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Nina Compton brings Caribbean tradition to kitchen tables around the world.

DINING WITH A DIPLOMAT

With a passion for fresh ingredients, *Top Chef* runner-up and St. Lucia culinary ambassador Nina Compton is cooking up a career infused with culture

BY NIEMA JORDAN

Warning: Visiting Nina Compton's Instagram page may lead to hunger, increased wanderlust and the making of a new friend in your head.

The Miami chef, whom you might recognize from TV's *Top Chef*, is the culinary ambassador for St. Lucia, a job that takes her around the world serving up a little island flavor at every stop. Among her biggest inspirations from her Caribbean childhood: her

father's emphasis on a farm-to-table diet and the open-air market, where before sunrise shoppers can find a host of just-picked produce, get fish straight from the ocean and grab a chicken that's running around. "Having those fresh ingredients at my fingertips stuck with me," says Compton. "We used a lot of curry, ginger, turmeric, infused spices and oils, so now I try to use them as much as possible."

The homage to home is important to this South Beach chef, who is known to add a Caribbean touch to French and Italian techniques. "I tell people that whatever you are cooking, that's an expression of yourself that you put on a plate," she says.

HEALTHY & HAPPY

DAVID HOIR/BRAVO/NBCU PHOTO BANK VIA GETTY IMAGES

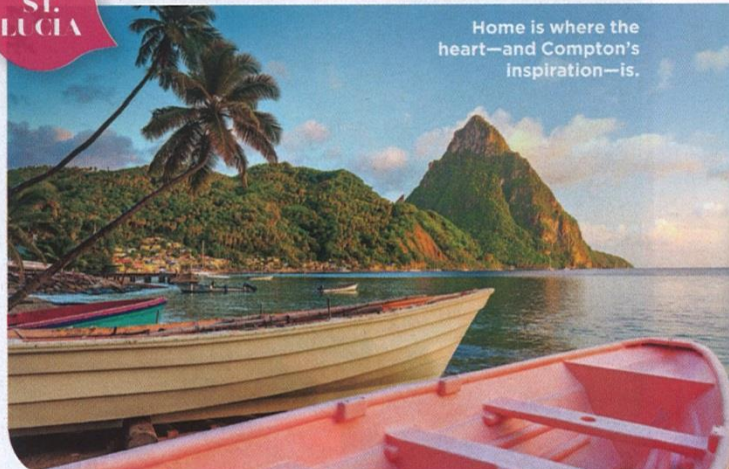
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HEALTHY & HAPPY : ISLAND FLAVOR

Spice it up.

ST. LUCIA



Home is where the heart—and Compton's inspiration—is.

Casting Call

For nine years, Bravo's hit show *Top Chef* has introduced millions to rising culinary stars. Still, Compton was hesitant about joining the competition.

"When I got the call, I was pretty shocked," explains Compton, who was chef de cuisine at the Fontainebleau hotel's Scarpetta Miami Beach restaurant at the time. "I almost said no because I was scared and wondered if I could handle the pressure." After encouragement from her boss, chef Scott Conant, she joined the show's eleventh season—and hasn't looked back. "It made me fall in love with cooking all over again. It was a very important chapter in my life."

Designing Her Own Path

After coming in second place on *Top Chef* and being voted fan favorite, Compton took another big leap and left Scarpetta.

"When I got hired, it was just four walls. I saw it built from the ground up. That was an exciting point in my life, to witness such an iconic property transformed," says Compton. Last year she joined forces with the tourism board of her native St. Lucia and now splits her time between there and Miami spreading the good news of Caribbean food. Compton initially planned to study agriculture, but when she started creating holiday meals for her family as a teenager, she realized her true calling was cooking and decided to attend culinary school. "I'm happiest when I'm in the kitchen because I get to create moments and memories for people," she says. ▶



Miami's Lincoln Road farmers' market is a hot spot.



Compton often trades olive oil for coconut oil.

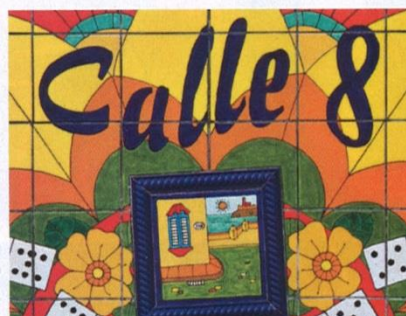
MIAMI



Crandon Beach in Key Biscayne

"I'm happiest when I'm in the kitchen because I get to create moments and memories." —NINA COMPTON

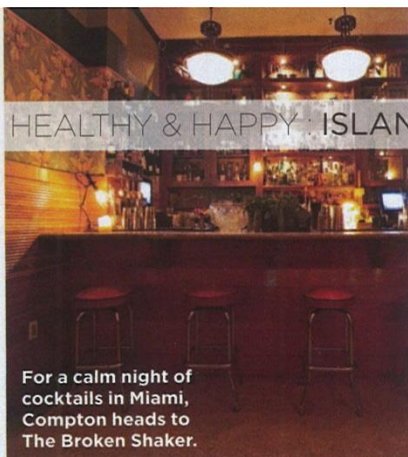
The Calle Ocho (Eighth Street) mosaic is located in Little Havana, Miami's Cuban district, a favorite Compton haunt.



Compton met husband Larry while cooking.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ANGELIKA SCHWARZ/GETTY IMAGES; ALAN COPSON/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF THE MARKET COMPANY; JOHN BLOCK/GETTY IMAGES; EYON/JUG VIA GETTY IMAGES; WALTER BIBIKOW/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF SUBJECT.



HEALTHY & HAPPY ISLAND FLAVOR

For a calm night of cocktails in Miami, Compton heads to The Broken Shaker.

Miami Meals

Nina Compton has witnessed firsthand the culinary expansion of southern Florida and is enjoying every minute of it. "The great thing about Miami is there are so many things to do when it comes to eating. You can get great Cuban in Calle Ocho, Italian at Macchialina or Japanese at Makoto," she says. "When my husband and I are both off, we have a date night." The couple met at the former Versace mansion, where Compton was a chef and future husband Larry Miller was a manager. They will soon celebrate their six-year anniversary, starting with a scenic stroll. "We go to the beach during the day and pick a restaurant that we haven't been to for dinner." When she's in a party mood, Compton heads to LIV nightclub, and for a more chill experience it's cocktails at Foxhole or The Broken Shaker. On weekends off from sharing the many culinary offerings of St. Lucia, you can catch the chef at the farmers' market on Lincoln Road in Miami. "I grew up with fresh meals," she says. "The biggest thing when people try my food is I want it to be approachable and comforting."



Compton served as chef de cuisine at the Fontainebleau hotel's restaurant, Scarpetta Miami Beach.



Give this decadent dessert a try.

SWEET TREAT

JUST IN TIME FOR VALENTINE'S DAY, **NINA COMPTON** SHARES HER CARIBBEAN TWIST ON A CLASSIC FRENCH PASTRY

CHOCOLATE BEIGNETS WITH RUM VANILLA ANGLAISE

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

Prep time: 30 minutes, plus 3 hours for freezing

Cooking time: 15 to 20 minutes

BEIGNETS

3 cups ricotta
4 eggs
1/8 teaspoon vanilla extract
3/4 cup flour
1/2 cup cocoa powder
1/8 teaspoon baking powder
1 cup amaretti cookies, finely ground
1 cup melted chocolate, for filling
Cooking oil
1 cup shaved, toasted coconut

Using a mixer with paddle, blend ricotta, eggs and vanilla for 3 minutes. Add dry ingredients; do not overmix. Pipe tablespoon-size dollops of batter onto wax paper; chill for 10 minutes. Pipe the melted chocolate in the center of the dough, making sure to seal the hole.

Freeze dough until pliable, about 3 hours. Preheat oil in a deep pot at 350°F. Fry dough balls in batches, 2 to 3 minutes on each side, until they float for 1 minute; remove from oil and drain. Top with shaved coconut and serve with anglaise.

ANGLAISE

1 vanilla bean
1/2 cup cream
1/2 cup milk
1/2 cup sugar
1/8 cup rum
8 egg yolks

Open vanilla bean and scrape the seeds inside into a sauce pot. Add cream, milk, sugar and rum, and bring to a boil. Once edges begin to foam, lower temperature. In separate bowl, whisk egg yolks. Temper yolks then add them to hot milk mixture. Cook on low until mixture coats the back of a spoon. Strain through mesh sieve into a container placed in ice; let cool. Pour over chocolate beignets.

BEIGNETS: PHOTOGRAPHY, KATE SEARS. FOOD STYLING, SUSAN OTTAVIANO/HALLEY RESOURCES. PROP STYLING, CAROLINE COLSTON/HALLEY RESOURCES. MIAMI MEALS: FROM TOP: COURTESY OF THE FOUNTAINBLEAU/MIAMI BEACHES.COM; COURTESY OF THE GREATER MIAMI CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU/MIAMIANDBEACHES.COM; COURTESY OF SCARPETTA/FONTAINEBLEAU.COM.