



Cook Ital-style at home with authentic Caribbean ingredients including tinned callaloo, fresh Scotch bonnet peppers and ground pimento (allspice) from easycaribbeanshop.com

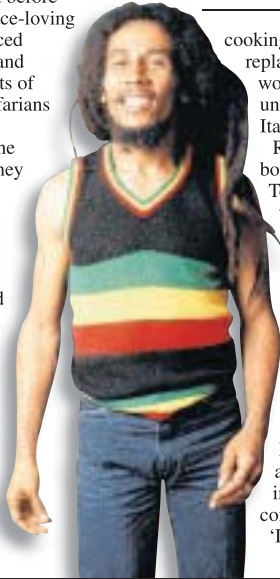
Vegetarian? No, Rastafarian

Mention a meal without salt, meat, shellfish and dairy, and most foodies will run a mile. But before peace-loving

vegan hippies danced naked to Hendrix and extolled the benefits of a basic diet, Rastafarians in Jamaica were developing a cuisine even Paul McCartney would consider spartan.

'I-man say don't make jah body a graveyard for de dead animals,' said Bob Marley about the diet of the true Rastafarian, known as Ital

Stir it up: Reggae legend Bob Marley was an advocate of Ital cooking



Ital cooking: Rastafarians' strict dietary rules mean they have had to find some alternative ways of creating distinctive flavours **BY OLLIE STALLWOOD**

cooking. Rastafarians often replace the first letter of words with 'I', signifying unity with nature; thus Ital is derived from 'vital'. Rastafarian dietary laws borrowed from the Old Testament were designed to increase 'livity', or life energy force, within the body. Chemicals, salt, flesh, blood and milk (known as white blood) were banned, along with tobacco and alcohol. One thing never excluded from Ital food, however, is flavour. Over the years Rasta chefs have learned a number of ways of imbuing their dishes with complex, rich flavours. 'It's the Rastaman way of

cooking vegan and we are always looking for alternative ways of creating flavour; it's about eating healthy and living long,' says Levi Roots, Jamaican chef, musician and creator of Reggae Reggae Sauce. 'This way of eating gives you more energy, it is good for the brain and helps the digestion.' Roots replaces salt with coconut milk and recommends using the Jamaican staple of allspice, which blends pungent natural ingredients such as cloves and nutmeg. Pick your vegetables well, he adds, because freshness is key. 'Feel, touch and smell your veg to make sure they are fresh,' he says. 'When you sit there and a plate of food looks delicious, it looks like a painting.' The typical Ital feast will feature turnip curry, carrot and sweet potato soup, Ital stew with okra and yams, all packed with scallions, onions, garlic,

ginger, callaloo (similar to spinach) and Scotch bonnet peppers. Tofu is often used and it is essential to marinate the otherwise bland bean curd for a day in order to pack in as much taste as possible. 'Don't worry too much about the lack of salt, says Roger Fothergill, a chef consultant with 25 years' experience in Caribbean cooking – you'll get used to it. 'If we were brought up with no salt or sugar, we wouldn't crave it,' he adds. 'If you are used to salt, you may notice it is not there in Ital cooking but the taste comes from the variety of ingredients.' Rastafarians have adopted Nazirite vows into their beliefs, including not cutting their hair (hence dreadlocks) and not eating meat. Many believe that to touch dead flesh is to touch death. Pork is a distinct no-no and shellfish is seen as a scavenger and is also avoided. But if you really want to understand Ital beliefs, you have to turn to the Bible and, in particular, Genesis 1:29: 'And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed,

which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.' In other words, plants will provide all that you need – including something to smoke. Virginia Burke, author of *Eat Caribbean: The Best Of Caribbean Cookery*, lives in Jamaica and was a good friend of Marley. She says that keeping the body, or 'temple', clean, pure and healthy is an integral part of being pure in spirit for Rastafarians. Marley spent much of his life eating Ital food and went to particular care to make sure his band and entourage were stocked up when on tour. 'As you can imagine, it would have been difficult for him and his entourage to get the type of meals they wanted from restaurants while on the road,' says Burke, who met Marley on New Year's morning in 1973 in Jamaica. 'There was always a trusted cook or two around, whether Bob was home or on the road. 'I do remember that Mikey Dan [a Rastafarian elder charged with

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**Stir it up: Reggae
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› Ital curry recipe

From Eat Caribbean: The Best Of Caribbean Cookery by Virginia Burke (pictured below). Serves four to six people.

■ Cut 250g potatoes, 50g sweet potatoes, 350g pumpkin, ½ small green cabbage, 1 large carrot, 1 red, green or yellow sweet pepper, ½ cauliflower, 225g green beans or bodi (runner beans) and 1 de-seeded Scotch bonnet pepper into 2.5cm pieces.

■ Heat 2tbsp vegetable oil in a large skillet and add 1 spring onion, 1tsp fresh thyme leaves, 1 chopped onion, 6 allspice berries, 2 chopped garlic cloves and 2tsp curry powder.

■ Stir until lightly browned then add 225ml coconut milk. Add both types of potato and allow to cook for 5min, then add the remaining vegetables. Simmer until tender, adding water to prevent sticking if necessary. Serve sprinkled with 1tsp garam masala.



creating the Ital food] was with him on his first tour to California. He was busy from morning to night making sure “Skipper” and the other Rastafarians had their Ital food and

probably a Thermos full of porridge on the bus; no stops at McDonald’s for that crew.’

Rastafari is less an intensely organised religion, more a movement.

As such, many Rastafarians have their own way of looking at Ital cooking, even adding fish or chicken depending on their interpretation. The most important thing, however,

is that the food is fresh, wholesome and of good quality. Fothergill sums it up: ‘If you are healthy in your body, you will be healthy in your mind.’

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