



Jamestown, the capital city of St Helena Island, secreted in the James Valley and overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. Pictures: RYAN ENSLIN

A taste of time and heritage

St Helena's culinary tradition is born of love, family and tradition, writes **Ryan Enslin**

It's late on a Wednesday afternoon and I find myself engaged in an active search for meaning under the shade of a giant Ficus tree, in a garden first written about in 1682. I am engaged in a conversation with Basil George and his wife Barbara, seeking to understand a place I've been wanting to visit for the better part of 10 years. I'm in the remote reaches of the South Atlantic, far from the tedious hum of 2025, on St Helena Island.

As one of the most remote places in the world, the black rock of this volcanic island rises fiercely from sapphire blue waters and you feel as if you are standing at the very edge of the world.

For the past 11 days, I've been immersed in the gentle allure of island life – breathing it in, ruminating on my own life while sitting on the worn stone walls of a fort dating back to 1874, roaming the winding country roads in unhurried, soulful meanderings and savouring the warmth of the local cuisine. Yet something eluded me. I wanted St Helena to reveal itself to me and I couldn't help but wonder if I was simply too foreign, maybe too rushed to understand its rhythm. I was asking questions, but the island refused to answer in the language I expected. What was the essence of a Saint, as the locals are affectionately known?

Basil's origins

Formerly involved in education on the island, Basil traces 16 different ethnic links in his family genealogy. "I've got 12% African in me," he says, "I tell people, this brown



The volcanic rock that is St Helena Island springs forth from the mighty Atlantic Ocean, creating a visual treasure trove of dramatic landscapes

skin doesn't come out of a bottle," he continues, touching his aged arm as we share a light-hearted moment. An important realisation dawns on me; Saints don't suffer from our South African obsession with racial classification. Basil proudly shares the results of his genealogy investigation and I note that the world map illustrating his ancestry mirrors ancient trade routes from a time long before the



The rugged landscapes of St Helena are often matched by moody weather, a feast for the seeking soul.

Suez Canal. Perhaps a vital clue to understanding the island and its people?

When I pressed him on the essence of what makes St Helena special, something I was still battling to define for myself, he told me it revolved around two key concepts. First, life here is centred around family. And second, there's a culture of Saints working with their hands and actively embracing the time it takes to get things done.

The proverbial penny dropped. Time was the key.

And the answer had been with me all along, having spent much of my time exploring the cuisine. On the island, food isn't rushed. It's an act of care, a ritual and a reflection, in line with what Basil had said about the importance of family. Much like the place itself, local dishes are steeped in history, influenced by a fusion of British, African, Indian and Chinese culinary threads that speak to the diverse heritage of the Saints.

Jaye's place

Earlier in the week, I spent two nights at Jaye's Guesthouse in Half Tree Hollow, a quiet settlement perched above Jamestown. In Jaye Loosely's warm kitchen, Loosely being a Saint herself, I finally had the chance to try something I'd heard much about, but never seen on a menu: a home-cooked plate of plo, the island's beloved one-pot rice dish, fragrant with spice and memory.

As Loosely slowly brought my tuna plo to life, I watched cabbage, carrots, bacon, rice and potatoes come together, with the tuna added at just the right moment to balance flavour and texture. "Times were hard when I was growing up," she shared, recalling how she learnt to cook by watching her mother. "We didn't have all the herbs and spices we do today, but the food tasted just as good." And it did. The dish's honesty lay in its simplicity.

Over dinner, Loosely spoke of island life and the ritual of family meals, especially on

Sundays. That evening, with a soft drizzle falling outside, the plo – somewhere between a biryani and a paella – was perfect. A true comfort dish, nearly three hours in the making. The island's slow rhythm, once again, served up on a plate.

Helen's cakes

Family and the tradition of eating together run deep on St Helena, as Helen Joshua of Helen's Family Kitchen shared with me later that week. After years abroad, she and her husband returned to the island a decade ago. "The family drew us back," she said, describing how her catering business was born from that homecoming.

Joshua introduced me to a local favourite, fish cakes, which instantly reminded me of my Granny Iris in South Africa. I asked about her recipe, but on the island, each family guards their version. She did reveal one detail: she adds bacon to hers and everyone uses breadcrumbs.

Sensing my curiosity about the local fare, Joshua gestured toward the tomato paste she'd prepared for our meal by the wharf and began to explain the origins of a dish called bread 'n dance. In days gone by, district dances were held across the island, and true



Helen Joshua, whose passion for family and communal eating inspires much of her culinary creations.

to form, Saints never arrived empty-handed. Tomato paste, made with onion, tomato, parsley and sometimes egg, was spooned onto slices of bread and served as a snack during the festivities. A kind of island bruschetta.

I'd tasted it unknowingly while wandering the streets of Jamestown on my first Saturday night on the island when I came across a dance at the community centre for the old folk. Now it clicked. On St Helena, food is memory, story and a celebration of shared roots.

It was becoming clear that food on St Helena wasn't just sustenance, it was deeply personal. I was intrigued by how a dish as simple as fish cakes or bread 'n dance could carry so many variations, each one a reflection of the cook behind it.

Wanting to learn more, I continued my culinary discovery.

Moir's platter

In search of a deeper understanding of the island's dishes, I spent an afternoon with Moira Peters, head cook at Plantation House, the official residence of the governor of St Helena. She was preparing for that evening's reception, where residents from Half Tree Hollow would be welcomed. Among other items on the menu are bread 'n dance and fish cakes.

Curious to compare notes, I asked about her take on the now familiar tomato paste. Peters smiled, but revealed little. No bacon, no egg, she said, just her well-honed balance of ingredients. As for the fish cakes? "Made with love," was all she offered. On St Helena, recipes may vary from kitchen to kitchen, but that sense of care and quiet pride remains constant.



St Helena holds fast to what makes the island and its people unique.



Moira Peters using her tomato paste in a novel way.



In his happy place — the kitchen. Dan Flory experiments with his take on local dishes and ingredients as he delves into the Saint food palate.



Helen Joshua's assortment of local treats from her catering business Helen's Family Kitchen, including local raw honey, tuna chutney, pesto and the much-loved tomato paste.

Dan's experiments

Though tradition remains the backbone of St Helena's cuisine, a quiet wave of innovation is beginning to stir. Among those reimagining local fare is Dan Flory, a recent arrival drawing on his experience in some of Italy's top kitchens.

With a deep respect for island flavours, he's gently reinterpreting the familiar into something quietly new, and offering islanders and visitors alike a new perspective on the local palate.

Flory arrived with his partner, who had taken up a post in the paramedic service, and began baking bread from home. What started

as seven loaves for friends quickly became 40. Word travels fast on this remote island.

Soon after, Flory opened a space in Jamestown, Dan's Bakery, where I met him on a Monday evening. He now serves deli-style lunches daily, with pop-up dinners every fortnight. It was at one of these dinners that I got to experience his experimentation.

"I'm mostly about flavours and textures, combined with good, local produce," Flory told me as he plated a squash purée risotto, the night's starter, which draws inspiration from the island's pumpkin stew. He spoke of the challenge of adapting to limited ingredients. "I soon learnt how to use what

we had and still craft something different and amazing," he said, smiling, clearly in his happy place.

The main course, Mediterranean couscous with fresh tuna and a swirl of Romesco sauce, was a layered, elegant dish that danced with texture and flavour. The couscous was light and fragrant, the tuna tender and buttery. But it was the Romesco sauce that tugged at my heartstrings: smoky, nutty and alive with the sweetness of roasted red peppers and tomatoes. It felt both refined and familiar, echoing the island's beloved tomato paste in a way that was both respectful and elevated. An artful nod to local tradition through a new culinary lens.

In Flory's hands, island fare and local ingredients find new expression, firmly rooted in that illusive essence that is St Helena. Even on these most remote shores, tradition and innovation can share space around the same table. I'm just not sure how he managed to get the recipes from the locals.

As my time on St Helena came to an end, I found myself reflecting not just on the food, but on the people I had met. Each dish told a story, of patience, heritage and quiet pride. Whether passed down or reimagined, the island's cuisine is rooted in a deep sense of place.

When I asked Basil under that Ficus tree where he saw the island in 10 years, his words lingered: "I hope that locals continue to look internally, to understand where our success as a people comes from and continue to seek that essence going forward."

On this faraway rock, surrounded by the endless Atlantic, it's clear that answers lie not in rushing forward but in looking inward, holding fast to what makes the island, and its people, so enduringly unique.



The Castle Gardens in Jamestown, first recorded in writings dating back to 1682.