

BY JOHN T. EDGE

Rocket City's Jamaican Flair

IN RAPIDLY GROWING HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA, GET A TASTE OF THE DEEPER SOUTH



Business cards for Island Twelve Shipping and Nicole Nickerson, “North Alabama’s Jamaican Realtor,” share counter-space. A Bible open to Psalms lies alongside. “Exodus,” the old Marley classic, loops through ceiling speakers. A delivery driver, here to pick up foam boxes of braised oxtails, buys a pair of miniature boxing gloves embossed with the Jamaican flag. Soon, they will sway from his rearview mirror as he drives the Friday lunchtime streets of Huntsville, Alabama.

M&K Jamaican Restaurant began about four years ago at a nearby gas station. Today it’s the most vital among an array of Caribbean restaurants in this fast-growing and quickly diversifying city that pulses with new arrivals. Opposite a car dealership, next to a vape shop, husband and wife owners Mark and Karen Blake now work a strip mall storefront decorated with reggae star glasses and poster of the 2002 Jamaican bobsled team.

From a galley kitchen, they dish goat rot, fried plantains, curry chicken, and coconut rice and peas. They

bake patties stuffed with pebbled beef and wrapped in turmeric-yellow crusts. Outside, Winston Blake, Mark’s father, lends a barrel grill beneath a carport. By noon, charcoal smoke curls from under the eaves, and fragrant jerk chicken, sticky with an allspice-scented hot sauce, follows.

Huntsville has been a different sort of Alabama city since the World War II era. After developing V-2 rockets for the Nazis, Wernher von Braun and his team came here to work for the U.S. Army. They stayed to build the rockets that propelled America to the moon. Rocketmaking still draws smart people to work at the Army’s Redstone Arsenal and NASA’s Marshall Space Flight Center. Haitians who left Austin, Texas, for the next tech boomtown now flock to M&K. Cameroonians who work in cybersecurity come for their snapper escabeche fixes.

If you know Jamaican food, then you know jerk, the most popular island export after reggae. Southern barbecue and Jamaican jerk are not the same. But they have comparable histories. Caribbean colonists and the U.S. South enslaved people. In Alabama, the

Jerk Station
find up with a plate of chicken

The Blakes opened their first restaurant beneath the overhang of a gas station in Huntsville. Today, at **Jam Rock Jamaican Restaurant**, the Walker family works the space, cooking jerk chicken that smells of woodsmoke and allspice. Inside, they sell Jamaican snacks like plantain chips and **bread of gratitude**.
Ting—UTE

money, crop was cotton. In Jamaica, it was sugar. Like Southern foodways, Caribbean foodways bear those markers. Jerk chicken clairs, likely roots in the seventeenth century, when enslaved Jamaicans fled to the mountains to escape the British. Curry goat, which the Blakes serve in a velvet sauce with potatoes and carrots, borrows spicing from indentured Indian workers who came to work sugarcane plantations after the British outlawed colonial slavery. And their brown stew chicken gains deep flavor and color from caramelized sugar.

Today, these three serve the new-economy workers of Huntsville, drawn by tech and space industry jobs, and those who come to study at a constellation of educational institutions, including Oakwood University, a Seventh Day Adventist–funded HBCU, a mile and half down the road from M&K. Set on a former cotton plantation, Oakwood had educated many Caribbean people, drawn by scholarships and church connections; and many now call Huntsville home. Oakwood is stored ground, Dred Scott, the enslaved man who famously and unsuccessfully petitioned the Supreme Court for his freedom, once tolled there. After the Civil War, the church converted the plantation to a school, to serve the needs of the once enslaved.

At the powwow of the campus, the university sells student-grown vegetables from what looks like an old Whole Foods branch. The Blakes cook with vegetables raised by Oakwood farmers, and they serve dishes that appeal to vegetarians and vegans. But my favorite dish on their menu is the meatiest. On a recent Saturday, a sign posted to the plexiglass order window announced that oxtails are now subject to a one-dollar surcharge. “The meat has gotten expensive,” Mark says. “But we don’t want to give it up.” My advice: Pay the freight. Braised until they shade black and gain autumn highlights, these nuggets of beef taste like braised mini pot roasts. As the oxtails cook, they throw off a rich onion-sweet gravy. In a boxed meal, that gravy soaks into the coconut rice and peas; it swamps the creamy mix of potatoes and chick peas. And it gilds bits of plantain, cooked until they turn golden and chewy.

M&K is a portal. Cross the transom, fork into the oxtails, and you travel to Jamaica. Take in the sounds and smells, and you also get to glimpse the Huntsville of the future, a place many people from many places will call home. In 2018, Huntsville passed Montgomery in population. By 2023, it is poised to pass Birmingham. As the city grows and new people arrive, M&K will serve as a clubhouse for all, with a better soundtrack than most, and oxtail gravy that begs you to sop to the bottom of the box. **Q**

Illustration by Michael Spitz

COASTAL COLLECTIVE
COMBATING GRAVITY

AESTHETICS AND WELLNESS BOUTIQUE | CHARLESTON SOUTH CAROLINA | BOTOX | FILLER | LASER | IV