



food of the gods

Intrepid adventurer Jonathan Cane savours fried cassava, sacred *acarajé*, fresh coconut water and countless *cervejas* in Brazil's exuberant Salvador...

TEXT JONATHAN CANE PHOTOGRAPHS JONATHAN AND BRONWYN CANE



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Street architecture; wish ribbons, 'fitas' or Bonfim ribbons tied to the gate of the Church of Nosso Senhor do Bonfim for good luck; fresh caranguejo for lunch. OPPOSITE, FROM TOP A *Baiana do Acarajé* wearing a customary hooped dress, embroidered lace bodice and turban; 'boteco' or tavern with plastic chairs on the pavement.

LEISURE TRAVEL

The 16th-century slaves who built the churches of Salvador took revenge for their forced labour by carving angels and cherubs with larger than normal genitalia. The licentious succubae painted on monastery vaults and copulating cupids glazed on blue tiles were erased centuries ago by unhappy monks. The slaves from Angola kept the peace by calling their gods São Francisco and Santa Maria and São Paulo, but in secret they buried their dead with food offerings to the gods of the Yoruba, Fon and Ewe. And there were many who died. Historians estimate that half the slaves from Africa died in transit; 3.65 million arrived.

In 1549 Salvador was the first capital of Brazil, and for 200 years it was the empire's most powerful and wealthy city. Rich and ruthless clergy covered their churches with gold, while merchants and princes stocked ships with plunders. The state of Bahia was born in the spirit of its age – the baroque, or *barroco* in Portuguese, meaning the 'oddly shaped pearl' – the beauty of extravagance, impetuosity, audacity and irrationality. Salvador was, as one writer put it, 'delightful in the tumescence of its carnal forms, in the provocative swelling of its flesh'. The blood of slaves, the smell of palm oil frying, the gold of crosses, the white of dresses of the freed women slaves, cardinal-red, copper-green, swirling clouds on cathedral domes, witchcraft, animal sacrifices, drums, dancing.

After 200 years of 'golden storm' the capital moved to Rio de Janeiro. No one visited Salvador, the slaves were freed, the gold peeled off the sides of the churches, and the priests and priestesses of the Candomblé religion stopped pretending to believe in the Virgin Mary.

When the first slave-women were freed they began to sell street food to support their families. In the Candomblé temples (*terreiros*) the devotees had cooked with dried prawns and curry and tapioca, and offered the meals to the ancient African god Oludumaré and the lesser deities called orixás. In order to be pragmatic it was agreed that the sacred food called *acarajé* could now be sold in profane places – street corners, beaches, outside brothels – but only by the daughters-of-saints (*filhas de santo*).

These daughters of the Candomblé priests and priestesses were, and still are, called the *Baianas de Acarajé*. They still almost all wear white baroque dresses with hooped petticoats and embroidered lace bodices, turbans and ribbons. ▷



Acarajé frying in fragrant *dendê* palm oil. BELOW A menu and graffiti on the pavement.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP *Baianos* playing football on Porto do Barra beach; facade of baroque church Igreja de São Francisco; *queijo coalho*, the local halloumi-type cheese, braising on the beach; tropical sunset south of Salvador on the Bahian coast.



LEISURE TRAVEL

They have many strings of beads and bangles in the colour of their personal orixás and give away beautiful coloured ribbons with prayers printed on them, which tourists wear on their wrists and locals tie to the gates of the monasteries and churches of the city. The *Baianas*' work is hard. She spends hours peeling and pounding black-eyed peas, grinding cashews and then frying for long hours among the traffic and the city's commotion.

Acarajé, originally derived from the Yoruba words *acará* (ball of fire) and *je* (eat), are made by deep-frying balls of bean paste in fragrant palm oil called *dendê*. The ball is then cut open and stuffed with chilli, green tomato, *vatapá* (a disconcerting but delicious orangey paste of bread, fish, peanuts and coconut) and then topped with a handful of (equally disconcerting but super delicious) little dried red shrimps.

Every local has their favourite *Baianas* spot, which are usually plastic tents with glass cases that display not only the dried prawns and pastes but also *cocadas* – tapioca doughnuts made with coconut and cane sugar. My favourite *Baianas* works on the boardwalk of the city's coolest (and most profane) beach, Porto do Barra. She works under a red-and-blue plastic tent in front of the orange beach and in view of the old fort that young boys do acrobatics off.

There are also a number of good vendors on the beach between rental deckchairs, umbrellas, men carrying small fires to cook *queijo coalho* (a local halloumi-type cheese) on sticks with lemon, old fat ladies in hats, dark brown surfers in speedos and cooler boxes.

In Brazil drinking in public is legal and most *Baianas* are 'affiliated' with a bar/booze shack on the beach that makes caipirinhas and sells freezing beers (*cervejas*). Beer drinking is not gender specific in Brazil; women stand in the water in G-strings with quart bottles and are surprised to hear that South African women avoid both thongs and beers. There are a couple of good local *cervejas* – I prefer Brahma and Bohemia to Skol or Schin. If you're on a budget like me, one block back and down the alleys are Korean bottle stores selling even colder beers even cheaper. A drink that's well liked by locals and makes you feel like you're in a picture of yourself on holiday is fresh coconut water. The green coconuts are opened with a machete and drunk through a straw.

A good rule of thumb in Bahia is the crappier the restaurant looks, the better the food will taste. You don't want a chef in the kitchen; you want

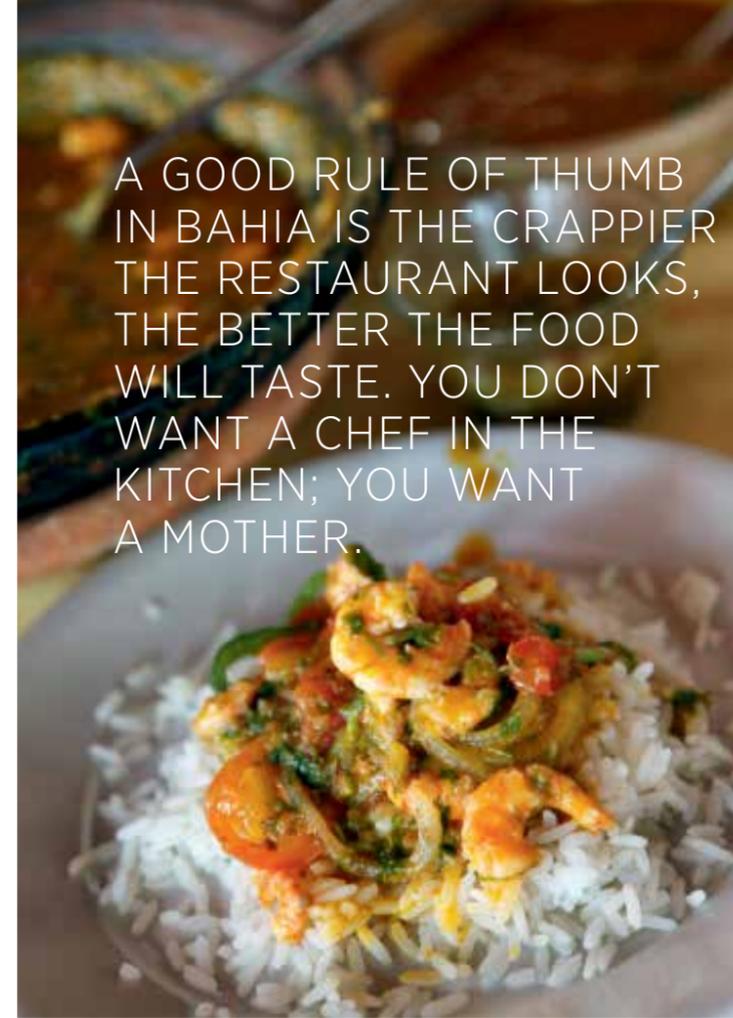
a mother. You want plastic chairs (preferable sponsored by Skol or Schin), forks that will bend under pressure and/or laminated menus with no English (or at least bad English translations).

There are two areas you'll eat in. The first is the Pelourinho ('the whipping post'), which was the old slave market and is now a UNESCO World Heritage Centre. It is unspeakably beautiful, and sometimes sad, but always full of tourists and those who would profit off feeding and/or robbing those tourists. The second place is: everywhere else. The latter will always be better and cheaper and more fun, and there will be less Dutch white people, a bonus in my book.

The Pelourinho has some exquisite churches such as Igreja de São Francisco, and you can watch capoeira dance/fighting in its charming streets. You also cannot escape the feeling that you are a tourist, a feeling that poverty and slavery are being served up for you with a sad and/or cynical smile. I don't like that feeling.

I found a restaurant, ugly and decorated with promotional plastic furniture, orange bunting and grey tiles, which I liked very much. I'm unusually unadventurous and so walked along the beaches everyday to the same place to try a different dish. My favourite was *moqueca*, which is a stew of prawn and/or crab cooked in coconut milk and palm oil. It tastes a bit like a liquidised *acarajé*. It's fabulous and is served with a really odd side dish common throughout Brazil called *farofa*. For almost a year I assumed *farofa* was a bowl of breadcrumbs but it's actually fried cassava (*mandioca*) flour.

One caveat to the dodgy-equals-better-food rule are the swish restaurants in São Paulo that have started experimenting with 'vernacular' cooking and reincorporating ancient and 'forgotten' ingredients from Bahia and Amazonia. Super-chef Alex Atala of DOM Restaurant just released a large cookbook called *DOM Rediscovering Brazilian Ingredients* (Phaidon). The book gives complicated and fantastical recipes – for tapioca, *maracujá* (passion fruit), *açaí*, *caju* (cashew nut fruit), palm oil and cassava, not to mention ants. The ingredients are pretty hard to find in South Africa, if you're shopping at your local supermarket that is. Grab your shiny cookbook, take off your jewellery, put away your iPhone and find the dodgy Nigerian market in your inner city. There, among the goats and fetishes and noise, you will find cassava and palm oil. ☺



A GOOD RULE OF THUMB IN BAHIA IS THE CRAPPIER THE RESTAURANT LOOKS, THE BETTER THE FOOD WILL TASTE. YOU DON'T WANT A CHEF IN THE KITCHEN; YOU WANT A MOTHER.



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Blue-white tile (*azulejo*) panels at Porto do Barra beach; prawn moqueca lunch; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, the Pelourinho ('the whipping post'); gritty street art; *cocadas* or tapioca doughnuts made with coconut and cane sugar.



ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS: GALLUO/GETTY IMAGES, THINKSTOCK