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Sharing the Story of Local Food, Season by Season

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The Complexity of Simplicity

Lavish minimalism in the Turks and Caicos

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hat strikes me first is the color. Aqua doesn't quite cut it, or turquoise. It's a more concentrated hue, and yet diaphanous at the same time, a light green-y blue rimmed by gray thunderclouds. Parrot Cay (pronounced key) in Turks and Caicos is subject to storms, but they're the fast-moving kind, and it's ringed by a world-famous reef. While outside is a channel of deeper, darker blue, inside is all calm and that unearthly green.

Legend has it that two female privates bivouacked on this island in the 1850s. Anne Bonny, red-haired and rapsallion, and fierce Mary Read, ended up here after being badly treated by husbands and men in general before joining up with the notorious Calico Jack Rackham.

On this scrubby scrap of land, they watched for Spanish and British galleons using the deep-water channel just beyond the reef, then signaled for Jack's crew to go fetch. Anne and Mary were a quick study themselves with cutlasses and pistols, and Mary Read had a habit of ripping off her bodice to whichever poor sod she'd mortally wounded, crying, "See, Sir, you've been slain by a maid!"

All these years later, **Como Shambhala Parrot Cay** is lavish, luxurious, and completely lovely, and it's where I was lucky enough to be put up to while writing this piece. At night, the Big

Dipper sparkles, the palm trees rustle in the light wind, and the sand is the texture of finely-milled flour studded with sunrise shells.

One of the many pearls of Christina Ong, a visionary hotelier who founded the Como Shambhala properties (eleven in all, including Bali and the Maldives), it epitomizes her mission: hospitality and simplicity, wellness, and unforgettable experiences.

Melissa Ong, Christina's daughter, first brought the abandoned island to Christina's attention when Melissa was diving off the reef. Christina immediately saw how she could develop the place into a community where nature mattered more than development. Before long her friends, none other than Keith Richards, Christie Brinkley and Donna Karan, all wanted villas, and the whole place became a low-key but luxurious property where the famous could relax, recharge and, basically, disappear.

After twenty-three years, second generations come back now, bringing their kids, along with regular guests, and the focus is still on nature. Villas at the edge of the 1000-acre wildlands are still being sold. The hotel pools are peppered with families. The spa is world famous, a minimalist haven with therapists imported from Thailand and Bali. The standard rooms are in the original plantation buildings, white-washed and elegant, while the villas are lavish with four poster beds and plunge pools. Ours came with a butler, a





Above: Cuban style beef skewers
Below: Pumpkin and macadamia nut
crust pizzetta.
Opposite: Whole roast sea bass with
sweet and sour grapes. All photos
courtesy of COMO Hotels & Resorts







gentle Turkish young man named Ozan, who quickly made himself indispensable. A fearless golf-cart driver, he told of us of his love of roller coasters while skillfully maneuvering down the banana plantation paths. And then there's the food, Como Shambhala Cuisine. While spa food has a reputation for being bland, here it vibrates with Balinese, Thai, and even Bhutanese influences.

For the past four years, Edwin Lau has been the Director of Food and Beverage, managing the culinary team at Como Parrot Cay. An unassuming and handsome young man, it doesn't take long to realize he has definite opinions and is every inch the part. After working in Michelin-starred kitchens in the Swiss Alps and Monaco, Edwin did a swing through molecular gastronomy at Casino de Madrid before arriving full circle back in Singapore to figure out his own food.

"I tried a lot of complicated things that didn't really work, then gradually it all melted away, and now I have a philosophy. It's simplicity in complexity. Everything needs to be simple, but to get simple, you need to go through complex first... For example, tonight, it's steak night. It's just a simple piece of steak. What goes into the steak, people don't have to know... the complex part is the source, from which farm, how organic it is. Are they exclusive to us? Why are they exclusive? What water do we use? How hot is the water to cook? That's all the complex part, but once you've reached the end user for eating, I don't want them to know any of this. It's a piece of meat. It's a bowl of soup. That's it."

And what's his kitchen culture like?

"Military," he says, then laughs and adds that, "But anyone

who has an idea—even the interns—I encourage them to come forward. We have these family meals where everyone says what they think, then we make the dishes, then we start taking things away. How much can we remove and still keep the essence of the taste?"

Many of the ingredients are local, a challenge on an island like this, and there are plans for a fleet of dedicated fishermen and more elaborate kitchen gardens as well.

Over the next four days, we swim in the ocean, read books, dine like kings, and actually talk. On the boat crossing back to the airport, a long grey torpedo of a shape races behind us in the water

then settles beneath the bow as the captain slows. When the captain picks up speed again, a twelve-foot dolphin leaps out of the water, inches away, and then again and again, jumping with something that looks a lot like joy. •

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