



Taste of Paradise

DR. PATRICK HOWELL, THE OWNER OF **CARIBBEAN PARADISE AND PARADISE BISTRO**, CONTINUES TO FIND NEW WAYS TO SATISFY THE PHILADELPHIA AREA'S GROWING APPETITE FOR JAMAICAN CUISINE.

BY BILL DONAHUE

IN 2014, Jamaica native Patrick Howell set up shop at a South Jersey farmers market and began serving up jerk chicken and other dishes of his homeland. His enterprise has since evolved into a small empire of eateries celebrating the distinctive cuisine, music, and culture of the Caribbean.

"Jamaica is a real melting pot, kind of like America, and you experience that diversity in the food," says Howell, the owner and operations manager of a family of Caribbean restaurants on both sides of the Delaware River. "Everybody from around the world comes to Jamaica—people from India, China, Africa—and everybody brings the food of their culture with them. That makes Jamaican cuisine very unique, with all these different flavors, so it's unlike anywhere else in the world."

Born in Jamaica's capital city of Kingston, Howell grew up near Montego Bay in a family of restaurateurs. In his early years,

he spent time working as a police officer and was promoted to the position of police immigration officer before emigrating from Jamaica to the United States to pursue a career in

medicine. In fact, he decided to embark on his culinary career while working as a physician specializing in internal medicine.

"The income was great, but I had a very long commute, so I started thinking of ways to stay closer to home," recalls Howell, who earned a bachelor's degree in biological sciences and premed from Rutgers University, and an M.B.A. in Management of Technology from New Jersey Institute of Technology. "I knew how to cook, so I bought a smoker from Lowe's and got a couple of parking spots at the Berlin Farmers Market. A friend and I showed up with a couple of boxes of chicken, turned up the reggae music, and started cooking. People started turning up."

Customers weren't the only ones to take notice. Local newspaper reporters who had heard about the authenticity of Howell's food started calling with interview requests. It didn't take long for Howell's fledgling enterprise to outgrow its modest origins.

Today, Howell is a full-time restaurateur, with multiple Caribbean Paradise locations in South Jersey and Southeast Pennsylvania, as well as a vibrant catering business. In addition to a storefront in Sewell, he operates restaurants inside Simon Property Group malls in King of Prussia, Northeast Philadelphia, and Pottstown. He also has a pair of Caribbean Paradise food trucks near the campuses of Cooper University Hospital in Camden and Rowan University in Glassboro.

Each of Howell's locations serves up an

array of Jamaican delights: top-selling jerk chicken, jerk ribs, jerk salmon, oxtails, curry shrimp, garlic shrimp, conch soup, conch fritters, Escovitch-style red snapper, an assortment of rotis (griddled flatbreads filled with the likes of curry chicken, curry goat, and Jamaican cabbage), and signature sides such as fried plantains and mac and cheese. Other menu favorites include fresh-made fruit juices like carrot mango and pineapple lemonade, and island-inspired desserts, such as coconut mango cheesecake, sweet potato cheesecake, and Jamaican rum cake.

The enterprise's most recent expansion is also its most ambitious. Howell recently took over a shuttered Ruby Tuesday within Pottstown's Philadelphia Premium Outlets and reimagined the space as Paradise Bistro. The restaurant seats 180 people, both indoors and out, with a menu comprising the same Jamaican-inspired dishes his customers have grown to love. Howell expects the restaurant to obtain its liquor license within a few months.

"This is a major deal," he adds. "It's the biggest restaurant in this location. We'll have a wide-ranging menu of authentic Jamaican food, but it's a family restaurant, for all families, so we'll also have cheeseburgers, chicken tenders, and fries. We want to have something for everyone."

Paradise Bistro is about more than just island-inspired food. The restaurant will also host live entertainment, including nationally and internationally known musicians, as well as locally based performers of reggae, R&B, and other genres.

Howell credits his company's success to the people who have helped, supported, and encouraged him from the beginning: the late Lansford Barrett, a family member who first inspired him to start the business; his beautiful family, for all their support over the years; the tireless efforts of his staff; and, of course, his loyal customers.

Howell sees more headline-worthy growth on the horizon. In addition to continuing his career as a restaurateur/entrepreneur, his ambition is to one day return to practicing medicine.

"As we continue to grow, I want people to know that giving back to the community is something we consider very important," he adds. "We're bringing the taste of the Caribbean to the masses. Our food is authentic and delicious. If you've never had Jamaican food before, it's unlike anything else in the world." ■



For more information about **CARIBBEAN PARADISE** and **PARADISE BISTRO**, including the address and menu for each location, visit caribbeanparadise.biz.