

Jamaica at the table, month by month

Festivals, seasons and what people eat at each time of year.



Before you start

Each month brings its fruit, its festival or its dish. This guide goes through the Jamaican year from January to December.

In this guide

January to April — New Year in Jamaica · February: country show · Good Friday in Jamaica · April to June: lobster closed season

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The whole year — A year at the table



New Year in Jamaica

A vigil, a clean house and what is left in the Jamaican pantry.

Watch night.

On the night of the 31st, many families go to church for the “watch night service”: they pray and sing as midnight arrives.

In 1977, the Daily News was already calling it a “traditional” service.

Clean house, unwashed clothes.

Before the new year the house is cleaned: out goes the old so the new can come in.

On 1 January clothes were not washed, because it was believed to bring bad luck. And some people threw out clean water to attract good fortune.

Christmas yam.

According to Higman, plantation manuals said that by Christmas the yam vines dried out and the yams were harvested.

And white yam, which arrives around Christmas, could be stored for up to six months.

Sorrel until January.

Sorrel, the flower used in the Christmas drink, is planted in August and ripens in December or January.

So the year still begins with sorrel.

JAMAICA

Watch night

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12 uvas (12 grapes)

Midnight on the 31st

In Jamaica, church and prayer. In Peru, many people eat 12 grapes at midnight, one wish for each, and throw lentils.



February: country show

On Ash Wednesday, Trelawny usually fills up with crops, livestock and food.

The Hague Show.

In Falmouth, Trelawny, the Hague Agricultural and Industrial Show is normally held on Ash Wednesday.

It is organised by a branch of the Jamaica Agricultural Society, the farmers' society.

Themed villages.

Producers show crops, livestock and farm produce.

In 2020 there were villages for livestock, a botanical garden, food, health, education, the economy and one for children.

Less red meat.

With Ash Wednesday, Lent begins. Many Christians in Jamaica cut down on red meat, and fish gains ground.

Time to plant yam.

According to Higman, on plantations white yam was planted in February or March, to be harvested twelve months later.

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Hague Show

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Ash Wednesday

Good Friday in Jamaica

We have already covered bun and cheese. This is the rest: fish, church and customs.



Fish on Good Friday.

Many Christians cut down on or avoid red meat during Lent, especially on Good Friday.

Fish becomes the preferred protein and fishermen sell more, according to the Jamaica Observer.

Black on Friday, white on Monday.

There are services on Good Friday, Easter Sunday and Easter Monday.

Some people wear black on Friday and white on Monday.

Reading the egg white.

On the eve, an egg white was put in a container, and on Friday the shapes were read: a ship or a plane foretold a journey.

Today it is hardly practised.

The tree that “bleeds”.

At midday on Good Friday the physic nut, known as the “Crucifixion Tree”, is cut, and it gives off a reddish sap.

People believe the cross was made from this wood. It happens mainly in rural areas.

Round like the moon.

Before the long bun, hot cross buns were baked at Easter.

According to Higman, they were round for the full moon, and the cross marked the four quarters.

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Fish

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PERU

Pescado (fish)

Good Friday without red meat

In Peru too: sudado and chupe. In Piura, malarrabia; in the Amazon, patarashca in bijao leaf (Andina).



April to June: lobster closed season

From 1 April to 30 June, lobster gets a rest in Jamaica.

Three months without lobster.

Every year, the National Fisheries Authority closes the spiny lobster season from 1 April to 30 June.

In 2026 it was forbidden to catch, sell, buy or transport it.

So it can breed.

The closed season gives lobsters time to breed and restock without being fished.

If one is caught by accident, it is returned to the sea at once.

Not small ones, not ones with eggs.

Lobsters with eggs, or with a shell under 7.62 cm, are always illegal.

In 2024 the maximum fine was J\$3 million or two years in prison.

Stored stock must be declared.

Anyone who wanted to keep frozen lobster during the closed season had to declare it in writing: kilos, type and where it was stored.

An inspector checked it and issued a certificate.

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Lobster

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PERU

Camarón de río

Closed seasons for breeding

In Peru, river prawns have a closed season in summer, until 31 March. When that one ends, the lobster one begins.



May to July: mango season

We covered the history of the mango. Now, its calendar.

The big harvest.

According to Higman, the mango harvest runs from May to July. It varies by area, and out of season you can find it, but at a high price.

A mature tree can give 400 to 600 mangoes a season.

Heat and little rain.

It does best in low, warm places with little rain, and it grows up to about 1,000 metres above sea level.

A tree can produce for up to a century, although some years it gives little.

For ordinary people and the elite.

In the 1890s the mango was said to be “the common food of the common people” and the prized dessert of the upper classes.

In the 1930s it was the most popular fruit in Jamaica, and in 1992 it was still perhaps the favourite.

And then comes guinep.

In its season, from May to December, guinep is sold in bunches, in town and in the country.

It is eaten on the go, as a snack.

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May to July

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Year end

Mango season

In Peru it is a year-end fruit: in November 2024 alone, 63,114 t were harvested, 69.5% of it in Piura (INEI).



August: Festival cooking

Emancipation, independence and a long tradition of cooking competitions.

Recipes with a flag.

Every year, the independence Festival held culinary arts competitions.

According to Higman, the recipes that were published helped people prefer local food over foreign.

Festival and cooking

1965	Plantain: 600 recipes entered.
1968	Potato, the competition's special product.
1970s	Festival, the Hellshire dumpling, is born.
2025	New category: Street Food JA.

Why is it called festival?

Festival, a sweet fried cornmeal dumpling, was born on the beaches of Hellshire in the 1970s.

According to Higman, its name comes from the Festival of Arts and Culture that marked each independence anniversary.

Denbigh, the big show.

The Jamaica Agricultural Society held the 71st Denbigh Show in May Pen, Clarendon.

There were more than 450 animals, a record, and 500 farmers got in free for the first time.

A competition with street food.

In 2025, the JCDC competition had 12 categories and added "Street Food JA": in one hour, three dishes from a list with yam, breadfruit, festival, bammy or fish.

That year the final was on 9 May.



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JCDC contest



PERU

Día de la Cocina

Celebrating your own cooking

In Peru, since 2010, the second Sunday in September has been Peruvian Cooking and Gastronomy Day.



October: avocado, cacao and turrón

October in Jamaica tastes of pear and cacao. In Lima, of turrón.

Pear season.

In Jamaica the avocado is called “pear”. Its traditional season ran from August to October.

Since the 1980s, varieties that ripen from December to February, such as Lulu and Collinson, have become popular.

Avocado is not cooked.

According to Higman, it is one of the few fruits eaten raw, because cooked it turns rancid.

The English learnt this from the Spanish, and they from the Taíno.

The cacao harvest.

Jamaica's main cacao harvest runs from September to December, with a smaller one from March to June.

The pods turn orange or red as they ripen.

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Pear and cacao

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Turrón

Flavours of October

In Lima, October is the month of the Señor de los Milagros and of turrón de Doña Pepa.

The story of Doña Pepa.

According to tradition, Josefa Marmanillo, an enslaved Afro-Peruvian woman from the Cañete valley, was cured after praying to the Christ of Pachacamilla.

In thanks, every year she brought her turrón to the procession.



November: Eat Jamaican

November is the month for eating what is grown on the island.

A month for local food.

The Ministry of Agriculture and the Jamaica Agricultural Society launched the Eat Jamaican campaign in 2003.

The idea: to give farmers a secure market at home.

Eat what you grow.

The JAS sums it up like this: “grow what we eat and eat what we grow”, as a way of life.

In November everyone is encouraged to buy and eat local produce.

Eat Jamaican Day.

The month closes on 25 November with Eat Jamaican Day and a producers’ fair.

In 2022 the fair was held in the gardens of Devon House, in St Andrew.

The calipever arrives.

In the 18th century it was written that the calipever, a large mullet of sea and river, came close to the coast around November.

That was when it was most plentiful, with roe similar to salmon roe.

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Eat Jamaican

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PERU

Día de la Papa

Eat what you grow

In Peru, since 2005, 30 May has been National Potato Day: there are more than 3,000 varieties to celebrate.



December: the Christmas table

We covered sorrel, black cake and Grand Market. Now, the rest of the plate.

Pudding or cake?

Jamaican “Christmas pudding” is pudding and cake at once: the same mix, steamed, is pudding; baked, it is cake.

It is served cold, and the fruit is soaked at least a month ahead.

Tinned ham.

In the late 19th century ham came imported, whole or tinned, aimed at the Christmas market.

In the 18th century it was eaten mainly by plantation owners.

What is always there.

At Christmas dinner: glazed ham, pork, chicken, curry goat or mutton, fish, and rice with gungo peas.

And on the side, potato salad and baked macaroni.

Preserves and biscuits.

According to Higman, preserved passion fruit was bought as a Christmas gift.

And in the 1930s, tins of English biscuits, “the best biscuits in the world”, were sold in Kingston at Christmas.

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Glazed ham

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PERU

Pavo al horno

The centre of the table

In Jamaica ham rules. In Peru, roast turkey is usually the star of Christmas Eve, according to Andina.



A year at the table

Month by month: what Jamaica eats and celebrates, and its Peruvian counterpart.

January to April

January	Watch night, stored yam, sorrel.
Ash Wednesday	Hague Show and the start of Lent.
Good Friday	Fish, and bun and cheese.
1 April	Lobster closed season begins.

May to August

May to July	Mango season.
May to Dec.	Guinep in bunches.
30 June	Lobster closed season ends.
1–6 August	Festival and Denbigh Show.

August to December

Aug. to Oct.	Pear (avocado) season.
Sep. to Dec.	Main cacao harvest.
November	Eat Jamaican; its day is the 25th.
December	Ham, gungo peas, pudding and sorrel.

And in Peru

Jan. to Mar.	River prawn closed season.
30 May	National Potato Day.
September	Peruvian Cooking Day.
October	Turrón de Doña Pepa.



24 Dec.

Roast turkey.



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