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Growing up in Newark, New Jersey, I was surrounded by people from different backgrounds. Though I didn't speak Italian, practice Hinduism, or wear Chinese fashion, what connected me to other cultures was our mutual love of each other's food.

Jamaican culture has always fascinated me; my grandparents migrated to the US from Jamaica in the 70's. Through the Burch Fellowship I was able to explore how food is essential to the cultural identity of the Jamaican people. While based at the University of the West Indies, I traveled the island to interview people and document cuisine and agriculture. I came across an indigenous spice called pimento – a powerful part of Jamaican culture in both use and name – and decided to use it as the cultural anchor for my exploration. Pimento is not only used in nearly

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PIMENTO AND IDENTITY:

HOW A SPICE TRANSCENDS ALL ASPECTS OF JAMAICAN CULTURE

all Jamaican dishes, but it is also famously known around the world as "All-Spice." If you look in the spice cabinet in the home of a Jamaican either on the island or in England, Canada, or America, you will find pimento.

With pimento as my focus, I wanted to interview people connected to pimento through different avenues, from farmers to executives to chefs to civilians. To find these people I connected with Jamaican radio host Rev. Marvia Lawes. She was the perfect guide for my project because interviewing people is her day-to-day job.



I attended the Denbigh Show, the largest agricultural show in the English-speaking Caribbean. As I walked past the planted vegetables and farm-raised animals, I was shown a lifestyle I've never seen before. While I grew up in America with supermarkets and takeout, the farmers I met grew all their fruits and vegetables and raised their own animals. It was eye-opening to see subsistence living, which my grandparents were raised on, firsthand in Denbigh.

Next, I visited GraceKennedy, the largest conglomerate in the Caribbean. They manufacture, package, and ship Jamaican food and specialize in a pimento-based product called Jerk seasoning. At GraceKennedy's factory, I saw the assembly line and packaging and interviewed executive director Caroline Mahfood. I learned that GraceKennedy doesn't just package food; it packages heritage in a bottle. It connects second-generation Jamaican Americans with their heritage and gives Jamaicans abroad a way to feel at home.

From the slums of Kingston to the mountains of St. Catherine, I saw that poverty is prevalent in Jamaica. While traveling Jamaica I saw poverty far worse than I knew: zinc fence housing, dilapidated roads, houses with no water heaters, and many people in the streets "hustling," a Jamaican expression synonymous with entrepreneurial endeavors to survive unemployment and low wages.

While in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica I met with Sen. Norman Grant, the president of the Jamaica Agricultural Society, and founding Chairman of the Caribbean Farmers' Network. Although pimento and coffee beans are in worldwide demand, the value of Jamaica's imports far exceeds that of its exports, which results in national debt, high crime rates, and poverty. I realized that the Blue Mountain coffee fields I stood on were connected to the reason I live in America today. The debt and resulting hardship Jamaica incurred after gaining independence from England was what made my grandparents leave in the first place. They, like many West Indians,



have seen their home countries suffer as a result of severe debt by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank. My grandparents, like many others, emigrated so their children and children's children could have more



opportunities and a better life.

With my Burch Fellowship I literally went from the farm (to the factory to the kitchen) to the table and gained a deeper understanding of Jamaican heritage throughout it all. With this newfound understanding and perspective on the importance of cuisine and agriculture, I see now how something as seemingly small as pimento can permeate through different facets of a society: its economics, music, sports, and language. Through the years, as pimento has survived Spanish acquisition, English exportation, and changing nomenclature, Jamaica, too, has survived. Pimento to Jamaica is hope. It is the embodiment of a Jamaican saying I learned during my travels: *wi likkle, but wi tallawah*, meaning "We're small, but we're brave." Pimento is proof that Jamaica can not only survive in a global economy, but also thrive.

After this experience, I'm far more adept at interviewing, exploring unknown terrains, acclimating to a foreign country, learning the customs of a people, and seeing nuances that others may not see. I didn't get to go everywhere I wanted to go or interview everyone I wanted to interview. However, the Jamaican people showed me it's not about how many resources you have, it's about how resourceful you are. Through my Burch Fellowship, I accumulated hundreds of photos and videos that I will put together to tell the story of my journeys. This experience has forever shaped me and will stay with me for the rest of my life wherever I travel. As I navigate this vast world, I'll always remember that I may be likkle, but I'm tallawah.