

Fruit, vegetables and spices of Jamaica

What grows on the island, what came from far away and
what it is called in Peru.



Before you start

The Jamaican pantry mixes native plants with others that came from Africa, Asia and the Americas. Many also grow in Peru under another name.

In this guide

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Native or brought in?

Almost everything Jamaica eats arrived by ship.

Native = already there in 1494.

The historian B. W. Higman calls native whatever was already in Jamaica when the Europeans arrived in 1494.

According to him, only a small part of what Jamaicans eat is native.

No national dish is native.

Jerk, curry goat, patty, ackee and saltfish, rice and peas, stew peas.

Higman sums it up like this: none uses a native plant or the meat of a native animal.

Five waves

Around 700	The Taíno: cassava, pineapple, achiote.
1494–1655	The Spanish: citrus, plantain, ginger, avocado.
1500–1807	Slave ships from Africa: yam, okra, ackee.
1782	Mango seedlings and jackfruit.
1793	Bligh: breadfruit.

They travelled with people.

All the important root crops arrived with people who already knew how to eat them.

Cassava came with the Taíno. Many yams came as food on the ships crossing from Africa.



Native fruit

The ones already growing in Jamaica in 1494. You know several of them.

You know them

Guava	Guayaba
Soursop	Guanábana
Chirimoya	Chirimoya
Granadilla	Granadilla
Passion fruit	Maracuyá

More Jamaican ones

Naseberry	The Spanish called it níspero.
Star apple	When you cut it, it shows a star.
Guinep	It is peeled like a lychee.
Sweetsop	Sweet cousin of the cherimoya.
Cashew	The cashew, with its false fruit.

Guava jelly.

In the 18th century guavas were gathered along the roads.

Its jelly, guava jelly, became the fruit's most famous product.

“The best fruit of the Indies”.

In 1657 an Englishman wrote that the Spanish called it níspero and considered it the best fruit of the Indies.

It is sold on small plates at roadside stalls.

A taste of wine.

In 1816 an English visitor wrote that granadilla had the most singular and exquisite flavour of all the fruits of Jamaica.



In Lima it is an everyday fruit.

Fruit that arrived

The most Jamaican ones came from far away.

The travellers

Ackee	West Africa · around 1770
Mango	India · seedlings in 1782
Breadfruit	Tahiti · 1793
Jackfruit	India · 1782
Plantain	Asia · around 1510

More travellers

Orange, lime	With Columbus · 1494
Avocado	Mexico · around 1510
Papaya	Mesoamerica · around 1520
Coconut	Indo-Pacific · around 1600
Tamarind	Africa · around 1600

It arrived on a slave ship.

The oldest record, from 1778, says it arrived on a slave ship from the coast of Africa.

Its scientific name, *Blighia sapida*, honours Bligh. Today it is the national fruit.

The voyage of the Bounty.

The mutiny on the *Bounty* foiled the first attempt. In February 1793, Bligh arrived with 346 plants on another ship.

In the 1970s, in the countryside it was eaten three times a day in season.



The pot, turned over.

A Jamaican saying: in mango season, the cook can turn her pot upside down. There is no need to cook.

Today the mango seems native, but it came from India.

Up to 25 kilos.

Jackfruit is the largest cultivated fruit in the world.

Some Jamaicans believe that travelling with a whole one gives you a flat tyre.



Vegetables of Jamaica

From callaloo to susumber: everyday vegetables.

From “calalú”.

The word comes from the American Spanish “calalú”, a leaf soup. In Jamaica it is the leafy green above all others.

It is harvested in six weeks. Since the 1970s there have been callaloo patties.

Chocho = chayote.

The Taíno already grew it. In the 1980s it was called “the most versatile plant in Jamaica”.

Note: in Peru, “chocho” is tarwi (Andean lupin).

Saturday soup.

Pumpkin is the base of “Saturday soup”.

Many people believe the iron is in the skin.

It came from Africa.

It arrived around 1700. In 1788 a writer called it the favourite vegetable of the enslaved.

Today it is eaten mainly steamed with fish.

The bitter ones.

Susumber are small bitter green berries that grow wild. It is cooked with saltfish, like ackee.

Cerasee is a bitter vine that is drunk as a tea.



“Food”: what fills you up

Root crops and plantain: the heart of the Jamaican plate.

What is “food”?

In Jamaica, “food” means the starches: yam, coco, sweet potato, cassava, green plantain, breadfruit.

A meal without “food” hardly counted as a meal.

Yam.

According to Higman, “yam” may come from “nyami”, to eat, in a language of Senegal: the same root as “nyam”.

Yellow yam is called “afu”, from Twi, a language of Ghana.

It is not the fruit.

Jamaican coco is a root crop, a relative of pituca (taro).

From it comes the proverb “one one coco full basket”: little by little the basket fills up.

Sweet potato.

It originated between Mexico, Ecuador and Peru. Before 1520 there were already eight varieties in Jamaica.

Its pudding has a saying: “fire on top, fire below, hallelujah in the middle”.

Cassava and bammy.

“Cassava” is an Arawak word. Cassava arrived with the Taíno.

It is used to make bammy, a flatbread that exists only in Jamaica.

Beans and peas of Jamaica

Spoiler: rice and peas has no peas in it.



The “peas” are beans.

The “peas” in rice and peas are red kidney beans.

In 1938 rice and peas was called “the Jamaican coat of arms”.

The spoon stands up.

They used to be called “seven-year pea” and “Christmas pea”.

In St Elizabeth, gungo soup has a rule: “spoon mus’ tan up”. The spoon has to stand up in it.

JAMAICA

Cowpea

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PERU

Frijol castilla

Vigna unguiculata

It reached Jamaica from Africa around 1600.

JAMAICA

Lima bean

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PERU

Pallar (lima bean)

Phaseolus lunatus

The RAE defines the pallar as “judía del Perú” (Peruvian bean). In Jamaica it is eaten green, in December.

Peanut.

On slave ships peanuts were given as food. In Jamaica they were called “pindals”.

Today they are sold from handcarts in the street, and there is peanut punch.

Green plantain, ripe plantain

The cooking plantain kept Jamaica fed for centuries. And it has a cousin in the Peruvian rainforest.



It came with the Spanish.

The Spanish brought it from the Canary Islands. By around 1520 it was well established in Jamaica.

In the 1680s, Hans Sloane wrote that, after cassava, it was the island's main staple.

Never eaten raw.

Unlike the banana, the plantain is always cooked. A bunch can have 50 fingers and weigh up to 18 kilos.

In the early 20th century it was said that Jamaicans preferred it green, boiled or roasted.

Green, turned, ripe

Green	Boiled, roasted, as chips or flour
Turned	Starting to turn golden: with saltfish
Ripe	Fried or in plantain tart

Plantain flour.

The enslaved dried slices in the sun and ground them. In 1785, after some hurricanes, a planter proposed storing it in barrels.

They called it "coor cuntine"; today kongkonte. It is eaten as porridge and in dumplings.

Pounded plantain.

In 1750, an Englishman ate plantain "tum tum" with fish, pounded in a mortar. The name imitates the thud of the pestle.

It is the African fufu: plantain, yam or coco pounded to go with soup.

JAMAICA

Tum tum

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PERU

Tacacho

Green plantain, pounded



In the rainforest, tacacho is green bellaco plantain, roasted and pounded with chicharrón. Its name may come from Quechua for "the pounded one".

Pumpkin and chocho

Two plants native to the Americas: one holds up Saturday soup, the other passed itself off as apple.

From Aztec to Patois.

The Taíno already grew chocho. Until the 20th century some Jamaicans called it "chota", from the Spanish chayote.

And chayote comes from the Aztec chayotl. Note: in Peru, chocho is tarwi.

They thought it bland.

In 1756, Patrick Browne found it too bland. Another writer said it was used to fatten pigs.

But it improved with lime, salt or spices, and it keeps for six weeks or more without spoiling.

The chocho that became apple.

As early as the 18th century it was used instead of apple purée.

In the 1980s, when US apples were banned, chocho replaced them in apple pie.

Saturday soup is modern.

Saturday soup has pumpkin, beef bone, chocho, yellow yam and chilli. It is called traditional, but it is fairly modern.

In 1893, pumpkin soup was almost only pumpkin, with a little meat and thyme.



Pumpkin with rice.

In 1893, a cookbook called pumpkin with rice “a favourite dish” of the people.

And people preferred pumpkin boiled in big pieces, not mashed with butter.

JAMAICA

Chocho

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PERU

Caigua

Sechium edule · Cyclanthera pedata

Cousins in the squash family. Chocho comes from Central America; caigua, from the Andes, and in Peru it is eaten stuffed.

The breadfruit tree

It was brought to feed the enslaved. They did not want it... at first.

A solution from the Pacific.

In the 1780s, several hurricanes wiped out the plantain walks and caused famine in Jamaica.

The planters were looking for food that would not take land away from sugar. The answer was the breadfruit tree from Tahiti.

From Tahiti to Jamaica

1787

Bligh, in command of the Bounty

The mutiny

The plants never arrive

1791

Second voyage: Providence and Assistance

1,686

Plants raised with Tahitian help

Feb. 1793

346 to Jamaica and 333 to St Vincent



The Tahitian who travelled in hiding.

Bobbo helped gather the plants and stowed away on the Providence. Bligh believed he would get the fruit used quickly.

He died a few months later. The Tahitian ways of storing and preparing it never reached Jamaica.

Pig food?

Several historians wrote that the enslaved refused to eat it and that for 50 years it went to the pigs.

Higman adds nuance: within ten years there were trees all over the island. The rejection was also resistance to an imposed food.

Fragile in a storm.

In the storm of 1812, plantain bore fruit again within months; the breadfruit tree took years to recover.

That is why the enslaved preferred their plantain and yam.

From rejected to loved.

By around 1945 it was one of the most popular foods on the Jamaican table. Travellers take it roasted to their families abroad.

By 2001 there was an annual breadfruit festival in Bath, every August.



The story of ackee

Who brought it, who named it and why the dish used to be called the other way round.

The first record.

A catalogue of Hinton East's garden says that Dr Thomas Clarke gave him the plant in 1778, and that it arrived on a slave ship.

Higman believes ackee did not grow on the island before the 1770s.

A child with a seed?

In 1915, a Kingston resident said that an enslaved African child brought a seed as a toy in 1777.

There are no documents to prove it. Higman thinks it possible that Africans brought it as a curiosity, for the beauty of the tree.

Bligh did not bring it.

In 1793, Bligh's Providence took an ackee plant from Jamaica to Kew Gardens, in England.

In 1806 a botanist described it and named it Blighia, after Bligh. Sapida refers to its flavour.

Another fruit is called ackee.

Its name comes from the Kru a-kee, from West Africa. In old villages of the enslaved, groves of ackee remain.

In the eastern Caribbean it is hardly eaten, and there they call "ackee" the fruit that Jamaica calls guinep.

Ackee and the US

1955	Tinned exports begin
1970s	The US issues an alert



1993 The alert becomes a ban

2000 The ban is lifted

At first it was the other way round.

The name "ackee and saltfish" only appears in 1930. Before that it was "saltfish and ackee", with more fish.

Higman believes it may have been born in the planters' kitchens, between 1780 and 1880.

The coconut

Water, jelly, rundown and oil: a fruit that arrived after Columbus and found its way into everything.

The sources disagree.

The coconut reached the Caribbean after Columbus; the first record is from Puerto Rico, in 1582.

One botanist says it spread slowly in Jamaica. Higman quotes 17th- and 18th-century writers who saw it all over the island.

From water to jelly.

A coconut takes 12 or 13 months to ripen. When young, you drink its water: "coconut water" since the early 19th century.

Then comes the jelly, the soft flesh eaten with a spoon cut from the shell. The term dates from 1834.

Worth more fresh.

Since the early 20th century, coconut sellers have gone round the streets with carts or waited at crossroads.

In 1985, less than 10% of coconuts went to copra for oil: the jelly man paid better.



Coconut milk cooked until it curdles.

Rundown is coconut milk boiled until it looks like curdled custard, with salted fish and chilli.

It used to be served in a shared dish for dipping yam, plantain or breadfruit. It was called “dip and fall back”.

A cousin with Hindi roots.

In the 1950s, in parts of Jamaica, rundown was called pakassa, a word with Hindi roots.

Pakassa also has flour, butter and achiote, and is usually vegetarian.

Lethal yellowing

1860s	Commercial plantations begin
1870s	The disease is first noticed
1970s	Malayan dwarf palms dominate
1997	3.5 million coconuts
2004	Only 312,000

Citrus of Jamaica

From Columbus’s seeds to the ugli: Jamaica’s sour (and sweet) fruits.

They came with Columbus.

Columbus brought seeds of bitter orange (Seville orange), sweet orange, lime, citron and probably yellow lemon.

They went wild so quickly that in the 16th century they were feeding cattle and wild pigs.

JAMAICA

Lime

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PERU

Limón sutil (lime)

Citrus aurantifolia



Jamaica's "West Indian lime" is the same species as our limón sutil, the one from Piura, Lambayeque and Tumbes.

The lime is better.

In Jamaica, the lemon (yellow lemon) is thought bland next to the lime.

The lime was used against scurvy, in punch and in shrub, a drink with rum. Its trees were living hedges up to 5 metres tall.

The ortanique and the ugli.

The ortanique is a natural cross of orange and tangerine, found around 1920. Its name combines orange, tangerine and unique.

The ugli appeared in the wild in 1914; the sources disagree on where. From 1938 it was exported to England.

Ugly, but sweet.

Some wanted to call it "Jamaica Lovely", but the name ugli stuck. It is usually bigger than a grapefruit, with a wrinkly skin.

When grown outside Jamaica it turns out more sour and loses its sweetness.

Better than Europe's.

From 1740 it was said that Jamaican oranges beat European ones. They were exported to New York from the 1870s.

In 1943, 63% of farms had orange trees. And grapefruit gave rise to Ting.

The Jamaican mango

From the French ship captured in 1782 to the "Number 11": Jamaica's favourite fruit.

A seed that does not last.

The mango was domesticated in India about 4,000 years ago. Its seed lives only a short time, which is why it took so long to cross the world.



The Portuguese took it to Brazil, and from there it reached Barbados in 1742.

Rodney’s ship?

It is often said that it arrived on a French ship, sailing from Mauritius to Saint-Domingue, captured by Rodney’s fleet in 1782.

But it was not the first: in 1773 an Englishman was already planting seeds, and in 1779 a mango was seen growing in Westmoreland.

Numbered mangoes.

The plants from the French ship had numbers, and they kept them in Hinton East’s garden.

In 1837 the most prized were “Number 11” and “Number 32”. Today Number 11 is just called “Number”.

Mango even for the pigs.

By 1814 it was one of the most common fruit trees. There was so much that it was fed to the pigs.

Today it is found in the country and in town. One expert said it seems almost native to the island.

Today’s mangoes

East Indian	Among the most expensive; first ripened here in 1880
Bombay	The “aristocracy” in 1938
Julie	St Julian, among the favourites
Number 11	The timeless classic
Haden and Tommy	Also grown in Peru

JAMAICA

Number 11

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PERU

Kent

Mangifera indica



Peru exported 289,508 tonnes in the 2024-2025 season; 98% was Kent. Piura has 60% of the planted area.



Chillies and spices

What gives Jamaica its flavour. Several are already in your kitchen.

Cousin of ají panca.

Its name comes from its shape, like a Scottish bonnet. It is native to tropical America.

It is the same species as the Peruvian ají panca: *Capsicum chinense*.

Kion.

Ginger came from India with the Spanish, around 1525. Jamaican ginger has a reputation as one of the best in the world.

In Peru we call it kion. That is why our drink is called King Kion.

Allspice.

It was already growing in Jamaica when the Spanish arrived; its name comes from “pimienta” (pepper).

Jamaica is the only place where it has been produced without a break since the early 16th century.

You know them

Annatto	Achiote · came with the Taíno. It gives patties their colour.
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Turmeric	Palillo · arrived in 1780. It makes up a quarter of curry.
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Cinnamon	Canela · Rodney brought it from a French ship.
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Nutmeg	Nuez moscada · one tree, two spices.
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Jamaican allspice

The spice that carries the island's name.



Allspice: “all the spices”.

Since at least 1621 the English have called it allspice because it tastes of cinnamon, nutmeg and clove all at once.

It is a single spice, not a blend.

Jamaica, without a break.

It was already growing in Jamaica when the Spanish arrived; its name comes from “pimienta” (pepper). Jamaica is the only place that has produced it without a break since the early 16th century.

Today Jamaica is still its main source.

Berry and wood.

The dried berry is key to jerk seasoning.

And the wood of the same tree is used to smoke jerk.

Pimienta chapa.

Here you know it as pimienta chapa or pimienta de chapa.

Next time you buy it at the market, think of Jamaica.

Spices for the world

Allspice, ginger and nutmeg: how they are harvested, dried and sold.

Pepper that smells of clove.

In 1657, a list of Jamaican fruits began with pimento: “pepper that smells of clove”. Since the 1670s it has been Jamaica pepper.

It is harvested green, by breaking off the twigs, and dried for about ten days until the seeds rattle.



Barbecue //bár-bi-kiu// · noun

In Jamaica, besides a way of cooking, the plastered platform where coffee and pimento are dried.

“Put the pimento on the barbecue.”

They preferred chilli.

An 1823 writer stated that the enslaved did not use pimento in their food: they preferred the island’s chilli.

In 1987, the producers’ association published recipes to sell it abroad. It is still the base of pimento dram.

The ginger that sets the standard.

Jamaican ginger is the world benchmark for quality. As early as the 1870s it was said to be the best in the world.

Since the mid-19th century it has been grown mainly in the mountains of Christiana, at more than 600 metres.

Types of ginger

Black ginger	Scalded and dried before peeling
White ginger	Peeled by hand: it fetches a better price
Oriental	Since the 1980s, fresh, for Asian cooking
Oleoresin	Concentrate for export

The late arrival.

In the 18th century Jamaica imported mace. The nutmeg tree was only planted in the Antilles in the 19th century.

Grenada received it in 1843 and is now a major producer. In Jamaica it stayed a minor crop.



Jamaican pepper sauces

From chilli ground with salt to the bottle that is exported.

Chilli in a bottle.

Edward Long said that bird pepper was dried in the sun, ground with salt and kept in tightly stoppered bottles.

It was called “cayan-butter” and used in soups and with turtle.

Pickled chillies.

Caroline Sullivan’s recipe book included sliced chillies pickled in boiling vinegar with allspice seeds.

And a “poor man’s sauce” of ripe chillies, shallots and mustard.

More chilli, less tomato.

Ketchup came imported, mainly from US brands such as Heinz.

According to Higman, local makers gained ground when they added more chilli and spices, and less tomato.

Island sauces

1921	Pickapeppa sauce is born.
1946	“Pepper Getchup” is advertised.
2002	Scotch bonnet is now an export crop.
2005	The “Ready A Ready” line, with hot sauce.

27.5 million dollars.

Between January and September 2023, Jamaica exported 27.5 million dollars’ worth of sauces, according to STATIN.

It is a growing export category.



Pickapeppa

The sauce from Shooters Hill, in Manchester, that rests in oak barrels.

A teenager in the kitchen.

According to the Jamaica Observer, Norman Nash created the sauce in 1921, when he was a teenager, in his mother's kitchen.

The factory is still in its original location: Shooters Hill, near Mandeville.

Another family in charge.

Years later, the Lyn Kee Chow family bought the business.

In 2011, the Observer reported that this family had owned the company since 1945.

Copper pots and barrels.

Onion, tomato, mango, raisins, tamarind, cane vinegar, chilli and spices are cooked in copper pots.

Then it rests in oak barrels: one year, according to the company; one to four, according to Higman.

95% is exported.

In 2011 the company exported 95% of what it made and had 42 workers.

It bought 80% of its ingredients, such as chilli, allspice and ginger, from farmers in Manchester, Clarendon and St Elizabeth.

A copy in England.

A British company that lost the right to import it made its own version, with fake labels.

According to Jamaica's intellectual property office, the fine was over 80,000 pounds.



Sources

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