

Down on the (very stylish) farm in St Kitts

Belle Mont Farm is a chic new resort that grows its own produce on the tiny Caribbean island. **Fiona Sims** is in foodie heaven

It's midnight and I have guinep juice dribbling down my chin. Forget chocolates on the pillow, at Belle Mont Farm on the Caribbean island of St Kitts I get a branch full of fruit.

It is presented on a wooden board by my bed when I return from dinner, alongside a little hand-written description about how I should eat them. I dutifully peel back the brittle green skin and pop the fragrant lychee-like fruit into my mouth, sucking off the juicy, sweet flesh before spitting out the large pip.

That evening had already been a night of firsts — callaloo leaves, which I've always previously enjoyed steamed or sautéed, arrived raw and used as a wrap with an accompanying peanut and passion fruit dipping sauce. This was followed by raw okra, which I've only ever eaten stewed or at the very least blanched. It was young and tender, hollowed out and then filled with a pearly aubergine caviar. And yams (usually boiled or baked), which were sliced paper thin, used as "ravioli" and filled with goat's cheese.

Most of it is grown on St Kitts, which cuts out the air miles. About 95 per cent of the food you eat on the average holiday in

the Caribbean (which, let's face it, isn't known for its food) is flown in from all corners of the world; but 90 per cent of the ingredients you eat at Belle Mont Farm are grown right here.

I should point out that when I say farm, I mean a posh hotel on a farm, with your own luxury cottage or villa, gourmet food and smart wines. I should also point out that there is no beach, or not one to shout about near by, which will doubtless rule this out for some.

Belle Mont Farm isn't for everyone — even the general manager, Carlos Salazar, agrees. "It's a sustainable approach, we're creating a sustainable future, and we want people to experience that, from the stone that we used to build it, which was quarried right here, to our pesticide-free 18-hole golf course." A sustainable golf course? I can just see the collective raising of eyebrows. Well, it claims to use only water recycled from the hotel and villas; and it's weeded by hand, the course closing once a week to enable the army of staff to complete the arduous task.

I, however, spent a happy four days hanging out here (albeit with a promise of a couple of days at the beach on Nevis to

complete my trip), with no need of a round of sustainable golf to fill my days. I was blissfully content lounging by my plunge pool, watching the sun set behind St Barts in the distance, enjoying the wine stashed in the mini bar (all part of the package), filling my face with healthy, imaginative, beautifully presented food and listening out for the odd gnawed mango lobbed by resident monkeys on to my open-to-the-elements bathroom floor.

Belle Mont Farm at **Kittitian Hill** is a hugely ambitious project — and what I've seen is only the start. There was plenty of construction in evidence (though not within earshot, or even sight, thankfully — they have 400 acres to play with) as they work towards finishing the 84 cottages, a number of villas, four "farmhouses" and six restaurants, one to be headed up by the top New York chef Dan Barber of Blue Hill fame. Plus, there will be a further 100 hotel rooms in the "village", which will have an additional 12 places to eat. The main push to finish the next phase will begin next month. Sounds like a sizeable investment. Think \$400 million (£260 million).

More than a quarter has already been raised thanks to an army of investors,

mainly from China, Russia and the Middle East, keen to take advantage of the St Kitts passports on offer with their access to the

Commonwealth countries (the UK being an obvious draw) for a minimum investment of \$500,000. While this is now common practice, it did sour the tale slightly. As Salazar puts it, however, this project wouldn't have happened without that investment, and it allows others — like me — to enjoy this particular slice of paradise.

Of course, there is a visionary behind all of this. Val Kempadoo is a Trinidad-born entrepreneur, who travelled the length of the Amazon at 17 years old, founded the first television station that broadcast only locally-produced programmes, and won a general election as campaign manager. He is fed up with Caribbean culture being reduced to a limbo dance. "If I see one more fire-eater..." he grimaces. "It's about making a difference, and bringing about lasting change, from the way we train our staff to celebrating who we are as people. The focus here is on authenticity, yes, but it's also about creating a guest experience."

That guest experience includes a candle-lit dinner on a communal table in the farm, and an early-morning walk through the rainforest with Basil the forager, where we learn about the flora and fauna, followed by a picnic breakfast under a 200-year-old mango tree. Then we tour one of the nurseries (there are five) with executive chef Christophe Letard.

Normandy-born Letard was cooking for the governor of British Columbia on Vancouver Island before he arrived on Nevis, so he has had to rethink his recipes somewhat. "Val's approach is different, to say the least, but I was attracted by his ideas about community and mentoring people," Letard explains, plucking a small green leaf. "I've had to retrain my brain — there are so many new ingredients here to work with. This is moringa — also called the 'tree of life'. It is packed with antioxidants and popular in the Rasta community, and great in juices.

"And this is grumichama," he says, pointing at a small, dark berry. "It has a sour-cherry-like flavour — you just have to remem-

ber to spit the big seed out. Fabulous with duck. And remember the raw okra you tried last night? Nobody eats them raw here, but I love that fresh, vegetal taste — the secret is not to let them grow more than two inches. Though the farmers are pretty flexible," he grins.

I should say. Led by manager Winston Lake, the farm has planted cocoa and even coffee in an effort to boost its already impressive sustainability rating. Lake used to manage the sugar plantation that once stood here. St Kitts, like most other Caribbean islands, ran on sugar. By 1775, 68 sugar plantations existed here, but with the abolition of the slave trade in 1834, the sugar industry dwindled.

With plummeting profits, the government finally called time on sugar, closing the factory and the last sugar cane field in 2005. Tourism is now the main source of income for the island — you can take a tour of the plantation ruins on the St Kitts Scenic Railway.

It's also worth setting aside time to visit the imposing UNESCO-protected Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park en route to the bustling capital Basseterre — if only to make sense of the island's various colonisers. After that, we head to the island's best beaches, a 45-minute drive farther south, where it's easy to see why the soft white sands and turquoise waters make this part of the world such a draw.

After an excellent grilled local lobster lunch at Reggae Beach Bar on Cockleshell Beach, we take a water taxi to the Four Seasons on the neighbouring island of Nevis, a 30-minute ride away.

You can't come to St Kitts without dipping your toe in the sea around tiny, unspoilt Nevis with its drowsy, quaint capital, Charlestown. The beaches are something else, with Pinney's leading the way, running along the sheltered west coast for three glorious miles. The Four Seasons Resort Nevis is at its northern end, where many guests (like us) pad across immaculate white sands to the cluster of beach bars to eat grilled snapper and down rum punch.

Now if you thought you were leaving the local-food ethos well behind, you would be mistaken. There's a surprising injection of local flavour on the menus of the five-star resort's restaurants.

Highlights include breakfast dishes such as spiny lobster stew and salt-fish benedict, with Munich-born executive chef Kai Autenrieth keen to imbue a sense of place wherever possible, he tells us, as we are caught inspecting his veg patch, which he started two years ago, soon after arriving.

Callaloo, kale, sweet potatoes, lemongrass and breadfruit all grow well, but it's his breakfast roti that has us hooked: gently spiced eggs and nubs of tender chicken spiked with homemade mango relish, washed down with bush tea made with lemongrass. It beats a club sandwich and a cuppa any day.

Need to know

Fiona Sims was a guest of Belle Mont Farm (00 1 869 465 7388, bellemontfarm.com), which has B&B doubles from about £426, and Four Seasons Resort Nevis (00 1 869 469 1111, fourseasons.com/nevis), which has B&B doubles from £321. Belle Mont Farm opens for the new season on November 1. British Airways flies to St Kitts from £525.

Further information
Stkittstourism.kn,
nevisland.com





The pool at Belle Mont Farm; below, an open-air bathroom below left, on the farm