

Caribbean Airlines



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Caribbean Beat



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IN OUR FOOD ISSUE

STYLE

HOT SHOPPE

in a **COLD** country



Homesick West Indians come here to eat their fill of T&T roti and Jamaican jerk. **Debbie Jacob** checks out a Caribbean outpost in Canada

Photography courtesy D Hot Shoppe

Customers tap their feet to David Rudder's "Trini to the Bone" as they shuffle down the line for their boneless chicken roti at D Hot Shoppe Restaurant in Burlington, Ontario. Come rain or shine, summer or winter, West Indians and native Canadians searching for the warmth of the Caribbean land on Gabriel and Simone Lou Hing's doorstep – that is, at the door of their quaint Caribbean restaurant.

"Oh, there's nothing like a Trinidad roti," says Simone, the Trinidadian hostess of the couple's family-owned business. Brought to – or invented in – Trinidad by East Indian immigrants, roti bears a resemblance to a large Mexican tortilla, except that it is softer and is stuffed with split peas before it is wrapped around curried vegetables or meat.

D Hot Shoppe specialises in Caribbean cuisine – especially roti. There's a choice of curried beef, goat, cuttlefish or vegetarian roti, with pumpkin or channa (chickpeas) and potato; curry chicken; Jamaican jerk - you name it and Gabriel will whip it up.

It was five and a half years ago that the Lou Hings opened their Caribbean restaurant. The couple had migrated to Canada in 2004. Gabriel started working with his aunt Kori, but soon the Lou Hing family encouraged the enterprising couple to start their own business. Simone, who had trained in real estate, was working in a coffee shop, and pregnant with their second child, when the couple decided to take the plunge.

"The rewards of being your own boss and giving people a taste of Trinidad food and culture – there's just nothing like it," says Gabriel.

Gabriel's homemade pepper sauce is graded from mild to "suicide"

Gabriel already had a wealth of culinary experience. From 1998 – 2001, he worked as a chef in Antigua hotels. He had worked as a sous-chef in Trinidad's Ambassador Hotel in St James, and been head chef at The Bight in Chaguaramas, which is frequented by yachties.

"I always enjoyed cooking, especially our food. From the time I was a boy, I watched and learned from my grandma," says Gabriel.



Canadians eat roti covered in gravy and with a fork!

"Like all great food, the secret of Caribbean food lies in the sauce."

In food from Trinidad & Tobago, that sauce is often curry. Gabriel has his own secret recipe: a mixture of fresh, plump tomatoes, garlic, shadon beni (known up north as cilantro) a blend of curry powders from Guyana, chives, and his homemade pepper sauce, which is graded from mild to "suicide".

"Caribbean people come and don't want too much pepper. Canadians come and want the deadliest pepper," Simone laughs. "And they drink milk with their roti."

You won't find that combination in Trinidad & Tobago, but then, Canadians must cool the unaccustomed fire.

Canadians at D Hot Shoppe have also developed their own style of eating curry. They pour curry sauce on the outside of their rotis – and eat them with a fork, which is as strange as eating pizza that way.



Corn soup

"Now Caribbean people coming to the restaurant are doing the same thing," says Simone, who stuffs the rotis as her husband flips them to golden-brown perfection on a *tawa*, a flat cast-iron griddle.

The Lou Hings are expanding their business, with a new branch opening in Hamilton. It's not like they're not busy enough already. A staff of eight serves an average of 300 – 400 rotis a day. They cater for weddings and parties, and they do corporate catering as well. Canadian Christmas parties – at least in the Burlington area – now have crab backs, pastelles and traditional Trinidad black cake – rum-soaked cake made with prunes along with red, green and orange jewels of candied fruit.

Customers often leave with their own bottles of pepper sauce, made, bottled and sold at the restaurant.

Gabriel also offers classes in cooking Trinidadian Chinese and creole food. He doesn't divulge the secret of making his roti, but students can learn to whip up a real Trini lunch: stewed chicken, macaroni pie and red beans.

The Lou Hings say their success lies in a combination of great food and ambiance. "We know our customers and treat them like family," says Simone. "Customers say all they're missing in the restaurant is sand. The restaurant is bright yellow, blue and red. We have a steelpan, pictures of Trinidad, the Trinidad flag. We stick to our roots and they like it."

"We want people to get that whole joyous, loving, homely island vibe," says Gabriel.

And that's why customers leave D Hot Shoppe full and ready to tap their feet to Arrow's "Hot, Hot Hot" – or even Sparrow's "Congo Man".

For more information: dhotshoppe.com



Gabriel, Simone and two of their staff members in front of their wall of local awards

D Hot Shoppe

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