

Motherland



Story and Photographs by
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I am thankful that in this age of racial awareness people have generally evolved from the blunt, tactless question “what are you?” to more thoughtful verbiage—but the curiosity around my ethnic ambiguity remains. I’m Mauritian-American. That is too obscure an answer for many people so I typically follow with a mini-geography lesson: my dad is a small-town Midwesterner from southern Illinois with Eastern European roots, and my mother is from Mauritius, a tiny, volcanic tropical island nation off the eastern coast of Madagascar—the only place the Dodo bird ever existed.

New acquaintances aren’t the only ones who wonder who “my people” are, it’s somewhat of a mystery to me too. Mauritius itself is a multiethnic society with the population being an admixture of Indian, African, French, and Chinese lineages. Familial, ethnographic record-keeping wasn’t exactly a priority for Grand-mère Cici Nadal (pictured to the left)—a young widow, struggling to keep her 12 children fed and well-mannered—so I’m not sure whose blood is running through my veins.

As I’ve settled more deeply into adulthood, this lack of ancestral knowledge beyond my great-grandparents has led to significant questions regarding my own identity. The only other Mauritian American I know of is my sister, Stephanie, and it’s strange to feel I can’t relate culturally to many people around me, not even my own parents. I long to share a connection with a tribe of my own.

A couple years ago, the most valuable resource to understanding my maternal genealogy was put at risk when



The author's mother and her parents; Mauritius, an island off the coast of Madagascar.

my mom was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. Since then, my parents' lives have revolved around her medical care. Respite finally came in March, when they were given the green light to take a few months off treatment and doctors visits. In no time, my parents had their tickets to Mauritius booked, and Stephanie and I swiftly followed suit. It had been a decade since the four of us visited the island as a family. I was once told that the essence of life can be more visible when you know you're going to lose it. The opportunity to be with Mom in her country, and by extension my country, was a gift that would not be squandered.

When I met her at the airport she looked strong and healthy—buzzing with the vitality she had before her illness. The only recognizable sign of treatment being that her trademark black corkscrew shoulder-length curls were now just a couple inches long



and grayer than I remembered. Stepping through the sliding doors of Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport hand in hand with my mom awoke all senses. The sunny, hot weather was a welcome feeling coming from Portland, Oregon, where a long winter was just ending, and the expanse of lush greenery and bright, colorful flowers provided a stark change from the sterility of the past 30 hours in airplanes and airports. My ears registered the sounds of unfamiliar bird chirps and began to re-acustom themselves to Kreol Morisien, the French-based lingua franca of the island that remained unwritten until very recently. My tastebuds had their own exaltation delayed a couple more hours, but thankfully that gastronomic celebration of seasoning would happen daily.

Mauritian cuisine is reflective of its population; diverse flavors are further influenced by the filters of Dutch,



The author, standing back right, with her family.

French and British colonization. Food is the common factor in the memories I've kept from this trip, just as it was integral to the First Annual Nadal Cousins' Picnic—a potluck on the beach with dozens of relatives. Amid pine trees we popped up tents and plopped down on blankets, looking out to the clear, twinkling open ocean. A comprehensive array of lovingly homemade national dishes and snacks were passed around: tiny, fresh fried fish (of which you can eat the head and tail); chicken curry over rice; stir-fried Chinese noodles, to name a few. I even succumbed to the locally revered pungent and chewy jerk-spiced tang—a rodent that looks like a hybrid between a small opossum and a hedgehog, hunted by my cousins-in-law in the sugarcane fields under the veil of darkness. Cheap but effective Goodwill rum (also used to quell the itching of mosquito bites) kept laughter flowing and spirits

high, backed by the ever-present, care-free beat of sega music.

As the afternoon drew to a close, I thought about how Mauritius had reinvigorated my body and soul, and how each of my relatives here could be connected to one woman, my mother's mother, Grand-mère Cici. It is her DNA that runs through all of us and binds me to these family members from across the globe. Despite years and continents apart, and language and communication barriers, it feels natural and easy being with my relatives. Until then, the only place Nadals congregated in such numbers was at funerals. I'll see to it that a Second Annual Nadal Cousins' Picnic happens, hopefully before another decade passes. These are my people after all—my tribe. **R**

CARI POULE MAURITIAN CHICKEN CURRY

SERVES 6

A variety of thoughts run through one's mind when they learn a parent has cancer. A notable one for me was the urgent need to capture my mom's recipes. This is one of her classics.

Please note, the chicken should be carved so the thighs and legs still contain the bones, but the breast and rest of the meat should be carved off the carcass into large, boneless pieces. The carcass is not used in this recipe, it can be saved for stock or discarded.

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| <p>½ yellow onion, roughly chopped</p> <p>¼ cup canola oil</p> <p>1 whole chicken; carved into large pieces, drumsticks and thighs separated</p> <p>½ tsp grated ginger</p> <p>4 cloves fresh garlic, crushed</p> <p>4 Tbsp garam masala curry powder</p> <p>¼ tsp cayenne pepper, optional</p> <p>pinch of ground clove</p> <p>1 14.5 oz can diced tomato, liquid reserved</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In a large pan, sweat onion in oil over medium heat. 2. Add the bone-in chicken and simmer until browned 3. Meanwhile, in a small bowl, combine ginger, garlic, curry powder, cayenne, and ground clove with water until a thin paste is formed. Set aside. 4. Add the boneless chicken meat to pan. 5. Stir in spice paste and canned tomato without liquid. 6. Add ½ cup liquid from tomato can; bring to simmer, cover. 7. Simmer until the chicken is cooked through, about a half hour. 8. Serve over rice or with farata (recipe follows). |
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FARATA

MAKES 8

I loved this flaky and buttery flatbread as a kid, and my cousins taught me how to make it during this trip. Farata is the Mauritian version of Indian paratha or roti and pairs perfectly with a savory curry.

2 cups all-purpose flour, plus ½ cup for rolling and dusting

pinch of salt

¾ cups hot water

4 Tbsp melted butter (reserve 1 Tbsp for brushing)

1. In a large bowl, combine flour, salt, hot water, and 3 Tbsp of butter. Mix well and knead until a soft, smooth dough forms, sprinkling flour or water as needed to maintain consistency.
2. Cover dough with a damp kitchen towel and let rest for 15 minutes.
3. Divide the dough into 8 portions, form each into a ball, and roll out into 7-inch circles.
4. Brush each circle with butter and fold in half. Brush each half circle with butter and fold in half again to form a triangle. Roll out the triangular shapes into thin 7-inch circles.
5. Fry each farata individually on a hot, oiled griddle or frying pan, like you'd cook pancakes, until golden brown spots appear on each side, about one minute per side.