation for authentic Caribbean cooking. Amid the cheery, elbow-to-elbow ambiance,

you are sure to run into your favorite varnisher, that refrigeration guy you have meant to call or even your newest boat neighbor. A near constant stream of local folk stop to eat, place takeout orders or linger to pass a spot of time.

“Grace, what you be cookin’?”  
“Grace, you be needin’ anyt’ing from town?” “Grace, you got Pepper Pot today?” they will ask. “Grace, what should I eat today?”

Often there is an answer—a disembodied voice issues forth from behind a pass-through no

bigger than a bank teller’s window.

“I got Fish Water today,” she says. “You know that won’t last.”

Fish Water is a rich, soupy concoction of fish, dumplings, vegetables and green “figues” (pronounced figs, but actually small, finger-shaped bananas). Fish Water does sell out early, but you get the feeling Grace holds back a few portions for her favorite sons.

David Butler, mate on *Lady Lauren*, for one. “God, I love your cooking, Grace!” he hollers, swollen from lunch. “In the States you get a chicken sandwich with

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no depth or complexity. Here I taste the love in every mouthful.”

Grace takes such effusive praise with—well, grace. “We just make it tasty,” she trills back.

Only rarely—like when some customer needs to know, “Who *did* this meal?”—does she appear, in flip-flops, swaddled by an almost full-body apron and baseball-capped by Aeropostal.

Otherwise Grace is just “too busy cookin.” Considering the sheer range of the menu, she had better be.

“Fresh, fresh, everything fresh,” she says, making prepping, cooking, spicing and juicing for 100 or so, six days a week for 34 years, sound easy. “We make all the juices,” she says, meaning tamarind (beware: like the Fish Water, it runs out early), raspberry, ginger, lemon and fruit punch, plus the odds-on favorite, brown sugar iced tea.

No, you can’t get a beer at Grace’s. On that bit of bad news, occasionally someone walks out. But then that poor soul misses, say, Grace’s acclaimed roti.

“Yes, we make the roti wrappers ourselves. We also make our own hot sauce, but we don’t sell it, it’s just for the customers.”

From all evidence, “we” means Grace herself.

### GOOD GOLLY, IT IS A GALLEY

In a cooking space no bigger than your average sailboat galley, Grace stretches out not-very-long arms and rotates with the syncopation of a lawn sprinkler.

Swiveling left to the six-burner stove, she stirs a pot, pops the oven door, checks her pan of chicken, continues clockwise, dips her ladle into an industrial-size spice container, veers back to dump seasoning loads into one cauldron or another, then contin-

ues on, clears a chopping space on a miniscule counter overflowing with vegetables.

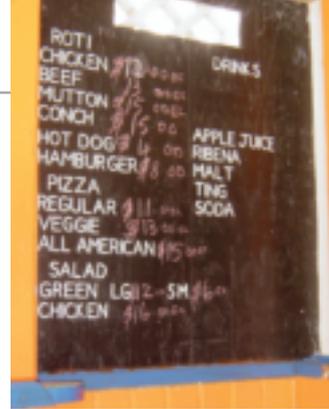
Taking a hefty chef’s knife to a hunk of cabbage, she cuts top to bottom in an alarming swipe straight down to her palm.

“Nah, don’t worry,” she says. “This knife know me so long now he don’t bother me no more.”

Across from this organized, ongoing flurry, in an equally tiny storage area, a pretty Jamaican is dismantling cupboards, wiping down every can, shelf and counter. Grace makes it not just tasty but super clean.

### SPECIAL SPECIALS

Stew Fish, Stew Chicken, Curry Pork, Bake Chicken...the daily specials are deceptively simple for



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some fairly complex flavors. Frequently, cruiser/gringos require some translation.

Pepper Pot is “all kind of vegetable and meat mixed up,” while Fungi (pronounced fun-gee) is a concoction of cornmeal, fish and okra.

Fish is usually kingfish or gray snapper: “We steam it, stew it, bake it, even slice it sometimes.”

Stew Fish turns out to be a half-inch-thick kingfish filet so balanced with spices, herbs and flavor your lips curl up happily around it and your throat fairly jumps forward to meet it. Clearly Grace has been blessed by the Spice Goddess.

Daily specials, like the Fish Lunch or the Chicken Lunch cost 15 EC—about \$6. And “Lunch” is no exaggeration: a plate arrives



Grace Piper creating her signature authentic Caribbean fare in Antigua

brim to the rim with variety. In the center, the main course. Surrounding it, macaroni shells—firm, buttery, lightly cheesed, flecked with parsley. Steamed vegetables that do not melt in your mouth. A salad of immaculately fresh ingredients doused lightly with a vaguely sweet-sour dressing. A tender plantain or two. Rice and beans, of course.

And there is Provision—a jumble of cooked plantain, dasheen, yams, sweet potato, taro,

pumpkin. Aptly named, Provision has, for as long as anyone can remember, “provided” for the people, making use of humble and plentiful Caribbean root vegetables.

Grace’s doors open at 8:30 a.m. for juices, the occasional breakfast roti and takeout lunches. Hurricane shutters are lifted around 11, and a lively, unfettered

harbor breeze cools the dining room, which seats 26 on long picnic tables. Lunch stops at 3; dinner begins at 5:30 and goes until...

“Well, let’s just say we go with the flow,” says Grace.

It is literally all about Grace Before Meals here; nothing gets made without Grace; everywhere there is grace in the simple, but coordinated table appointments. And every dish is suffused with grace and goodness. ~

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