SINGH’S ROTI SHOP in Boston serves traditional Indian flatbread with jerk chicken, curried goat, or chickpeas, as well as Jamaican-style beef patties and pholourie, spicy fried dough balls with an addictive, house-made tamarind chutney. This hybrid Indian-Caribbean fare, found in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, reflects the high proportion of islanders who are, like restaurant owner Ricky Singh, descended from Indian immigrants. Singh and his wife, Kay, opened their Dorchester business more than five years ago to serve Greater Boston’s growing Caribbean population, which is heavily weighted toward Haitians and Dominicans, followed by Jamaicans. “But my base clientele,” he adds, “is now American-type individuals. I am so popular that I am getting people from all over Maine, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire.”

Singh, like many culinary entrepreneurs, still readily takes his food on the road. His roti, along with fresh coconut, pineapple, and sour sop juice, can be found at many regional festivals, including the twenty-third annual Cambridge Carnival on September 13. The Cambridge fete is a far tamer version of the Brazilian carnivals traditionally held before Lent, but still draws a throng to Central and Kendall Squares.

A three-hour parade kicks off at 12:30 p.m. on River Street. Streams of dancers clad in scanty satin costumes loaded with rhinestones, sequins, tassels, and faux jewels—some sporting giant feathered headdresses and masks—strut proudly like exotic birds. The spectacle ends on Main Street, where more live, loud music—from reggae, rap, and hip hop to calypso and “kompa” (Haitian pop)—is on offer, amid vendors of crafts, clothing, and food (a la carte items, $4-$5; combination platters, $8-$13).

Singh will be there. His tropical beverages come ice-cold, with a straw, in cored pineapples. “We also use fresh sour sop,” he says of the white, pulpy, native Caribbean fruit that tastes of lemons mixed with pineapples and a strong shot of banana.

Other carnival stalls sell more traditional Indian and Thai food. Especially worth seeking out, though, are the various “jerk” dishes and the harder-to-find Jamaican specialties that are typically offered by the purveyors below. (The list includes those vendors slated to be at the carnival; the food actually served that day is subject to last-minute changes. Retail

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The Cambridge Carnival celebrates food and culture.
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HARVARD SQUARED

locations have been provided, where applicable.)

R & S Jamaican Restaurant owner Shernett Barrett cooks and sells her food at fairs all along the Eastern Seaboard. “People eat with their eyes,” she says of her open-grill style. “My motto is ‘Only the best is good enough.’” She typically offers jerk chicken and pork, curried chicken and goat, rice and peas, fried ripe plantains, and steamed vegetables.

The Irie Jamaican Restaurant also serves rice, peas, and steamed vegetables, but seasoned with an orange sauce that doubles as gravy in the chicken dishes. At the Boston Jerk Festival in June, owner Donna Davis also dished out spicy seafood stew with mussels, shrimp, lobster, and fish “escovitch,” a seductive, pickled Scotch bonnet pepper sauce packed with strands of carrots and onions. Sides include roasted corn and a tough, chewy bun known as “festival.”

Flames Restaurant (flamesrestaurant.com) is a larger outfit with three locations in Boston that serve “Caribbean and American food.” That includes classic Jamaican dishes plus the occasional specialties (when available): curried conch and ackee. The latter is the island’s national fruit—although when cooked it looks and tastes like scrambled eggs. Careful harvesting is required: what’s eaten are actually the yellow arils that grow on the toxic black seeds found inside the ripe red fruit. (Unripened ackee is poisonous).

East Somerville’s Some Ting Nice (www.sometingnescambridge.com) has an extensive menu, but co-owner Susan Puckerin plans to serve only jerk chicken and rice and beans, along with Jamaican-style roti, at the carnival. Dhal roti, she says, is a closed, or wrapped, roti stuffed with a mixture of split peas, garlic, and spices; aloo roti holds potatoes. The “buss-up-shut” roti (as in “busted up”) means the bread is pulled apart and used, like Ethiopian injera, to gather bites of goat stew, for example, and a dollop of mango kuchela. The Indian-Caribbean chutney is bold: unripe green mangoes, mustard oil, and hot peppers.

Visitors to Singh’s can try his own, handmade version of chutney—or take home a bottle of his more proprietary pepper sauce. As he notes: “It’s the hottest sauce in New England right now.”

~NELL PORTER BROWN

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