



# ITAL IS VITAL

JAMAICA'S TROPICAL CLIMATE AND FERTILE SOIL  
PROVIDE AN ABUNDANT SUPPLY OF ORGANIC FRUITS,  
VEGETABLES AND POTENT HERBS.

By Janeen Johnson







Local farms are the backbone of Jamaica's *ital* vegetarian menu, providing fresh fruits and vegetables all over the island.



The island is rife with opportunities to explore and sustain a plant-based diet. Labels like vegan or vegetarian are concocted to define those embracing a meat-free lifestyle, but in Jamaica, everything is simply *ital*.

The Rastafarian movement has been a definitive part of Jamaica's cultural identity with an undeniable influence on local cuisine. *Ital* is a word coined in Rastafarian culture to describe natural foods prepared without salt; however, the term is loosely applied to all meatless dishes. Rastafarians are traditionally advocates of sustainable living and reaping the fruits of one's labour. *Ital* is not a fad or trendy social media hashtag; for many it is a vital part of their existence.

"There's something special and spiritual about sitting in a Rasta man's shop as he prepares his *ital* stew for you," says Keisha McDonald, co-owner of Kushite's Vegetable Cuisine. She and her business partner, Kush Tafari, are two of a growing number of entrepreneurs that are changing the face of local vegan food. Their fine-dining approach to vegetable cuisine was revolutionary when they started Kushite's back in 2010.

#### ITAL SHOPS

*Ital* shops are at the core of Jamaica's burgeoning vegan food scene.



Structures range from modest street-side shacks to small and tastefully decorated eateries. Ital stew is more about the sense of fellowship and communion than it is about the hearty merger of vegetables steamed in coconut milk then seasoned with freshly grounded herbs and spices. The love and patience that goes into the preparation of each dish enhances the flavour just as much as the fiery scotch bonnet pepper and callaloo mixture of a pepper pot soup. Visiting an ital shop is an authentic experience and sweet immersion into local culture, such as the warm greeting from the Rasta man as he hands you a cup of freshly made sour sop juice blended with homegrown limes. Ital is Jamaica's soul food.

#### VEGETARIAN RESTAURANTS

Ackee Quinoa, Jerk Breadfruit and Callaloo Lasagne are snippets of the array of plant-based meals offered at restaurants like Kushite's Vegetable Cuisine and New Leaf Vegetarian. Vegetarian restaurants maintain the distinct flavour identity of local cuisine. The infusion of Mediterranean and other international cooking styles is a testament to the island's rich history and traditions of past and present inhabitants.

Other restaurants like the Regency Restaurant at Terra Nova All-Suite Hotel in Kingston are responding to the rising demand for healthier meal options. They introduced a gourmet vegetarian menu in an effort to enhance the fine-dining experience for their guests.

Café Africa specialises in African-inspired cuisines with vegan-friendly options. Fufu (Ghanaian cassava dish) and matoke (Ugandan plantain polenta) are fixtures on their menu.

#### FARM-TO-TABLE DINING

St. Elizabeth is the island's largest agricultural-producing region. Located in the Pedro Plains area of the parish, Dool's Organic Farm offers an al fresco dining experience.

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*Jamaica's fertile soil produces a bounty of fruits and vegetables. Farms abound on island, including Stush in the Bush.*



Emphasis is placed on the vegetable-based meal courses, prepared with freshly harvested ingredients. The monthly dinner events are organised by Jakes, an eclectic eco-style resort with a strong commitment to community-based tourism.

Lisa and Chris Binns describe their Stush in the Bush dining experience as “sexy vegetarianism.” Their business is a marriage of italy farming and a modern-day love story. The couple-turned-business-partners offer vegetarian lunches and dinners as well as tours of their 15-acre Zionites Farm in St. Ann. Their passion for natural and GMO-free living translates in their Stush in the Bush line of vegan-friendly sauces and preserves as

#### DID YOU KNOW?

Healthy vegan diets are abundant with vitamins B1, C and E; folic acid; magnesium and iron, whilst also being low in cholesterol and saturated fats.

well as their gourmet cuisines. There are more than 175,000 registered farmers scattered throughout the 14 parishes of Jamaica. Agriculture is the backbone of the nation, so it is no surprise that farm-to-table dining experiences are on the rise.

#### VEGAN ENTREPRENEURS

Jamaicans possess an entrepreneurial spirit and as such have capitalised on the rise in demand for organic products. Growth spurts in farmers markets and pop-up shop events have created a platform for vegan entrepreneurs. From home-based

meal delivery services to vegan pastries and natural juices, the ita! movement is spreading rapidly. At the heart of the Jamaican culture are street vendors who are turning live foods into fast food. The artisanship of the machete-wielding coconut and pineapple vendors cannot go unrecognised. Not to be outdone are the innovative men who sell freshly roasted peanuts from whistling oven-like contraptions attached to their bicycles.

Visitors to Jamaica have infinite opportunities to indulge in the natural bounties of the land. ■

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