

GOING OUT

Bah, bring on the dende

Brazil, no one in Bahia will prepare it with dendê oil, also known as palm oil, a flavourful cooking oil brought to Brazil by African slaves.

"I don't think it drastically changes the flavour of things — it just fortifies," Cassini says. But nutritionists have been calling palm oil suicide in a bottle for years, a trans-fat laden one-way ticket to heart disease. Wary of his customers, many of whom don't share the Bahian fondness for dendê oil, he leaves it out, with a slightly heavy heart.

Since he opened Cajú four years ago, Cassini has been trying to educate people about the cuisine of his homeland, one customer at a time. He came to Canada 20 years ago, and graduated from George Brown's hospital-

ty school seven years later, before going on to work in the kitchen of Markham's Hilton Hotel, followed by stints in several Toronto kitchens before opening up Cajú in 2003.

"I remember when I first came to Canada the most popular cuisine was Italian and Chinese," he recalls. "Then, in the early '90s, it was the Mediterranean — Moroccan, Greek, Italian, Provençal. It was nice because that's food that I really enjoy.

Then, at the end of the '90s, came fusion, and I said, 'You know what? Brazil is a fusion that's more than 500 years old, and they didn't have anything here. When I used to cook at my house and call my Canadian friends, they loved it. I always knew that the food is so good in Brazil that we

should give it a shot and try to do something."

Brazilian food is a classic Creole cuisine — a mixture of Old and New World influences unique to the South and Central America, the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, a loose school of cooking that includes everything from Argentine steak to jerk chicken to gumbo. A great example of this would be something like Cassini's *isca de Feijoada*, a black bean stew made with cuts of pork, beef and sausages. Anyone familiar with Portuguese food will recognize the flavours and ingredients, but the Brazilian version is a staple of life in Minas Gerais, the province north of Rio where Cassini comes from.

"The slaves didn't have many options in terms of

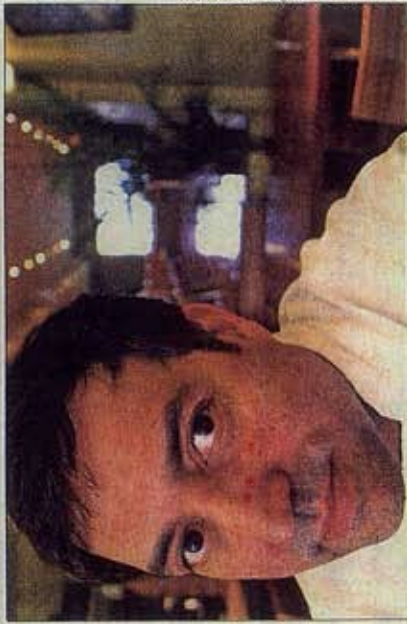
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RICK MCGINNIS/METRO TORONTO

Chef Mario Cassini in the bar of his restaurant, Cajú.

meat," he says. "They used whatever scraps of beef and pork they could put in the black bean stew. Today, I make it with beef sirloin, chouriço and pork tenderloin. Even nowadays when you go to Brazil, more in the small cities and farms, you can find the rustic way, slow cooking is a ritual that takes the whole afternoon."

Cassini's version is dark and toothsome, full of tender chunks of meat and soft black beans in

their inky juice. When I order his shrimp in a Moqueca sauce, he sends out two plates — a larger one with his standard version, with several fat grilled shrimp in a sauce that's both sweet and slightly tangy, and a smaller one to which he's stirred in a bit of dendê oil. The dendêo-spiked version tastes even richer, with a gravy-like low note that makes the Moqueca sauce hum.

I say damn the doctors and bring on the dendêo.

By RICK MCGINNIS
Metro Toronto

PROFILE MARIO Cassini has to fight with himself in the kitchen whenever he prepares one of the signature dishes at his restaurant, Cajú. Moqueca sauce is a staple of cooking in the northeast part of Brazil, a rich mixture of peppers, ginger, tomatoes and coconut milk that usually goes with seafood in

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