

Rice and Peas: Steve Fuger

Rice and peas are comfort food.

It was the lone 'vegetarian option' that evening and I was looking forward to it; every family makes it to their own secret concoction of spices and coconut milk.

My table companions at the simple guesthouse in the mountains above Kingston, had feasted on a sweat inducing jerked meat stew and, as the role of rice and peas in this instance was to mitigate some Scoville scale units and soak up the juices and sauce, it was rice and peas at its most basic, the one that boils rice with red kidney beans, rendering the rice a muddy colour. It was bland. Or classic some would say; even Jamaican children aren't weaned on Scotch bonnets.

After dinner I stepped outside and wound up in the back of the building by the kitchen door where cook was catching the marginally cooler evening air. I nodded to her, and she acknowledged me with a slight lift of her chin.

The bank opposite the kitchen was overflowing with flowering nasturtiums in full tumble, their spectrum from lemon yellow through tangerine to scarlet.

'Beautiful, aren't they', I indicated the blanket of flowers.

She tilted her head slightly and viewed me sidelong. My accent required interpretation.

'They'd look lovely decorating your dishes. Especially the rice and peas.'

Her eyes narrowed and she retracted her chin.

I picked a few leaves and a couple of flowers. 'Do you eat them?' and I proffered her my posy.

Her eyes widened and she leant right back, tucking her chin in tightly, inhaling deeply, and very slowly shook her head, from one side then to the other, just the once.

'They have a peppery taste' and, smiling encouragingly, I popped a leaf and a flower into my mouth and chewed, 'mmmm'-ing and nodding my appreciation.

Her eyebrows shot up, 'OOOooooooo!' she said, and I swear she adjusted her sturdy frame to cover the doorway, a pre-emptive manoeuvre to secure her retreat perhaps, or repel a move on her kitchen.

This would not be a winner and I conceded defeat. 'Nice dinner this evening, thank you, I had the rice and peas, I'm vegetarian', and with a little wave, backed off around the side of the building before she could inform me that the rice and peas were cooked in chicken stock or something else I didn't need to know about.