



# stormin' norma

PHOTOGRAPHER ROSEMARY PARKINSON

WRITER ROSEMARY PARKINSON

Norma Shirley is a larger-than-life character. Vivacious, creative and maddening, she is well loved and her friends forgive her bouts of temper that can sometimes make the earth tremble.



Sonia Mills, who has been close to her for many years, described her like this: "Norms is a visual and performing artist, and a revolutionary, and she arrived with hurricane force in Jamaica in 1985 to change the Jamaican foodscape forever."

Norma "The Storm" Shirley taught Jamaicans in the kitchen and at the table new ways of seeing and tasting food, and much of what she taught has become a part of Jamaican food culture. She demands Jamaican-grown and organic produce, and does her own shopping for the freshest herbs and vegetables. Her success lies in her attention to microscopic detail and her creative use of simple ingredients.

At 71, she has not slowed down. By 9 a.m., every day, she telephones her kitchen and Norma, the perfectionist comes into play: "One day I will call you all and you will remember everything. Denise, you have tomatoes? Where's the list me give you? You sure you have tomatoes? Go check. What? You just tell me you have tomatoes and now you seh you can't see dem! Don't be so foolish. Go and count the butter now. Whey de butter gone to? When I left yesterday there was butter, now dis mawning dere's no butter. And if we have no shrimp, call and order now and don't let me see dem bring me those silly ones me can't even see wid me eye, I want them big. BIG ONES ME SEH!"







A series of unprintables in Jamaican style follows but since she is also Norma, the maternal mentor, she shifts to the softest voice known to womanhood: “Denise, my sweetheart...you know those lovely chops I bought the other day. Let’s marinate them from now. And take out those lovely plump Cornish hens and let’s stuff them nicely, yuh hear, my dahling? How de children? You got dem to school all right Denise? Mother Sill in yet? Everybody okay? Find out if those blackberries come down from Blue Mountain hear, and if Mr Sharpe send de coffee too. And oh! get the waiters to fix a table with lovely flowers for 10, order dem right now, and one table in the solarium for four. Let Miss Thorpe take out the oxtail now. And remember those Otaheite apples I got yesterday...don’t let me hear all ya nyamed dem!...poach them for me sweetie...not too much, we don’t want them all mushy...”

And the voice then begins to raise again:“Remember I said no mush! I want them perfect. PEERFECT! And don’t, don’t let me come there and have to get my blood pressure high, yu hear. Bye.” And the phone goes down with a bang and a loud childish giggle is heard. Norma’s day has begun.

Before leaving the house, Norma and Ray James (her helper and right hand at home) choose her clothing by colour scheme, according to what the restaurant might require of her on that particular day. As swift as the wind passing through a valley, handbag in hand, Ray behind, her arms filled with loads of carefully ironed tablecloths and napkins, Norma rushes to her waiting car, giving constant instructions all the while.

Elaine Melbourne, once Jamaica’s deputy permanent representative to Unesco in Paris, has her down pat: “Norma has flair, whether it’s her jewelry, shoes, bags, scarves or home and restaurant decor. Blend flair with her passion for food and you have Norma’s seductive fusion of colours, taste, textures and aromas. O mon dieu!”

PREVIOUS PAGE LEFT ABOVE: Norma in her kitchen  
 BELOW: Grilled pork with salad  
 PREVIOUS PAGE RIGHT: Norma  
 ABOVE LEFT: Filo pastry basket of ackee  
 ABOVE:Norma in the market  
 RIGHT: Norma in the kitchen





With her signature head wrap, her bracelets tinkling, she is recognized a mile off. Vendors at Jo-Jo's and Papine's markets come to attention for Miss Norma, dealing with her every whim and fancy. She carefully chooses her fresh produce and herbs, quarrelling all the while if they do not meet her standards, promising never to shop there again.

By the time her first clients begin to move into the restaurant, Norma has made sure that every table, every vase, every tablecloth and napkin is just so. Not a spot of dust must be seen. And she is known to send a waiter home if he is not starched and polished to perfection. She once arrived at her restaurant in time to see a plate leaving the kitchen. She snatched it from the waiter and, without tasting anything, confronted the chef who admitted she had cut corners, not braising the meat for the stipulated time before placing it under the grill.

Every dish Norma Shirley prepares is a signature. She can make a simple Red Pea Soup dance on your palate. A traditional dish such as oxtail lightly covered in thick gravy compels you to unceremoniously suck the last juice out of its bones. The secret, she says, is "in the marinade which we do overnight".

She will not add so many flavours, use so many techniques to make one dish that she loses the essence of it. Norma one night at home took two small pork chops, salted and peppered them lightly, laid a sprig of thyme on each and placed them into a little Foreman grill. The deliciousness of it! I tried to do the same thing another time—useless. "I just have a gift, Rosie," she said, quietly. "I don't know why God just gave me this gift."

Norma Shirley, often referred to as the Julia Child of the Caribbean (although I have titled her the Grande Dame of Caribbean Cuisine), was not born to food. Her career was registered nurse and midwife. Breaking away from the boredom of home life after she married, Norma began cooking in the Berkshires, Massachusetts, preparing picnic baskets and later opening a small very successful restaurant in an old train station. A strained marriage led her to move to New York where her flair for creating new taste sensations and her artistic presentations saw her working for famous photographers such as Hiro, Irving Penn and Jean Pagliuso. Throughout her life, Norma travelled, devoting her time to food and design, tasting, inventing and revolutionising. Her friends, in particular businesswoman Gloria Palomino, begged her to return to her homeland and make a difference. "I met Norma in 1984, and what struck me was her amazing talent," Palomino recalled. "As the years roll by, I have seen her kindness in sharing her knowledge...seeking always to find ways to use our local produce in cooking and showcasing them."



LEFT: Norma with assistant, Chef Denise, at Epicurean Grand Lido, Negril  
 TOP: With Van Acken ( far left), Gari Fergusson (left) and Anthony Bourdain at Food Network South Beach Food & Wine  
 ABOVE: Filming





LEFT: Papaya wrapped with smoked salmon  
hors d'oeuvres

BELOW LEFT: The grill on the beach at Norma's

BELOW: The restaurant

Palomino also described her as having a heart of gold. One of her proteges was a gardener who could not read or write but who told her, "Me whaan learn what you do." He is now an executive chef in a restaurant.

With her two restaurants, Norma On the Terrace at Devon House, Kingston and Norma's At the Marina, Port Antonio (the latter in partnership with Gari and Gill Fergusson), Norma still finds time to organize private weddings and parties (huge or small) whilst running a cooking school. She has been featured in international "foodie" magazines, television and radio. She has been filmed for The Food, Travel and Discovery channels as well as local television but none has so brilliantly revealed her life as the hour-long programme *At the Table With Norma Shirley*, shown on the Canadian Food Network to some three million viewers last year. Her many awards include those received at the yearly Observer Food Awards (Kingston) but her biggest accolade was the Prime Minister of Jamaica's Medal of Appreciation, for her contributions to the culinary arts. It was presented to her by The Most Hon. P.J. Patterson in 2003.

Pinning her down to finish her biography is like trying to bottle the wind. The taking of photographs has to be done speedily before the cry goes out: "If you don't stop with those foolish pictures, my food will get cold, so eat! Now! Not tomorrow but now!"

I snatch bits and pieces of information are snatched from her while in her car screeching around corners on the way to Port Antonio; at her restaurants in between her screaming out instructions to her staff; up in the Blue Mountains when she is visiting friends; or during a stop at The Gap or the Sharpe's Café Blue for a cup of coffee. I did tie her down once next to my computer in Montego Bay.

I came so close to finishing her story then but suddenly: "That's enough, you have enough. I can't take no more, my arthritis bothering me. I going to me bed!" And that was the end of that. So far, it is a manuscript filled with vignettes and recipes and laughter.

When first approached on the importance of telling her real story, Norma laughed and said, "I must tell someone? Okay, I will tell you!" And that became the title of the story of her fast life in the food lane.

*Rosemary Parkinson's biography of Norma Shirley is due out in 2010. She has previously written Culinaria: The Caribbean and Nyam Jamaica.*

