

Chef Gets Fresh in St. John

Interview with Chef Mike Vargas of the Sugar Mill Restaurant

By Tim Cotroneo



For nearly four years, Chef Mike Vargas played hard to get. Each time he received a call from Anthony “Tony” Dawodu, the Executive Chef at the Caneel Bay Resort in St. John, Vargas would reply he’d seriously consider working at one of the most beautiful restaurants in the U.S. Virgin Islands. In 2009, Dawodu made Vargas an offer he couldn’t refuse, and the two former Boston-based chefs joined forces at The Sugar Mill Restaurant overlooking the Caribbean Sea.

“I worked with Chef Tony at the Four Seasons back in Boston. We stayed in touch after he relocated to work in St. John. I was born in Puerto Rico, and my Mom moved back there a few years ago. So now, I not only have the opportunity to cook at a restaurant that is very scenic and has all sorts of history, but I’m also just a 40-minute boat ride to where my Mom lives,” Vargas said.

What also drew Vargas to St. John was a chance to broaden his cooking horizons with a new kind of freshness, especially pertaining to seafood. “There’s Maine lobster and there’s Caribbean lobster. The taste is distinctly different, and our customers love it. At The Sugar Mill, we serve a fantastic array of fish, all caught within a few miles of the resort,” Vargas said. Caneel Bay Resort has its own private harbor, and fresh fish is brought in daily for the resort’s four restaurants.

A Restaurant with Atmosphere



Vargas' new home, The Sugar Mill Restaurant, is located on an elevated point of Caneel Bay's 170 acres. The name of the restaurant is derived from the fact that the foundation of this spacious facility is the actual remains of a sugar mill dating back to the 1800s.

This al fresco dining establishment is an architectural marvel. In the center of the restaurant is a stone circle that the mill used for grinding sugar. The ring of tables hugging the Sugar Mill's western wall provides customers with fabulous sunset views. For guests staying at the Caneel Bay Resort, Vargas will also prepare oceanfront custom meals with a table smack dab on one of the resort's seven beaches. Yes, you read correctly, Caneel Bay is home to seven glorious beaches.

Cooking in Paradise



Aerial view of Caneel Bay Resort in St. John

Cooking in paradise is not without hardships. “With the exception of our fresh fish and some local vegetables, everything served at The Sugar Mill has to be shipped in from the neighboring island of St. Thomas. If I need three limes, I need to buy a whole case,” Vargas said.

Vargas noted another chef management issue that is unique to the grand geography of the resort he works at. Caneel Bay’s four restaurants are positioned on various points throughout the resort’s sprawling acreage. If Vargas is without an ingredient that can be found at another Caneel Bay restaurant, he has a unique staffing solution. “At least one of the guys on my team is really fast. If I discover I don’t have a menu item, my fastest guy is the one who is going to sprint to the other restaurant,” Vargas said.

Freshness is the Key



Food freshness is what drives Vargas when preparing his menu and what he feels is integral to pleasing restaurant customers. “The key to good food is fresh ingredients. Beyond that, if a chef is passionate about what he does and shares that love with his staff and customers, his chances for success skyrocket,” Vargas said.

The Sugar Mill's seafood menu includes local favorites like Mahi Mahi, snapper, yahoo, tuna, and lobster. All of these menu standouts are caught from the local waters of the Caribbean Sea.

St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands – Who Knew?



Reflecting on his four years working at The Sugar Mill, the 34-year-old Vargas is grateful for the chance to stretch his cooking wings. Born in Puerto Rico and raised in Boston, Vargas thought he had planted long-term roots when he accepted a chef position and purchased a home in Charlotte, NC. That was before Chef Tony beckoned with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to cook in one of the Caribbean's finest restaurants.

“On a clear day here at the Sugar Mill Restaurant, you can see all the way to the islands of St. Thomas and Tortola. How many people can say their office has this kind of view and this kind of atmosphere?” Vargas said with a grin.

http://www.rosewoodhotels.com/en/caneelbay/dining/sugar_mill/