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Summer school: Belcampo's artist-in-residence program turns a Belize resort trip educational

NP VALERIE HOWES, SPECIAL TO NATIONAL POST | April 10, 2014 6:54 PM ET
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"We made history today," says Antony John, bouncing back from the telescope. That double-crested cormorant is *not* supposed to be here,"

I home in on the yellow-faced bird with its great black wings outstretched. John — a gangly Welshman in safari garb, with spiky salt-and-pepper hair and rockstar piercings — explains its natural habitat is coastal.

"If this is the first local sighting, who should we report it to?" I ask.

"Nobody. We're going to shoot it," says John.

As well as cracking jokes without mercy, John is at Belcampo jungle lodge, near the seaside town of Punta Gorda in Southern Belize, to share his expertise as a birder, painter and organic farmer. The former host of Food Network farming show *Manic Organic*, from Stratford, Ont., is the inaugural chef in Belcampo's artist-in-residence program, which allows visitors to learn skills from wrapping tamales to mixing mojitos alongside some of the world's leading food experts.

It is part of a program launched by Californian CEO Anya Fernald and Canadian General Manager Mara Jernigan at the 16-suite, 1,000-acre eco-resort that has its own farm, education centre and 12,000-acre wildlife reserve.

Jernigan, former Slow Food Canada president, left her own farm, inn and cooking school on Vancouver Island four years ago to help transform this jungle lodge. A dynamo in Wellies and a shirt dress, she manages everything from agri-tourism activities for guests to the expansion of the farm — key to maximizing the resort's self-sufficiency, already at 70 %.

Eager to experience the artist-in-residence program for myself, I get up with the howler monkeys at 5:30 a.m. for an outing with John and some hardcore birders. Our surprise sighting of the double-crested cormorant happens at a roadside lagoon, still hazy from the morning mist. We'd stopped the land cruiser there to drink bright Guatemalan coffee and eat breakfast burritos, loaded with orange-yolked scrambled eggs, tomato salsa and spinach-like callaloo — every ingredient farm fresh.

From there we drive on to Lubaantun, where pyramids and ball courts from the Maya Classic Age lie in ruins under fig trees, ferns and creepers. We'll have checked off 70 species by noon, including the belted kingfisher, with its bad-boy blue Mohawk; the rare emerald toucan, which has the birders doing high fives; and the painted bunting, which looks like it was invented by a child with a wild imagination and a bumper box of crayons.

"I saw six lifers," announces Madeleine, a retiree from Texas, triumphantly, as we debrief later in the lounge, referring to birds she has never spotted before. Local guide Emmanuel Chan is glowing too. John has been teaching him about the summer serenades sung in Canada by migratory thrushes, warblers and orioles, which are monosyllabic in Belize. In turn, Chan has been explaining the medicinal uses of jungle plants to the artist-in-residence. It's a mutually enriching exchange.



Before dinner, in the citrus grove, Belcampo's farm operations manager, Elon Ranguy, peels a juicy orange to share as he tells me about the piglets he won in 2012 as Employee of the Year. The father of five, with close-cropped dark hair and a luminous smile leads a staff of 40 and oversees everything from the livestock to the composting program.

As we walk by the ice cream bananas — named for their silky texture and sweetness — a hand-sized iridescent blue morpho butterfly flits by. The yellow-tailed melodious blackbirds sing mating songs so bubbly they sound computer-generated, and in the background the howler monkeys are starting up their evening round of lion-like roars. Jungle farms are intense. Here, fertilizer is made from bat dung; boa constrictors swallow chickens whole; and weeds, if ignored for an afternoon, sprout like Jack's magic beanstalk. So what does this guy have to learn from an Ontario farmer?



"It's Seedy Saturday this weekend and Antony John is coming to talk about seed saving," Ranguy says. "I'm *really* excited." The grassroots event has been on the Canadian gardening calendar since the '90s, but this is the first time it's happening in Belize — another of Jernigan's initiatives. The GM has invited farmers and gardeners from the whole region to Belcampo to hear John talk sustainable farming alongside two Toledo experts. They'll bring seeds to swap, a

frugal practice that promotes biodiversity. "We're helping the wider community in this part of the country, which is food insecure," says Ranguy. "Food adds colour and flavour to life, and we want to help increase the quality of *everyone's* produce."



Valerie Howes

A second artist-in-residence arrives in the evening: Chris McDonald, the executive chef-owner of Cava, a Toronto restaurant specializing in Iberian Peninsula cuisine. The highlight of McDonald's residency will be a seven-course tasting dinner that puts a new twist on Belizean ingredients.

On his first full day (and my last), McDonald is already laying the groundwork for his menu, on a riverboat outing with Culinary Director Renee Everett. As we set off down the Rio Grande towards the private island of Moho Caye — an emerald dot in the Caribbean Sea — the scent of jasmine mingles with the aroma of grouper grilling. It's Everett's day off and the swimsuit-clad

chef has a glass of wine in hand to prove it. Her colleague Brandon Genus is slicing peppers for fresh salsa, shredding cabbage for slaw, and tossing strips of green papaya with cumin and lime for salad. The result: the freshest and most flavourful fish tacos I've ever tasted.

"What do you use here for extra umami?" McDonald asks Everett, sipping from a bottle of Belikin beer — the national brew.

"Fish paste."

"And sweetness?"

"Killer bee honey or sugar cane."

"I want to take sugarcane from the jungle and poach fruit in it," says McDonald, his pale blue eyes sparkling under bushy brows. "Let's do that tomorrow!"

And today? We snorkel in the turquoise waters, exploring the coral reef and harvesting a trio of sea urchins — the black-and-white one a dead ringer for McDonald's bristly beard. Later, back at Belcampo, McDonald and Everett will crack the spiny creatures open, scoop out their flesh and serve it raw to curious guests. It's not usually eaten here, but as an invasive species, it's a natural fit for a restaurant with a sustainability ethos. McDonald worked in tropical Mexico for two years, so he sees untapped potential in the local bounty. Part of his mission is to get the kitchen staff here branching out.

By the end of his residency, McDonald will also have them working more closely with the gardening crew "You need to walk the land a few times a week in a place like this, to see what's growing and what stage things are at." And he gets them fired up about making vinegar from cacao pulp, transforming shrimp heads into seasoning — they usually go to waste — and cold-pressing cashews and sesame and pumpkin seeds for their rich oils.

On my last day, as I sit in the lobby with my suitcase, everyone's abuzz about the cocktail contest that the two artists-in-residence will co-host that evening — "Belizeans love competition!" says Jernigan. The servers have been practicing all week, with ingredients like papaya, guava and dragon fruit from Belcampo's cocktail garden. Many are bringing friends and family to cheer them on; one lets me preview his creation in exchange for honest feedback; every rum-laced sip makes me wish I could delay my flight home.

If You Go

Coming soon as part of the Artist-in-Residence series: Martin Cate from Smugglers Cove, a Tiki bar in San Francisco; Katrina Markoff, from Vosges Haut-Chocolat; and James Freeman of Blue Bottle Coffee.

High season rates at Belcampo Resort start at US\$449. Summer rates, which begin May 1, start at US\$288. For more information, belcampobz.com

Travel support provided by Belcampo.