

Todd A. Price
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Restaurant Review: Coco Hut



DINING OUT

Coco Hut

I found Coco Hut because of a shortcut. Heading to Jazz Fest, we cut down Bayou Road and, on a corner that I'd never noticed before, I saw a stand piled with tropical fruit parked outside a restaurant door. I made a note to return.

When I went back, I discovered a tiny space perfumed with a thick mix of spices that tickled my nose and made my stomach rumble. Reggae played on the radio, and the television was tuned to a Jamaican station. Spray-painted slogans covered the concrete floor where coconuts in a burlap bag sat ready to be cracked. In the cramped kitchen, the owner watched over the stove with an angelic smile as she explained the day's specials.

Coco Hut makes a fine version of jerk, the famous pepper-laced barbecue of Jamaica. In the homemade sauce, which can be ordered on chicken, shrimp or fish, the scorching hot habanero pepper is tamed by oranges, papayas and pineapples. Instead of an assault, Coco Hut's jerk sauce takes you down with a sneak attack. At first, you taste the aromatic spices and the smoke from the oak used on the grill. Slowly, the habanero hits, leaving you mouth atingle and your face flushed.

Everything at Coco Hut was fresh and flavorful. The chicken in brown stew was dark and meaty. The shrimp pasta in garlic sauce was seasoned with what tasted like an entire spice cabinet blended in exactly the right proportions. Most plates come with a green salad, cabbage steamed with ginger and rice and beans cooked with coconut milk.

I walked out of Coco Hut back onto Bayou Road with the scent of spices still clinging to my clothes. A corner of New Orleans that I had never noticed before was now marked by a taste that I wouldn't forget. That stretch of Bayou Road used to be an anonymous place that I passed on the way to somewhere else. Now, it's a block that I'll rush back to when a certain craving strikes. 2515 Bayou Rd., 945-8788, Tue.-Sat. 11am-7pm.

—Todd A. Price