

A taste of Trinidad from Harlesden

One of my favourite childhood memories of Christmas is the shopping trip we used to take to Harlesden in north London. It might seem like an unusual place to do shopping but for my parents it was a taste of home.

We would sit squashed in the back of my dad's car becoming more excited as we neared the area as we knew this signified the start of Christmas in our family.

The high street was full of west Indian and Asian food and wholesale shops. Mum would spend hours in a general store shop picking up essentials for recreating a Trinidadian Christmas in Watford. This included a giant ham for Christmas eve, beans and coconut milk for rice and peas, yams, sweet potatoes, okra and more for our Christmas dinner. We would also have an artery clogging macaroni pie with fiery scotch bonnet peppers and tinned evaporated milk

My dad would go to one of the halal butchers to get mutton for a curry along with pigs' trotters for a dish called pig foot souse - a clear broth of pickled pig trotters with onion, garlic, lime and more hot peppers. It sounds unappetising but tastes delicious! .

He would also go to one of the many off licences for ingredients for Rum & Guinness punch and Angustora bitters (a Trinidadian spirit) for cocktails.

We would be allowed explore the many Hair and beauty shops which seemed more glamorous than Boots or Woolworths. We would be instructed to meet back at the clock tower by a certain time – my dad saying that he would be leaving “no matter who was in the car!”

There were only 5 of us but my mother would cater for 10 times as many as she would have been mortified if there had not been a table laden with food from Christmas Eve to New Year's Day to feed impromptu visitors.

My parents divorced when I was in my late teens and as my mum could not drive, I took over going to Harlesden with my sister for the Christmas shopping which was just as much fun.

We invariably spent more time in the hair shops and on one occasion decided to combine the trip with getting our hair done before shopping – a complete disaster. If you know anything about black hairdressers, you'll know that timekeeping is not a priority. I became more frantic as time went by knowing that the butchers would be closing shortly. I got out of the chair when I was nearly finished not caring what I looked like. I told my sister to wait for me at the whilst I went to the butchers. With my purchases made I returned to the shop only to find that she had been talked into having a fashionable 'wedge' cut into her hair a la Shalamar's Jeffrey Daniel! I knew mum would be furious but on balance guessed she would have been more cross about the lack of meat.