

Turtle Power



Adam Leith Gollner

Not long ago, while researching the history of immortality, I went to Jamaica to meet Christopher Golding, a dabbler in “things for the back”—the local term for elixirs purported to enhance vitality, longevity, and especially libido. These concoctions include man-back, used for spinal nerves and sexual function, and woodroot—“a general tonic for the reproductive organs of both male and female.”

Golding is chef de cuisine at the Sugar Mill restaurant near Montego Bay. Although his kitchen focuses on high-end Frenchified island fare, he regularly brews medicinal drinks for himself, such as Irish moss, made from gelatinous red seaweed, or aloe vera with egg whites. (“If you drink a glass of it for nine mornings in a row,” he specified, “it cleans you and builds the body and makes you produce babies.”)

We discussed Jamaican healing potions at a tiny, smoke-filled,

corrugated tin-roof shack on the outskirts of Ocho Rios called Yammy’s. The rastafarian owner, Yammy, spends his days roasting yams and getting lifted on *hot grabba* (marijuana mixed with fresh, raw tobacco leaves). Yammy was particular about serving the charred, sooty root vegetables only after whacking them with a short shamanistic stick. “Slap im up mek it get softa,” he explained.

Golding loved it. “Lick a yam with a stick, rasta!”

The yams came out scorching hot; we took them to go. Golding brought us to a little bar he likes in the mountains. A few old timers sat around drinking rum on red leather chairs. The walls were painted green and blue. Golding said this was where he learned how to cook. He used to hang out here in the evenings after chef school. He’d spend his days learning classic European techniques and then drink Guinness while watching the owners grill

meat over coconut husks. There was no need to cook anything this time. Alongside Yammy’s yams, we’d picked up more street food: goat’s head soup, festival, ackee, jerk meats, and callaloo.

“There’s fire goin’ on here!” Golding declared, as we ate. “Jamaicans like flavors that make water come to your eyes, flavors that burst into flame, flavors that make you sit down and think.”

He then told me about an ingredient that definitely made me sit down and think: turtle scrotums. Jamaicans dry them, he explained, and grate them into soup or rum. I knew that black Perigord truffles can have spermic qualities, but I’d never heard of testicles as flavor-enhancers. It turns out that, rather than a Caribbean riff on bottarga or Parmesan, turtle scrotum is yet another folk remedy. When I asked what effects the testicles have, everyone laughed. “It makes you

strong," said one of the barflies. "It makes you live longer," added another. "It's for the back," Golding clarified.

The scrotum is usually procured while making turtle soup. "You're not really supposed to kill turtles, but it's mostly people who live in fishing villages or rural areas like Saint Ann or Portland who do this," Golding told me. "People who live off fishing, they still cook turtle soup. It's a classic Jamaican dish."

They've found uses for all the parts of the turtles, he said, from the shells to the beaks. They make a soup with turtle penis, adding to it conch, cow skin, and mountain crayfish. "The men love this kind of soup," Golding confided. "They say it gives them more lead in the pencil, if you know what I mean." (He later sent me an e-mail regarding "the anatomy of the male turtle penis." He attached a photo of a turtle with an erection and informed me that the penis of a turtle "is typically more than thirty centimeters long.")

It wasn't hard to imagine how the genitalia of a long-lived, wizened sea creature like a turtle might be considered to have medicinal attributes. And air-drying the scrotum, Golding informed me, seems to concentrate its potency even further. "When they get the testicles from the turtles, they're raw, remember, so they have to cure them," Golding explained. "First, they hang it from the ceiling of a chicken coop and then they tie the bottom of it to a rock, to stretch it as it dries."

The rock not only helps the water in the testicles evaporate, it also gets the whole pouch to become stiff and straight, making it easier to grate. After a week or so, the scrotum hardens, becoming "very hard, hard like PVC plastic water pipes," as Golding

put it. The testicles are approximately the size of a cow's testicles, he noted, which prompted me to ask what sort of turtles they use.

"Male ones, usually."

"Okay, I mean what size turtles?"

"Around eight to ten kilos."

"Are they tortoises?"

"Sure, tortoises. Big turtles."

Once dried, the testicles are grated and put into a container and can then be added to rum or soup. Those desirous of a more heroic dose can mix the gonads in a blender with peanuts, okra, condensed milk, Irish moss, Guinness, and linseed. This mélange is then buried in the sand, somewhere cool, for seven days, so that it ferments. "When you open it, sometimes it is so strong you have to be careful," Golding cautioned. "It is so powerful that when you drink it, your penis will be dead for four days."

"It will be *dead*?" I echoed.

"Yes, dead. It won't stand up."

"Like you can't get an erection?"

"No erections. But then, four or five days later, it will be so strong you better have a woman nearby."

"Do you believe that it works?" I asked him.

"Your mind is very strong," he answered. "If you believe in it, it might work. Anything you drink for the back, it might have an effect. We have a tendency of thinking with our dick sometimes."

"But you've tried turtle testicles, right? Did it work?"

"Yes, for me, I really think that it worked. It was great, man. I certainly felt the effects."

"What happened?"

"It made me real hard, so hard, but truly so hard. My lady loved it. Yeah, man. She said, 'Wow, you're so strong and so hard.' Yes, I believe it works." **LP**



Third Leg Punch

Christopher Golding, Chef De Cuisine at the Sugarmill Restaurant, provided us with the recipe for a "pretty serious" drink made with dried turtle penis.

Blend together:

- Raw Peanuts
- Green Marijuana
- Grated Turtle Penis
- Jamaican White Overproof Rum
- Jamaican Red Label Wine
- Ripe Pimento seed

Put it all in a bottle. Cork it very tight and bury beneath the earth for nine days. ("I have no idea why it has to be odd numbers always," Golding says. But it has to be.)

When this is taken from the earth it does not go in the fridge; it must be kept at room temperature.

Note: sometimes the potion bursts the bottle because of its strength. Portions are taken by spoonful when needed. **LP**