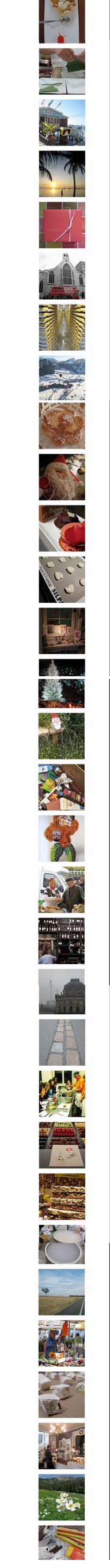




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All Photography by Kerrin Rousset



A Sweet Tooth in Belize

It certainly was a blast hanging out in the kitchen of **La Celba** restaurant in **Belize**. When you have a chef as down-to-earth as Sean Kuylen and as passionate about cooking as he is, it seemed like it was a true pleasure for him too to have me by his side. Between flipping flour tortillas on the griddle, he ran over to have me smell fresh herbs just collected from the garden. After placing banana leaves on a row of plates as presentation, he quickly scurried over to lift the lid from a pot so I could breathe in the fantastic aromas of coconut milk and paprika. But best of all was when we started talking about dessert.



(Above: Craboo gelato with papaya sauce; Chocolate gelato)

It didn't take long for Sean to get my love for sweets. And before I knew it, I was holding multiple spoons in my hand tasting his fresh batches of gelato: chocolate, craboo and pitaya. "Craboo?" That's what I said to him, with a flustered look on my face. He immediately disappeared into the back of the kitchen and returned with a huge smile and an enormous pail (below left) filled with the fruit of the **craboo tree**, perhaps more resembling olives from afar. The "Tropical" bottle (below right) is a blend of craboo cream and a double distillation of cane juice. It reminded me of other creamy liqueurs like Bailey's or Kahlua, and especially Amarula, a fruity cream liqueur I discovered in Botswana years ago. I love baking with dessert liqueurs like that and immediately asked Sean if he'd share a recipe. (He did! Sweet recipes below.) The craboo cream was perfect as an after-dinner drink on the rocks, even though I was most curious to drizzle it over vanilla ice cream or warm crêpes or even stirred into a hot chocolate.

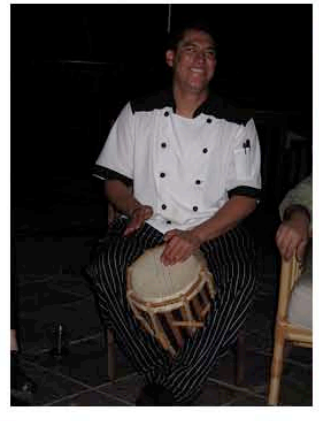
Ka'ana Boutique Resort owner **Jan Lizaraga** (below) told us how Belizean children most appreciate the craboo fruit: "Kids fill pails with it, cover with brown sugar, and 6 to 7 months later around Christmas time, they drink the liquid – which will have completely fermented by then. 12 year olds were getting sloshed; they loved it!" Adults might find themselves a bit tipsy too when drinking Nance liquor, sans cream – Nance being the Spanish word for the Belizean local craboo.



But back to that trio of gelato. You may also have had a question mark on pitaya, more commonly referred to as dragon fruit, an exotic fruit whose color makes a strong statement. Think vivid, fluorescent pink, and as Sean said when cutting it open, "it's wicked!" Common varieties have white flesh with tiny black seeds like those of a kiwi, but the variety they had in Belize was even more striking, the flesh the same bright pink as the skin. He made a gelato using the pulp, whole milk and a dash of cinnamon. I was one happy camper when served a scoop of it with a tall lemon meringue pie. I can't deny thinking the gelato had a slight flavor of bubblegum, but I may have been swayed by the color.



Last but not least, time for some of the chef's sweet memories and recipes to go with. But one last fun fact about him first. Not only a talented chef, totally personable and fun to be around... but he also plays a mean drum! (I even spotted his group's CD at the Belize City airport, *Griga Boyz!*)



"While attending primary school, my father would give us 15 cents a day to buy a snack during our break before lunch (when children all go to their respective homes for a full Belizean lunch). This money would be more than enough to purchase... **Wangla**, Pepitas, Hard Time (dense ginger-like cookie) or simply an orange cut in half with salt and habanero pepper. My favorite of course was not the healthy orange, but rather the sweets such as the Wangla and Pepitas candy which involve such simple preparation. I use these little candies at Ka'ana now as the turn-down treat which I tie with smoked banana leaf for that exotic finish.

Potato Pone and Cassava Pudding are more for Sundays when the family would gather for rice and beans, stewed chicken, potato salad and a Coke (the only day of the week we were allowed to have Coke. During school days, it was always fresh squeezed fruit juices). The potato pone is also popular around Easter."

Sweet Treats from Chef Sean Kuylen

Wangla Candy (sugar candy with toasted sesame seeds)

- 8 oz brown sugar
- 2 oz water
- 8 oz toasted sesame seeds

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Variation: **Pepitas Candy**

Pepitas is the toasted seed of the pumpkin or squash. Again, toast the pepitas and add to the caramel for an interesting candy with the same crunch and sweetness but with the smoky flavor from the pumpkin seed.

These ingredients are readily available in the international or Mexican section of your grocery store.

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Potato Pone and Cassava Pudding

1 pound sweet potatoes or yams
8 oz brown sugar
1 tsp cinnamon
1 tsp ginger
8 oz heavy cream
1 tsp all spice
1 prepared pie crust

Peel and boil the yams until soft, then puree using a food processor or potato ricer. In a large saucepot, bring the pureed yams, sugar, cream and spices to a boil, cooking until it forms a thick, starchy consistency – about 20 minutes. Pour the batter into the pie sheet and bake in the oven for another 30 minutes. Top with whipped cream.

Variation: **Plastic Pudding**

For the Garifuna Plastic pudding, substitute the yams with Cassava Root. This pie is called 'plastic' because of the natural starchy property found in the cassava.

~

Tropical fruit with Craboo Sabayon

Assorted tropical fruit such as papaya, watermelon, cantaloupe, star fruit (berries are fine too)
4 oz craboo liqueur
4 oz sugar
4 oz egg yolks
Sugar for maceration of the fruit

Dice fruit and macerate by adding an equal amount of sugar. Cover and reserve in refrigerator. In a stainless steel bowl, combine the craboo liqueur, egg yolks and sugar using a wire whisk. Create a double broiler by using a pot with water and the stainless steel bowl on top, cooking the egg craboo custard with the steam below. Whisk constantly over the double broiler until a silky smooth custard forms.

Scoop out the prepared fruit in a serving bowl and top with the warm craboo custard. Garnish with fresh mint.

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