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Travel Smart: Caribbean Chic

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Gourmet's special projects editor pops into the BVI to find over-the-top resorts, fabulous food, and a hot sauce she can't resist.



I flew down to the British Virgin Islands last month for five back-to-back nights of seven-course dinners from chefs and winemakers from around the world, part of the [BVI's annual Winemakers Dinners](#). (The

next one is in December.) Most chefs had planned far ahead to make sure everything they needed could be flown in—hearts of palms from Hawaii, fish from France for a proper bouillabaisse, pear kimchi and pickled mustard seeds to accompany Rachel Yang’s Korean-French cuisine from her Seattle restaurant [Joule](#).

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There was more to do than just eat, though: Before and after every dinner, we were given tours of resorts so astronomically priced I would never have been able to actually stay in them. Sir Richard Branson’s Balinese-inspired [Necker Island](#), which rents for around \$51,000 a day (yes, a day—but, hey, that’s for up to 28 people), has such easy glamour that being on it makes you feel not just that you’re hanging with the beautiful people but that you’re actually one of them. From the whitewashed main house high atop [Guana Island](#) (another private-island resort, this one a mere \$31,750 a day in high season), you can see the exact spot where the Caribbean meets the Atlantic and a string of volcanic islands. Imagine Gilligan’s Island if an architect and contractor had been marooned along with the rest of the gang.

But amid all this fine food and fancy digs, it was Esther Wheaty who stole the show. At her dockside restaurant, the [Fat Virgin Café](#) (at [Biras Creek Resort](#) on Virgin Gorda’s North Sound and accessible only by boat), Esther serves course after course of island dishes—and only one of them roti—all created from locally sourced ingredients. As I dipped a golden johnnycake into a velvety conch chowder, a fisherman pulled up as if on cue with a sack of conchs he’d just plucked from the sea floor. The barbecued pig came from a farm on a beautiful cliff looking out over the sea. (Pigs with a view, no wonder the meat was so tender.) But what made the dish so extraordinary was Esther’s zingy sauce. “It’s my own blend made from Scotch bonnets,” she said. When I asked for the recipe, all she said was: “We don’t measure anything around here.” Little did she realize that her simple meal measured up to the fanciest and finest.

Serti says: *I’d like an order of conch chowder, please—and a return trip to Necker. When I stayed there, long before I joined Gourmet (in the amazing [Bali Hai pavilion](#)), you had to rent the entire island. Now, you can book individual rooms, mostly in the off-season. (Contact the resort with specific dates.) Guana, by the way, also rents individually (\$1,450 a day, high season) unless the entire island has been taken.*

Photograph Courtesy of [Guana Island](#)

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