

# Caribbean Food Cultures: Representations and Performances of Eating, Drinking and Consumption in the Caribbean and Its Diasporas

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Junior Research Group  
“From the Caribbean to North America and Back”



**Caribbean Food Cultures: Representations and Performances of Eating, Drinking and Consumption in the Caribbean and Its Diasporas**

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The Caribbean is associated not only with beaches, palms, exotic food, fruity rum cocktails and reggae-music in Western common knowledge, but also with the inhuman plantation system, slavery, piracy or “banana republics”.

In the Caribbean, food and drinks as products and as acts or performances play a crucial role in various areas of human behavior and interaction: for the self-preservation of the body, as ethnic, religious and national identity markers, in the context of local and global commercial relationships, or regarding the fair allocation of food and relations of production. These biological, social, economic, historical and ethnic dimensions have taken a special turn in the Caribbean – a region that has been heavily influenced by migration. Thus, on the one hand, colonizers, slaves,

contract workers, privateers and refugees were components of specific historical relations of production and trade. On the other hand, these different groups of people brought along social, cultural and economic practices related to food, consumer and luxury goods, which were subject to change and (or) hybridization. In the course of decolonization, emigration and tourism these goods and food, in turn, are being re-imported into the former European “motherlands” and North America.

The aim of this conference is to explore the performances or acts related to the production, consumption and the symbolism of food and nutrition in the Caribbean and its diasporas from the perspectives of cultural, social and behavioral sciences. Particular attention will be paid to contemporary and trans-national perspectives. These, for example, can be concerned with the social or religious significance of food, abstinence, rituals of exchange and preparation as well as the exchange of culinary traditions and ingredients on the internet. Of further

interest are national and transnational representation practices of eating and drinking in literature, popular culture and new media, such as the advertisement of Caribbean products in the region and the diasporas and the symbolic or metaphorical usage of “ethnic food” and its consumption in narrative literature and song lyrics.

As for the structure of the conference, we propose the following panels: Food and Literature; Food and Popular Culture; Food and the Internet; Ritual Food and Eating. For further details on the panels, please see below.

Please send an abstract of 300 words by 1<sup>st</sup> February 2012 with a short CV to [foodcultures@googlemail.com](mailto:foodcultures@googlemail.com).

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## Provisional Panels

### *Food and Literature*

Food, its preparation and eating have always acted as creative devices in literature and plays. Within the genre of migration literature and in diasporic texts food becomes a marker of identity and cultural difference, a so-called “culinary identity”. Caribbean authors, especially those in the diaspora, write about food as a form of cultural retention to recall home and evoke feelings of nostalgia. Likewise, changes in eating habits can be interpreted as signs of cultural blending.

Eating and drinking may be used symbolically for sexual and corporeal representations. In novels, short stories, poems and plays the sensual aspects of food are emphasized to aesthetically express eroticism, desire and love. Furthermore, psychological aspects of eating, not-eating and hunger are dealt with to express empowerment and resistance, control, compulsion and oppression.

### *Food and Popular Culture*

References to food are very common in Caribbean popular culture, often carrying metaphorical significance. The consumption of food in song lyrics and movies, for example, serves to include or exclude various social, ethnic and religious groups. The representation and preparation as well as the socially expected consumption or the contamination of food and drinks are used to describe gender and sexual identities or deviations from gender norms. This is illustrated in Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's movie about homosexual love in communist Cuba, called *Fresa y chocolate* (1993).

Popular culture discusses hunger and shortage of food as well as the struggle for one's daily bread, but also the consumption of luxury foods and expensive liqueurs. Moreover, multinational companies exert influence on Caribbean popular culture through the sponsoring and organizing of cultural events, meanwhile making decisions about the artists and their lyrics and using pop stars to advertise their products.

In these two panels we will focus on representations and performances of eating, drinking and consuming in music, films, novels, plays, poetry, etc. by Caribbean writers and artists. How is eating narrated and realized aesthetically? Which functions do food metaphors and symbols have in the depiction, e.g., of bodies, sexualities and (deviant) gender norms? To what extent are the Caribbean and its diasporas connected through literary representations of ethnic food or comfort food? How may food be used to create national identity in popular culture and literature? What are the consequences of the growing influence of multinational companies, like Guinness or Pepsi, on cultural events in the Caribbean? Likewise, what role do food and drink play in Hollywood movies, such as *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003-2011), in constructing “Caribbeanness”?

### *Food and the Internet*

The internet serves, in particular due to the migrational movements within and from the Caribbean, as a means to connect to relatives, friends and home countries or as a window to the unknown. This panel will concentrate on one aspect: food and the internet.

The culinary consumption of country-specific food is very often source of emotions like nostalgia or longing. The familiar flavor of *arroz y frijoles*, for example, prompts a Cuban-American blogger to euphoric commitments to his *Cubanidad* and an ode to the food of his home country. Accordingly, we ask to what extent these emotions are reflected on the internet. Bulletin boards are used to exchange recipes, sites are created that can be used to recommend restaurants in the Caribbean and its diasporas. Online-shops advertise country-specific Caribbean ingredients on colorful websites. Furthermore, this constant exchange enables the emergence of transcultural culinary peculiarities, such as the usage of ingredients from different cultural areas as well as the

development of new recipes and their distribution on the internet.

For this panel contributions that discuss the phenomenon food and the internet are welcome. The following questions can be used as guidelines: Do the exchange processes described above facilitate forms of dialogue that would not be possible otherwise? Is the use of eating and drinking as a subject of discussion only an excuse to talk about other topics like culture, politics or society?

### *Ritual Food and Eating*

Food and the act of eating play a prominent role in a lot of religious rituals in the Caribbean. As objects, food and drinks may be ritually ingested (e.g. bread, wine, *prasad*) and their sacrificial offering may be proclaimed as a “feeding” of specific gods or *spirits* (e.g. sacrifices of fruits, tobacco, animals). Likewise, the practice of ritual not-eating and fasting is of equal importance in Caribbean religions. For example, devotees of the Caribbean Hindu Madras-Tradition fast on the day of

worshipping the Goddess Kali, which means that they abstain from consuming meat, eggs and alcohol, in order to be ritually pure and allowed to enter the premises of a temple.

This panel will address the following questions: Which kinds of food rituals, fasting, offerings and food taboos exist in the Caribbean? What are their functions and in which social and cultural contexts are they to be found? What, in particular, is defined as “food”? What is defined as “impure” and “non-food”? Different religious traditions will be considered within the panel, for example (Caribbean) traditions of Vodou, Santería, Spiritual Baptism as well as Hinduism, Islam, etc.

Additionally, we will investigate the influence of migration between the Caribbean and North America on ritual food and eating. Are there changes in the perception of food related rituals and the modes and practices of eating, not-eating and fasting? To what extent do these changes occur?