

Monkey Business

Bobbejan's Kralendijk, Bonaire

By Louise Wollman

Bonaire is hard to get to both physically and emotionally. If you've been Windwarding and Lee-warding, it's a 400-mile haul west from Grenada along the Venezuelan coast. Then this psychological hump: the widespread belief that Bonaire Customs will refuse you entry if you've over-tarried in the paradisiacal Aves or Roques. A myth. Press on anyway.

If you're easting from Cartagena, banshee winds and fierce waves will bash you unmercifully. Otherwise, you can wait months for a benign weather window. When it arrives you wrestle with making a straight three-day shot or risking nightly stops in dazzling but potentially dangerous Colombian anchorages.

Sailing On Your Stomach

In the wake of an insatiable food sleuth

When you finally arrive at Kralendijk (pronounced—how endearingly Dutch—crawl-in-dyke) and face the 47 moorings strung like beads around the town's fancifully curlicued buildings, **BE FOREWARNED:**

Do not pick up moorings 29, 30, 31 or 32.

Because at this particular location—roughly to port of Club Nautico—a fragrant cloud will descend every Friday afternoon and hover over your boat like the eye of a stalled hurricane until late Sunday. You'll be enveloped in the tantalizing honeyed aromas of slow-cooking barbecue. And, having escaped all other perils, you will drown in your

own saliva.

Blame Bobbejan's.

Blame, specifically, Maggie and Robert de Haseth, otherwise entirely un-blameworthy individuals, who fled rule-bound Holland for easygoing Bonaire to "start something of their own." Their BBQ stand at the 2000 Bonaire Regatta debuted to considerable fanfare and resulted in chicken-and-ribs carryout from their mustard-colored, 100-year-old Antillean-style home.

Blame the boyhood Robert—official family grill-man—for devising a rave-review sauce and for barbecuing succulent, greaseless pork ribs. Nothing undoes a cruiser diet faster than the Bobbejan olfactory Sirens.

In fact, a cruiser instigated conventional table

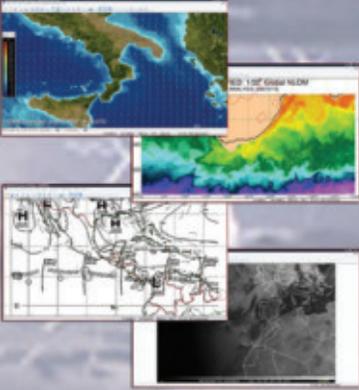
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service at Bobbejan's. In 2002, when onboard take-away wouldn't work for his big birthday bash, Maggie and Robert plopped a table out on their quiet street. Soon a bar/waiting area swallowed their driveway. Passionate word-of-mouth ate away the backyard garden. Nowadays the weekend-only "petit restaurant" seats 50 under lovely old trees...and continues encroaching on the remaining private space.

GOOD, FRESH FOOD

Today Bobbejan's kitchen boasts two mega-grills from Holland and an oven that roasts 12 racks vertically. But back in the old days, arriving diners passed Robert outside, working a vintage backyard barbecue, lovingly tending his flock of racks, turning, slathering, slicing and brushing until each charred rib emerged varnished with delectable sauce—no "holidays" allowed. Pork chops and chicken leg-thigh combos get similarly lacquered, but ribs draw 80 percent of patrons.

"First time I ordered the Bobbejan's Special, but then I decided why spend my time eating satays when I can have just chicken and ribs," says *Sapphire's* Bob Buchanan. "By the fourth time I figured 'Why should I waste stomach space on chicken when these ribs are so outstanding?'"

Fish filets and beef tenderloins complete the mains: fries, corn, salad



and coleslaw, the sides. My personal off-the-menu favorite is Gado-Gado Salad—lettuce, string beans and bean sprouts tossed with Maggie's estimable peanut sauce optionally spiked with her fiery homemade sambal sauce.

Bobbejan's (pronounced Bobby-*yon's*, not Bobby-*John's*) is Robert's childhood nickname—"monkey" in Dutch. They scratched the original name "Djado," meaning big rooster, on learning a similar local Papiamentu word means "rat." "Petit restaurant" refers—loosely—to Bobbejan's size, informality, ease on the pocketbook and simple menu, featuring neither appetizers nor desserts.

"If you have 'courses' you have higher prices—we want to be very cheap," says Maggie. Certainly a 6-guilder (roughly \$4.00) price tag for ribs (portion of 5 to 7, depending on size) meets that standard.



“We serve good, fresh food and I want all kinds of people here. Almost everyone on this island can afford us,” says Robert, whose quiet, beatific smile and halo of gray-blond hair suggest tonsured Franciscan monk. But the shy demeanor vanishes should you unwisely request the formula for his oft-imitated, never-duplicated sauce.

“Not one ingredient!” he hollers.

Robert guards his ambrosial concoction with the secrecy generally reserved for nuclear detonation-code sequences.

CONTROLLED CHAOS

A good-sized crowd gathers even before the 6 p.m. opening; some fervent souls hang impatiently on the gate. Cruisers generally come first-thing Fridays, as if the week hasn’t passed nearly fast enough. Soon the joint hops with socializing table-seekers and locals of every skin hue, many enjoying a brew awaiting take-out—because you can’t call ahead. Few have the phone number and everyone’s too busy to answer anyway.

Maggie, a wood sprite, an elf, a Hobbit of a person, seems responsible for the conviviality. Greeting, distributing menus, running drinks, cash-registering, even serving, she operates at sports-car speeds. Lively, twinkling, playful—wide eyes that dance, flirt and roll, with shoulder shrugs and hand flourishes add-

ing emphasis—she’s a one-woman drama class.

Waiting is part of Bobbejan’s ambiance. It’s controlled chaos. Each of the three frazzled but unfailingly friendly waitresses assembles her own orders—and that includes starting, monitoring and scrambling for the French fries—in a space no bigger than 6-foot square.

Table of 12 cruisers? Do the math: Meals are delivered Noah’s-ark style—two by two—though beers, wines, simple drinks and refills come quickly.

No one much cares—except me. Obsessed with piping-hot food, I will only order my two (okay, sometimes three) portions sequentially. Because I cannot abide their sizzling, crusty flavor peak dribbling off to stone cold by rib number 10 (or number 15) I have spent considerable time resenting tablemates who—maintaining more perfunctory approaches to the attainment of perfection—gnaw contentedly away. Naturally, I’ve reduced myself to groveling but prompt refills more or less depend on dumb luck in the ordinary ebb and flow of Bobbejan rib production

Still, there’s nothing quite like a Bonaire Friday night: dinghy to town, gorge at Bobbejan’s, a short walk for some fine Rocky Road at the mall, a dinghy ride home accompanied by myriad winking stars.

Best, you can repeat it all on Sunday.



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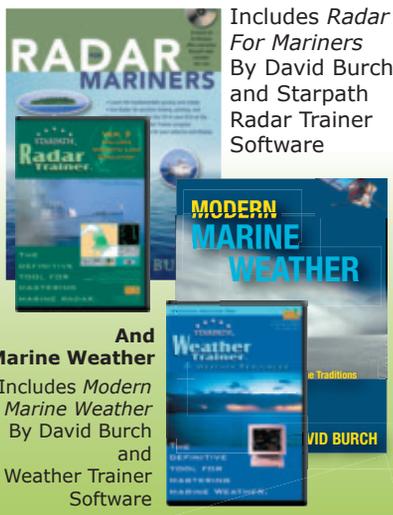
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