

CGW

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PATTY SMITHS

CGJ meets **Theresa Roberts**,
co-founder and
managing director of
Jamaican Patty Company

Words by Clare Finney

"Diet Coke? This is Jamaica, darling. We don't have Diet Coke here."

A more sassy customer than myself might point out that this is in fact a restaurant in Covent Garden, the heart of London's culinary melting pot—but I accept the (much more appealing) alternative of mango juice gratefully. I'm not one to quibble with restaurant managers, especially not when that manager happens to also be one of the country's most successful Jamaican entrepreneurs: namely, Theresa Roberts. Besides, I have already been swept away.

It certainly feels like Jamaica. Inside the Jamaican Patty Company, happy reggae and ska jazz music stream down from the ceilings and reverberate jauntily round the green and yellow interiors. Outside, the sun beams through the large windows, giving an even more appealing aura to the freshly baked, gold-burnished patties winking on the side. Likened, somewhat prosaically, to a Cornish pasty, the patties contain a variety of spicy fillings—jerk chicken, curried goat, saltfish and ackee fruit (a relative of lychees), prawn—with flaky, melt-in-your-mouth pastry, occasionally jazzed up with turmeric. They're spicy, but rich and varied in flavour; even someone who orders extra mild prawn kormas in Indian restaurants (yep, that's me) could stomach one a day for weeks on end. In fact, that was how Jamaican Patty Company started in the first place.

"It was 2009. I was having my house, Hanover Grange, built in Jamaica, and because everything I do I do with my heart, I wanted to be on site all the time," recalls Theresa. *"I didn't want to leave so for weeks I lived off Jamaican patties, coconut water and rum punch."* She didn't grow sick of it: on the contrary, when the time came for her to return to her residence in London she found herself pining for decent patties, freshly baked with Jamaican ingredients. As the weeks went by, her craving grew into a delightful culinary scheme.

"I told myself, 'God, Theresa—don't go there!'" she laughs. *"But I couldn't stop thinking about it. My husband's from Falmouth, and he's always going on about Cornish pasties. Well, patties are to a Jamaican what pasties are to him—but better,"* she adds, after a mischievous pause. I choose not to rise to it. I've long been a fan of the solid, buttery short crust pastry and mince combo, but the thinking behind JPC goes beyond domestic culinary rivalry:

to the country's global image, and what it means to be Jamaican today.

"The most important thing for me is that Jamaica is supportive. We've never had something like this, on this level, for Jamaica before and I feel more or less like I'm rebranding my country," Theresa enthuses. The patties themselves were designed by Caribbean chef of the year Collin Brown, a *"massive Jamaican"*, as well as an international chef of critical acclaim. *"I knew him from Jamaica. He'd invited me round for dinner, and I said, 'I'm going to ask you to do business with me.'"* That Jamaicans are happy with her efforts is *"absolutely fantastic"*, but it is not, if she is truly honest, what she expected from Jamaican Patty Company at first.

As an art collector and entrepreneur, the majority of her dealings with her homeland since she moved to the UK, aged eight, have centred on artists: Ebony Patterson, Barrington Watson (now Jamaica's master painter), Monique Lofters and others whose work she could relate to. With the help of her husband, solicitor Andrew Roberts, she has nurtured and invested in their work. The home that made patties Theresa's staple diet for weeks on end was built to accommodate their works, together with the high profile circle of friends in which the Roberts now move. *"I have a dining table that seats 30, just because I wanted it,"* she laughs. *"I wanted mine to be the biggest house in Jamaica. We have three gardeners and a chef. It is absolutely beautiful."* Yet even behind this bravado there is a poignant message. Theresa has not always been so well off.

"My dad was a labourer. My mum was a cleaner for a tea shop then for British Rail trains, which is how she came over to Britain. My dad came to London first, then mum joined him. I was just six months old." Brought up by her grandmother back in St Elizabeth, Theresa passed the first eight years of her life shoeless, without electricity, and selling mangos at the roadside for extra money. It was, she says, *"the best childhood in the world"*, and she spent her first year in London asking repeatedly to go back home. *"You want to go back to Jamaica? Then we'll send you right back there,"* my father used to say to me and I'd always say, *"Yes sir. But they never did."*

It would be another decade before Theresa returned to Jamaica. In the

meantime, she set her eyes on closer sights. *"Growing up in Battersea as one of eight siblings, all I wanted was to move over the bridge,"* she grins. *"Chelsea, darling. I used to dream of it."* Did she make it? *"Oh, yes! Via Leytonstone, Edmonton, and various other places."* Looking at her now—sharp black suit, tasteful gold jewellery, immaculate blow dry—she's the model of an SW1 sophisticate. Yet for all her joking, Theresa is clearly no lady of leisure.

A few days after our interview, I stick my head in to find her behind the counter serving customers. Even when she's not in her apron she's still working, either on the other side of the patty counter on her art business, or on Jamaican fashion shows. It was art, after all, that reignited her passion for Jamaica. *"The first time I went back, which was as soon as I was old enough to buy a plane ticket, I hated it. Then, when I got older and became more successful, I returned with my husband and fell in love."* The turning point? A picture of a little girl sitting by the roadside with big plaits, selling mangos.

"I looked at the image—just a print, nothing special—and I said to my husband, 'My God. That is me. That's what I used to do.' It was the first time I realised art's power to speak to me." She wanted to find the artist there and then, and purchase the collection, but her husband restrained her. *"Being a lawyer, he always wants to make a good investment,"* she grins. *"You want to support art? Then support real art, not tourist art,"* he told me. *"That's when I went to our national gallery, and the EM school, and saw all the wonderful art there."*

Her subsequent career has seen Theresa entertain celebrities, politicians and even royalty. The night she was introduced to Prince Charles for the first time is one neither she, nor anyone in her phone book, will forget for a long time. *"I was at dinner at Buckingham Palace with a guy who had sponsored one of my exhibitions, and there were two queues forming: one for Charles and one for Camilla. I realised I was in hers and thought, shit, no offence to Camilla but I need to see Charles."* Persuasion being a strength of Theresa's, she sought out the organiser and within minutes found herself in a separate room, waiting. *"I just told her that I didn't mean to be rude, but wanted to thank his Royal Highness for all the work he does in downtown Kingston,"* she shrugs.



"She said she thought he'd like to meet me too."

There was no one Theresa did not ring to regale them with the story that night. *"2am, everyone was getting that phone call. He gave me his secretary's card, and I put it under the mattress as soon as I got home."* Though in part sentiment, her enthusiasm owes far more to Charles's support of her homeland and its culture than it does his royalism. *"He's passionate about art, about young people in art, and he does great things for Jamaica."* On the Commonwealth, she's unequivocal. *"Look at Trinidad, darling. Why fix something that works?"*

Theresa is proudly conservative. Though she admits the Tory party was *"too late to embrace black people"*, she is adamant that most who come over here from Jamaica have conservative

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values. She met her second, and current, husband through a discussion of politics at the City pub, Blue Eyed Maid.

"He'd been to Oxford, was a young lawyer, and his MP was Thatcher," she laughs. *"My dad will never forgive me."* She herself *"went to school for the socialising"*, left at 16, and within two years was married with two young boys. She has no regrets whatsoever. *"I'm still very social—I network, my husband organises,"* she shrugs. *"We work as a team."*

So what next for Theresa? Jamaican Patty Company might have started out as a side order, but it's proving to be more than she bargained for. *"It wasn't my biggest dream"* she says, *"that was Hanover Grange, but now I feel very attached."* Critics are raving about it. There are calls to open new stores. Theresa's keen to deliver, but wants her *"firstborn"* to be in order before she does, and that's not easy. *"I need to get this baby running, and I need people here who can represent me and my country, who I can trust."*

"I need to make sure my customers are being served beautifully. Are you being served beautifully?" She rounds on a nearby table. They nod obediently, mouths full of patty, and she grins. *"Good. We are a young country but it's about time the world saw us seriously"* she continues, turning back to me. *"Jamaica is very fashionable and cool, and everybody wants a bit of it, but I would want to see a bit more authenticity about what goes on."* Rum bars and chicken shacks are all very well, but they are rarely run by Jamaicans. For Theresa, *"What's rewarding is to have the support of my community. It would be nice for young British-Jamaicans to represent their country themselves."*

We wander upstairs. The lunchtime rush is waning, and the smell of coffee beckons late afternoon strollers. The Blue Mountain coffee, Black River chocolate and Tortuga rum cake all hail from Theresa's home shores. *"Jamaica is small. It has a small but quality production, so things get bought up fast. That hasn't stopped me. I feel strongly that if it isn't Jamaican, it won't be in here,"* she shrugs. Based in central London, yet wholly and beautifully Jamaican. It's been a few years, but it seems Theresa has found her perfect home.

Jamaican Patty Company

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