

DELIGHTFULLY, DELICIOUSLY CURIOUS

A Panamanian restaurateur offers lessons in flavor and history.

BY SHEEKA SANAHORI

A FRIEND SHARED HER STRATEGY FOR finding the best local restaurants while away from home. Her method is simple. She asks her Uber or taxi driver, “Where are you eating lunch today?”

This question has led her to many delightful eateries frequented by the people who know their city best. I couldn’t wait to use her method the next time I needed a solid recommendation.

“Where are you eating lunch today?” I asked the taxi driver who picked me up from Curaçao International Airport. I’d just flown in from my hometown of Atlanta.

“Me? I’m going home to eat,” he replied. “That’s the best food.”

Not the answer I’d hoped for.

My next trip was to Panama. Ahead of that visit, I gathered options by reading online travel forums, just in case I got another recommendation that led nowhere.

A Facebook group for Black travelers had several endorsements for one particular restaurant in Panama City. “Best food I had while there was at Peach Fuzz International! Danny is the host with the most, and an excellent chef,” one post exclaimed. I added it to my itinerary, excited to try a restaurant both Black- and locally owned.

On our last evening in Panama City, my family and I took an Uber to Peach Fuzz International. It was shortly before closing time, and I briefly chatted with chef and owner Danny Jules as he prepared my to-go order of fried fish and patacones (fried green plantains). Once I bit into the crispy, tender fish, I knew I wanted to return to learn more about Jules and his cooking.

A few months later, I was back in Panama City, this time visiting Peach Fuzz International with enough time to linger at the restaurant. I wasn’t the only diner from the United States. I sat by myself at the bar in front of the propane gas-fired stoves. A group of six Americans sat behind me, with three small tables pushed together, jovially making conversation on Jules’ covered patio. Local customers occasionally popped in to order plates of fish to go. Jules told me that he has served diners from around the world, including Singapore, South Africa, and Mexico.

By then I’d been with Jules since sunrise. I was starting to yawn, though not out of boredom. I wanted to see him make his signature fried fish from start to finish. First, I accompanied him to the fish market, where he showed me how he picks the freshest snook. He then diligently

Photos by Sheeka Sanahori



Danny Jules, chef-owner of Peach Fuzz International in Panama City, Panama, seasons fish in a blend of lime juice and 17 spices, a marinade style he calls "in the mud."

Danny Jules (r) and an employee
open up shop for the day.

PESCADO FRITO



weighed each one, only choosing fish that weighed one-and-a-half pounds. He also bought a ten-pound bag of limes, a key ingredient in his marinade. We took a taxi back to Peach Fuzz International, where he showed me how to cut, clean, and season the snook. By the time the restaurant opened for lunch, my energy level was flagging. Jules, on the other hand, was in his stride, frying one batch of snook while coating the next in flour.

His restaurant, in a small shopping center, is not much wider than an SUV. Inside, beige-and-blue tiled walls are lined with commercial shelves stacked with bowls, spices, and serving dishes. When space permits, customers pull tables and chairs into the parking lot out front to eat the day's catch. Jules' specialty, PESCADO FRITO (fried fish), is hand-lettered in teal above the metal roll-up door. Peach Fuzz is sandwiched between a bakery and a restaurant that specializes in Panamanian bistec picado. The building sits in the shadow of the now-abandoned Juan Demostenes Arosemena Stadium, built in 1938.

Jules is Afro-Panamanian, the grandson of immigrants who moved from Barbados to Panama as they sought work on the Panama Canal and in other infrastructure jobs that promised higher wages and a better life.

He was born in Curundú, the same Afro-Panamanian neighborhood where he opened Peach Fuzz in 2013. He named his restaurant after the nickname a barber gave him regarding the whisper of hair covering Jules' scalp after a fresh haircut. I imagine he manifested his global clientele when he tacked on "International."

Today, he has a couple of regular customers who fly into Panama City on a layover that's just long enough for them to stop by and get a plate of Jules' signature fried fish.

His referral process is simple. New customers try—and love—his fried snook, cassava fries, and patacones. He asks them to tell their traveler friends. One customer who organizes tours to Panama always includes Peach Fuzz on her itineraries. Another loved his fried fish so much that she insisted Jules start marketing himself on social media. She made the restaurant's Instagram page herself.

You won't find Curundú on any travel website's lists for "best neighborhoods in Panama City," though. Public housing and a heavy police presence are staples of the neighborhood, which is near the center of the city. Curundú is about three



A plate of fried snook and cassava fries at Peach Fuzz International.

miles from Casco Viejo, the colonial neighborhood originally built by Spanish settlers, which now serves as Panama City's tourist district.

Uber, the car-riding app, intentionally cuts off service to Curundú every evening around 6 p.m. I discovered this during my first visit to Peach Fuzz International, when I tried to request a car to leave Curundú, my to-go plate of fish in hand. It's a policy I've never seen elsewhere in the world. If you request a pickup in Curundú after six, the app automatically responds with "no cars available." Jules hailed a taxi in Spanish so that my family and I could be on our way. He's used to it, he said.

Uber's local policy for Curundú can make it more difficult for tourists to visit businesses like Jules', but the transportation hurdle doesn't deter faithful customers like Nigel Fleming, a Black American who lived in Panama City for a couple of years after college. According to Jules, Fleming

“I’d rather have people that can’t cook come and work for me because I train them from scratch. I don’t have to break you out of any bad habits.”

was one of the first Americans to eat at Peach Fuzz International, not long after it opened.

“It’s beautiful. It’s like walking into your cousin’s backyard in the summertime at a cookout and all your cousins are there,” Fleming said. “Over there just felt really safe, like the community was protecting itself. Everyone knew whose kids belonged to who, and what area they lived in... Four or five kids are just walking down the street and coming up to Danny, and Danny’s talking to them, and they’re sitting in his lap and telling stories—all while he’s frying fish—and I’m just like, ‘This is so cool.’”

Now sixty-four years old, Jules hires neighbors in an area where jobs are scarce. He teaches his employees cooking techniques and restaurant management skills.

“I train everybody that works for me. I’d rather have people that can’t cook come and work for me because I train them from scratch. I don’t have to break you out of any bad habits.”

JULES IS CARRYING on a particular Caribbean-Panamanian food tradition. Caribbean immigrants to Panama brought the flavors of their homes, including turmeric and curry. They blended those with the Latino and African influences that already existed locally. In doing so, they created a regionally specific cuisine marked by dishes like seafood gumbo and fried fish.

He stays true to the techniques his Barbadian grandmother taught him when he turned thirteen. She passed down this legacy to all her grandsons, ensuring the young men would have this important skill. Danny started learning from his grandmother long before he became a teenager though, often following her as a child from Panama’s markets and back to her kitchen.

“My grandmother used to wake me up, she always

called me ‘old boy.’ She would call me, ‘Old boy! Let’s go to fish market. Old boy! Let’s go to big market,’” he recalled. “By me being with her so much, I was never intimidated by the kitchen.”

Now, travelers who want to learn some of the techniques Jules inherited from his grandmother can take his cooking class, where they spend a morning learning how to cut, season, and fry fish.

When I cooked alongside Jules, we started by juicing dozens of mandarin limes, with their bumpy rind and yellow-orange flesh. Their juice is milder in flavor than that of the Persian limes we commonly find in US grocery stores. Jules told me that you can use Persian limes or even lemons in a pinch, but the brine will be more acidic.

Into the lime juice he adds his blend of seventeen spices, including black pepper, turmeric, and curry, to make the “mud,” as his grandmother taught him to call the marinade. He scores each snook with six cuts along the body and smears in the spice blend so that every bite is savory.

It makes for a phenomenal melding of tastes and histories. The fish is tender, and the flavor is bright. Jules serves the snook with simple cassava fries so that the fish takes center stage. Travelers who remain in the tourist district aren’t likely to taste this fusion of Caribbean and Panamanian cuisine.

A few weeks later, back in Atlanta, I pulled out the fryer in my home kitchen. I carefully unwrapped the small bags of wet and dry seasonings Danny gave me. I nervously grabbed tilapia and Persian limes from my local grocery store, unsure how my version would turn out with the substitutes. As the fish cooled in the fryer basket, the drops of hot grease still slowly dripping down, my husband and I stood over it to take our first bite. Before my taste buds could register the tilapia’s flavor, my husband’s eyes widened.

“This is good!” he said.

I agreed, relieved that the seasonings I’d buried in my luggage had been put to good use.

As I ate, I thought about the fried-fish traditions of African American culture, how we’d eat fried whiting and catfish on the weekends or for special occasions. I was grateful to learn about the history of fried fish from another part of the diaspora. All it took was a taxi ride past the tourist area to find it. 🍴

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