

VISITING THE SOURCE

A Warm Cinnamon Curry From a Farm in St. Lucia

FOOD | BY GREG KESSLER | JANUARY 29, 2015 2:45 PM

When he is not making photos, the fashion photographer and T contributor Greg Kessler is also a farmer at Long Island's Quail Hill farm. Occasionally, for T he explores more remote agricultural areas.



Clockwise from left: On the Emerald Estate farm in St. Lucia, cinnamon is harvested from a family of exotic trees; there, chefs also cook with fresh cinnamon leaves and bark; ground cinnamon enhances a lamb curry. Greg Kessler

Last month I escaped Manhattan, where kale continues to dominate the culinary scene, to a place where kale does not even grow: a 30-acre organic mountainside farm in St. Lucia. The volcanic soil at Emerald Estate, owned by the family behind the Anse Chastanet and Jade Mountain Resort, instead boasts diverse varieties of pineapples, mangoes, cocoa beans — and cinnamon. Before this trip, I couldn't have told you what cinnamon is, or where it comes from. But I now know that the dried, curly sticks sold in grocery stores are cultivated from a family of exotic trees. I watched as a third-generation farmer at Emerald Estate, Martin Joseph, harvested cinnamon the way his grandmother taught him when he was a boy.

After cutting the grayish outer bark off an area of the tree (only three-quarters of the tree gets stripped because removing all the bark completely around one area would kill the tree), Martin cuts into the tree with a large knife and makes three long incisions. Immediately, he then lightly taps the exposed wood with a hammer. Within a minute, the inner bark lifts itself away from the tree, which Joseph gently peels off with his blade — one large, wide piece at a time, which he then slices into a variety of sizes. The result is slightly curved sticks of raw cinnamon, light brown and damp. It is only after the fragrant bark dries that it begins to curl into its signature scroll shape.

After my lesson in gathering cinnamon, the executive chef of Jade Mountain, Jeffrey Forest, indulged me by creating a cinnamon curry with spiced lamb. The hearty dish, outlined below, is as much a complement to the breeze off the Caribbean Sea as it is a balm against the East Coast's freezing temperatures in the wake of Juno.



Yellow rice pairs with cinnamon lamb curry for a hearty dish. *Greg Kessler*

Cinnamon Lamb Curry

Yield: 6-8 servings

Time: 30 minutes to prep, plus 3 hours to cook

For the lamb:

2 tablespoons ground cinnamon

2 tablespoons Kosher salt

2 teaspoons black pepper
4 pounds lamb shoulder meat (2-inch cubes)
Extra-virgin olive oil

1. Mix the cinnamon, salt and pepper together in a small bowl. Season the lamb generously with the mixture.
2. Heat a large heavy-bottomed pan over medium high heat. Pour enough oil in the pan to cover the bottom by 1/8 inch.
3. Carefully add the seasoned lamb to the pan and brown on all sides. You may need to do this in batches. *Chef's tip: Season the lamb in small batches (or the lamb will get wet and will not brown well). It is not necessary to cook the lamb through. Set aside.



A bay leaf can be substituted for cinnamon leaves while making the curry sauce. *Greg Kessler*

For the curry:

SPICE MIXTURE:

3 tablespoons ground cinnamon
1 tablespoon cumin seed
1 teaspoon ground allspice
1 teaspoon ground coriander
1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg
1/2 teaspoon ground fennel seed

1 teaspoon ground cardamom
1 teaspoon ground ginger
½ teaspoon ground star anise
1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
1 pinch cloves

1. Combine all ingredients and set aside.

SAUCE:

2 medium onions, sliced
6 cloves garlic, chopped
2 tablespoons fresh ginger, chopped
4 14-ounce cans coconut milk
2 cans diced tomatoes
2 cinnamon leaves (may substitute bay leaves)
2 cinnamon sticks
Salt and pepper to taste
4 cups prepared basmati rice
Extra-virgin olive oil

1. In a large heavy-bottomed saucepot set over low heat, cook the onions, garlic and ginger in a few tablespoons of olive oil for 20 minutes (add more olive oil if it gets dry). Add the spice mixture for the curry, above, and cook for 5 minutes longer.
*Chef's note: If the pan seems dry, add more oil to pan. It should look like a thick paste.

2. Add the coconut milk and tomatoes to mixture and bring up to a simmer.

3. Add the browned lamb and return to a simmer. Let the mixture cook gently for 2 to 2-and-a-half hours or until the lamb is very tender.

4. Be sure to taste the sauce after about an hour and adjust the salt and pepper to your liking. You may also want to adjust the thickness with a little water or white wine.

5. Serve over basmati rice.

*Chef's Tip: For a vegetarian option, substitute roasted winter vegetables for the lamb (squashes, sweet potatoes, and turnips work well). Be sure to cook the sauce for at least 45 minutes to develop the flavors before adding in the vegetables. Finish off with some crisp blanched haricots verts for freshness.