

That Pioneer Spirit

As every schoolboy and girl knows, we have Christopher Columbus to thank for such culinary staples as the tomato, the turkey and even the humble potato. There's been a brisk trade in gastronomic novelty across the Atlantic for over 500 years and, thanks to the likes of acai berries and pop tarts, it isn't showing any signs of slowing. **Felicity Cloake** meets a few of the founding fathers of this gastronomic revolution . . .

The Entrepreneurial Holidaymaker



For Sylvia Siddans, a farmer's wife "born and bred in rural Lincolnshire," the trip to the Caribbean was nothing more than a brief escape from the miserable February weather and the empty house occasioned by her children finally fleeing the nest. In her own

words, things were "very flat and dull, there wasn't much going on . . . [I was] looking for something exciting to fill the gap!" Through a house exchange programme she spent a few weeks in a St Lucian village, and found herself impressed by the traditional coalpot she was left to cook on: "you saw them everywhere – on the beach, by the side of the road, and they were just brilliant, so quick to light and easy to use."

Fuelled by the conviction that they could be just as popular back home, and this feeling of "middle-aged meltdown," she decided to investigate the possibility of importing them into Britain. "No one was doing anything like it here, we just have flimsy little aluminium barbeques or great big gas-fired monsters that take hours to set up, so I went into the mountains to see the women who made them – literally just for a look! – and they were so very excited by the idea of sending them to Britain." Infected with their enthusiasm, she placed her first order, for 200 pots. She sourced the round grills from a friend of her hostess in the village of Balata, and the coals ("everyone says the very best come from mango wood") from frail old Mr Charles the local charcoal burner, buying 10 sacks, "his entire stock!"

Now she just had to find a way of getting it all back to East Anglia. The main traffic between Britain and the Windward Islands is in bananas, and Sylvia finally managed to negotiate a space on a Geest ship. Mary and Alicia, the craftswomen, "pulled out all the stops" to get the pots ready in time, and, despite the grills nearly not making it on board (the leisurely friend of a friend had been "a little busy" and was only moved to

start making the final 50 by the arrival of the truck to collect them), in a little over a week, Sylvia was back home and in business. Since then her garage has been gradually emptying ("I can now see the back of it at least!" she laughs) after appearances at various fairs and markets, where people are "fascinated" by them, "the men especially!"

Sylvia describes the coalpot as an "entertaining experience" as well as an outdoor cooker, and looking at one, it's easy to see why. The squat little earthenware cookers are compact enough to sit easily on a tabletop, so you can grill your meat or prepare your stew without running back and forth to the barbeque or the kitchen, and on British summer evenings, when the inevitable chill sets in, you can sit round it and toast your hands (or the odd marshmallow!). The local clay imparts a wonderful depth of flavour, and St Lucians claim its many minerals are "very health giving". Most importantly, it keeps the food extremely moist. "During the summer I use it every day," Sylvia says. "There's nothing nicer than going into the garden, lighting the coals, sitting back with a glass of wine and waiting for my husband to come in off the combine." Recommended by Jamie Oliver and hyped in the Guardian as one of 2008's "most wanted culinary gizmos", Sylvia's hoping for a summer rush to clear her garage, and send her back to St Lucia for seconds. After all, quite apart from anything else, "Mary and Alicia are still out there, hoping for another order!"

For more information, or to purchase, visit www.stluciacoalpot.co.uk or call 01400 272773.