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## Caribbean cuisine on a Branson budget

When invited by a millionaire to jet between islands, sampling food and wine created by world experts to raise money for charity, how could anyone refuse? Robert Joseph gets his fill of fine Caribbean dining.

By Robert Joseph

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Serious wine tastings aren't supposed to be like this. Usually, when a top winemaker such as Wilhelm Haag, with over 50 vintages under his belt, crosses the Atlantic from Germany to open some of his best bottles, the guests don evening dress and gather in swanky dining rooms. But here it's midday and we're standing around a pool beside an improbably transparent sea and blindingly white sand. In one hand, we're holding glasses of Haag's crisp, floral 2007 Brauneberger Juffer Riesling; in the other, we're balancing plates of marinated tuna and barbecued lobster prepared by an Indian chef who has just flown in from Hawaii. There is not a jacket in sight, and our blonde-maned, globally recognisable billionaire host isn't even wearing shoes.



Necker is among several islands where the annual BVI Winemakers Dinners are held Photo: CATH LOWE

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Sir Richard Branson looks perfectly at home, for the simple reason that this *is* his home – Necker, the Caribbean island he heads for as often as he can. What is unusual about today is that he has allowed a diverse set of strangers into his kingdom. Ever since he bought this 75-acre hideaway for £125,000 in 1978, access has been restricted to his family, friends and, in more recent years, anyone willing and able to take over the whole place for £31,000 a day (including Princess Diana, Steven Spielberg, Oprah Winfrey, Tony Blair and Mariah Carey). On this July day, the man who has persuaded Branson to allow a few dozen "Necker Virgins" into his kingdom for a few hours (or for those prepared to pay a special rate of £8,000 for four nights) is an avuncular Indian called Ajit George.

Best known in the BVI as the developer of the £26-million Nail Bay resort on the neighbouring island of Virgin Gorda, George has a combination of twinkly-eyed enthusiasm and canny intelligence reminiscent of another Necker visitor, Desmond Tutu. Like the good bishop, George is a persuasive man. After discovering the amounts of money that could be raised by getting top chefs to cook for charity in Delaware, where he founded Meals on Wheels, he decided to apply the technique to the British Virgin Islands.

Which is why, here on this unlikely setting of a Caribbean island, I am surrounded by 70 food and wine lovers from across the globe. Lawyer Nick Rowles-Davies – who, as chairman of Bicester Town FC, combines a love of wine with a passion for football – has come from London, while Hollywood producer Haroon Saleem (*The Pursuit of Happyness*) has come from Los Angeles. Others have flown in from France, India, Slovakia and Japan, on scheduled flights via Miami and Puerto Rico or private jets directly to the island of Tortola. All have one thing in common: they've booked up for George's second set of "Winemakers Dinners" in the expectation of sampling some of the finest dishes and wines in the world. What makes these meals worth their long journeys, apart from the exotic setting, is that each will be prepared by seven top chefs and accompanied by wines from seven equally illustrious winemakers. And that all the profits will go to local charities in the BVI.

Necker is only one of the islands involved in the dinners. Over the course of five days, the intrepid diners will zigzag their way across short stretches of water between private lunches and dinners on Guana Island, Peter Island and Tortola and Virgin Gorda. The non-Spanish speakers among us are amused to learn that this last island was allegedly named by Christopher Columbus, because its shape reminded him of a fat – *gorda* – woman. The names of the smaller uninhabited specks of land, such as Dead Chest, Dog Island and Fallen Jerusalem, seem to have been lifted from the pages of *Treasure Island*.

Many of the guests have checked into the studio apartments and private villas of Nail Bay. Only a lucky few are actually staying on Necker, thanks in part to the cost – it's by far the priciest option – and also to the lack of availability: Necker has space for just 14 couples.

Even the most sophisticated travellers seem to adopt a dreamily wistful look when the island is mentioned, so the mischievous side of me would like to be able to report that it's actually rather disappointing. But it's not. It has a peculiarly relaxed magic that comes partly from the fact that it genuinely did start out as the private hideaway of a man who's not particularly bothered about wearing shoes, and partly from the artful way that the team running it – nice young English men and women of the kind you'd find working in chalets in Val d'Isère and Chamonix during the ski season – has contrived to avoid the ambience of a conventional "luxury" hotel or resort.

You sleep beneath fine linen in four-poster beds in Balinese wooden cottages whose open sides overlook the ocean. Nothing too unusual about that, perhaps, but some guests might be disconcerted by showering, shaving and using the WC before an audience of geckos and exotic birds. The cottages, with their private pools, are tucked away among the palm trees and scattered around the little island along tracks that run past turtle and flamingo reserves. Getting between these and the beaches, the tennis courts and the Balinese Great House, where meals are served at communal tables, involves actually walking, although if you haven't the energy, there are electric golf buggies.

It is in the Great House that the first Winemakers Dinner is to be served. The dress code is slightly more formal than it was at noon, and there are some very expensive dresses and suits, but ties are still rare, and the jackets soon find their way on to the backs of chairs. Some of the guests have spent the afternoon windsurfing and sailing Hobie Cat dinghies; others relaxed around the pool or cheered on the chefs as they played an impromptu game of beach volleyball using a coconut for a ball.

In many cases, the cooks and their assistants have flown as far to get here as the guests, most arriving with suitcases of exotic ingredients and their all-important personal sets of knives. Each cook has to produce his/her own dish, and the island's resident chef, a young Englishman called Craig Harnden, is looking a little stressed. His kitchen was built to feed 40 or so people at most and tonight's guest-list runs to 72. He has to find space for Korean-born Rachel Yang to prepare her crab and grilled watermelon, and for Carla Pernambuco, Brazil's answer to Nigella Lawson, to make her lamb dish before an eager Brazilian television crew. Vikram Garg, the Indian who prepared the barbecue earlier in the day, will need to poach the lobster he's going to serve with a chorizo and tofu salad, and Bill Fuller from Pittsburgh will knock up a tuna tartare and a snapper ceviche. And that's all while Harnden is trying to make his own cherry-tomato soup.

Part of the magic of the evening lies in the fact that the wines are not being poured by sommeliers but by the men and women who produced them. There are a lot of glasses – more than 1,000 by my calculation – to fill during the course of the four-hour dinner, but the winemakers still find time to watch the reactions to their wines and to assess how well they have been matched with the dishes. Haag is delighted to discover that his riesling is the perfect counterpoint to Rachel Yang's crab, ginger and chilli. "I always say that German white wines like mine are ideal to drink with Asian food – and often far better than bigger reds."

Pio Boffa, one of the finest winemakers in Italy, is just as interested to see how his Barolo competes with Jorge Borges's Passadouro red from Portugal when set beside Carla Pernambuco's rich lamb and Emmenthal dish. Alain Ivaldi, who runs a top French cookery school in Marseilles, is used to seeing the Provençal cheeses he has chosen matched with French reds, but he agrees that they are brilliant with the rich, plummy Pintas 2003 vintage port, produced by Jorge Borges's wife, former catwalk model Sandra Tavares.

In the morning, while everyone else is chilling out, Ajit George is busy coordinating the day's lunches in restaurants on Tortola and Virgin Gorda, a few miles to the south of Necker, and another big dinner at the Falcon's Nest Villa in the decidedly different setting of Peter Island, half an hour's ride by water taxi farther to the south east. If anticipation of the Falcon's Nest dinner is heightened by the journey across the water, the mood is sharpened even further by the windy drive up into the hills, past vivid bougainvillea and bottle-brush trees.

While Necker is all about barefoot luxury, Falcon's Nest has a decidedly more polished, Californian film-mogul feel to it. Film producer Haroon Saleem acknowledges the resemblance, as he tucks into Alain Ivaldi's brilliant squab breast and savoury-sweet Peking Duck sauce, accompanied by a raspberryish Etude Pinot Noir from his native California. But he also recognises that there's something unique about the atmosphere of these tours. "All these people have come from so many places – but they have this one thing in common: a love of really great food."

If Ajit George has his way, maybe we'll begin to associate the BVI with this kind of eating rather than as a place for sailing, diving and offshore banking. Since the first Winemakers Dinners, he has already persuaded the Taj group to develop an Exotica Resort here, the first big investment in the region by a major hotel group. Rock Café on Virgin Gorda, where one of this year's Winemakers Lunches was held, is transforming itself into a "Wine Restaurant", with its own Italian wines.

Necker is already part of the 2010 series of Winemakers Dinners, but anyone who wants to sample this gourmet getaway may need to book early. Several of this summer's guests have apparently already reserved their places for next year.

- **BVI Winemakers Dinners** will be held on Virgin Gorda, Guana Island and Tortola between December 3 and 6, followed by another series in July 2010, which will include dinners on Necker Island, Peter Island, Guana Island and Mooney Bay. The cost for a couple to fly Virgin Upper Class to the BVI, to spend four nights on Necker, and to enjoy eight winemaker lunches and dinners, is £17,600. Other packages at Nail Bay cost from £9,500. Details from [www.winemakersdinners.com](http://www.winemakersdinners.com) (<http://www.winemakersdinners.com>)

## FIVE ISLANDS FOR THE FOODIE

By Francesca Syz

### Tasmania

One of the only places in the world that has a moratorium on all GM products, Tasmania also has the cleanest air and water. This, coupled with its temperate climate, which resembles that of Champagne in France, has allowed the island to carve a niche for itself producing "boutique" foods such as wasabi, pepperberry, truffles, wakame (edible seaweed), honey and wine. It also breeds the delicious Cape Barren Goose and produces outstanding beef and lamb. This year Tasmania's first cookery school, the Agrarian Kitchen, was opened in the village of Lachlan, outside Hobart, by Rodney Dunn, former food editor of *Australian Gourmet Traveller*. Sign up for a course and stay in a cottage at nearby Curringa Farm. Doubles from £100 (0061 3 6286 3333, [www.curringafarm.com.au](http://www.curringafarm.com.au) (<http://www.curringafarm.com.au>) )

### **Ile de Ré**

Connected to La Rochelle on France's west coast by a two-mile bridge, the Ile de Ré has long attracted affluent Parisians. This island has 62 miles of cycle paths that wind through its villages and past its saltpans and oyster farms. Its salt is renowned, as are its oysters and goat's cheese. Check into L'Hotel de Toiras in St-Martin-de-Ré, which is partnered with two-Michelin-starred Restaurant Coutanceau in La Rochelle. Christopher Coutanceau has devised dishes for the hotel's restaurant, La table d'Olivia. You can also bring produce from the market for the hotel chef to prepare for you. Doubles from £154 (0033 5 46 354032, [www.hotel-de-toiras.com](http://www.hotel-de-toiras.com) (<http://www.hotel-de-toiras.com>) )

### **Kladesholmen, Sweden**

Also known as Herring Island, Kladesholmen has long been associated with great seafood. The award-winning restaurant Salt & Sill --the Swedish counterpart to Rick Stein's seaside restaurant -- was opened 10 years ago by a couple to showcase food based on local ingredients. Last year they added the modern Scandinavian-style, 23-room Salt and Sill Hotel, on six floating pontoons, next to the restaurant. Doubles from £155; [www.saltosill.se](http://www.saltosill.se) (<http://www.saltosill.se>)

### **Heir Island, West Cork**

Between June and November book a fishing boat to ferry you the four-minute journey to Heir Island and enjoy dinner at Island Cottage. It is run by John Desmond and Ellmary Fenton, who have both worked in some of the finest restaurants in Paris. The menu revolves around the local organic and wild ingredients. A two-day cookery course (accommodation included) with John Desmond is another option. Courses from £326 per person (00353 28 38102, [www.islandcottage.com](http://www.islandcottage.com) (<http://www.islandcottage.com>) )

### **Turtle Island, Fiji**

If you're looking for a desert island retreat, Turtle Island could be for you. The setting is beautiful, the Fijian staff a delight and the food, overseen by Australia's leading fine-dining chef, Jacques Reymond, exquisite. He is there for only three weeks a year, but his dishes are beautifully executed by the chefs he has trained. Turtle Island has an organic garden, so fruit and vegetables are "just picked" and fish and lobster are "just plucked" from the sea. From £1,448 per person for seven nights (001 360 256 4347, [www.turtlefiji.com](http://www.turtlefiji.com) (<http://www.turtlefiji.com>) )

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