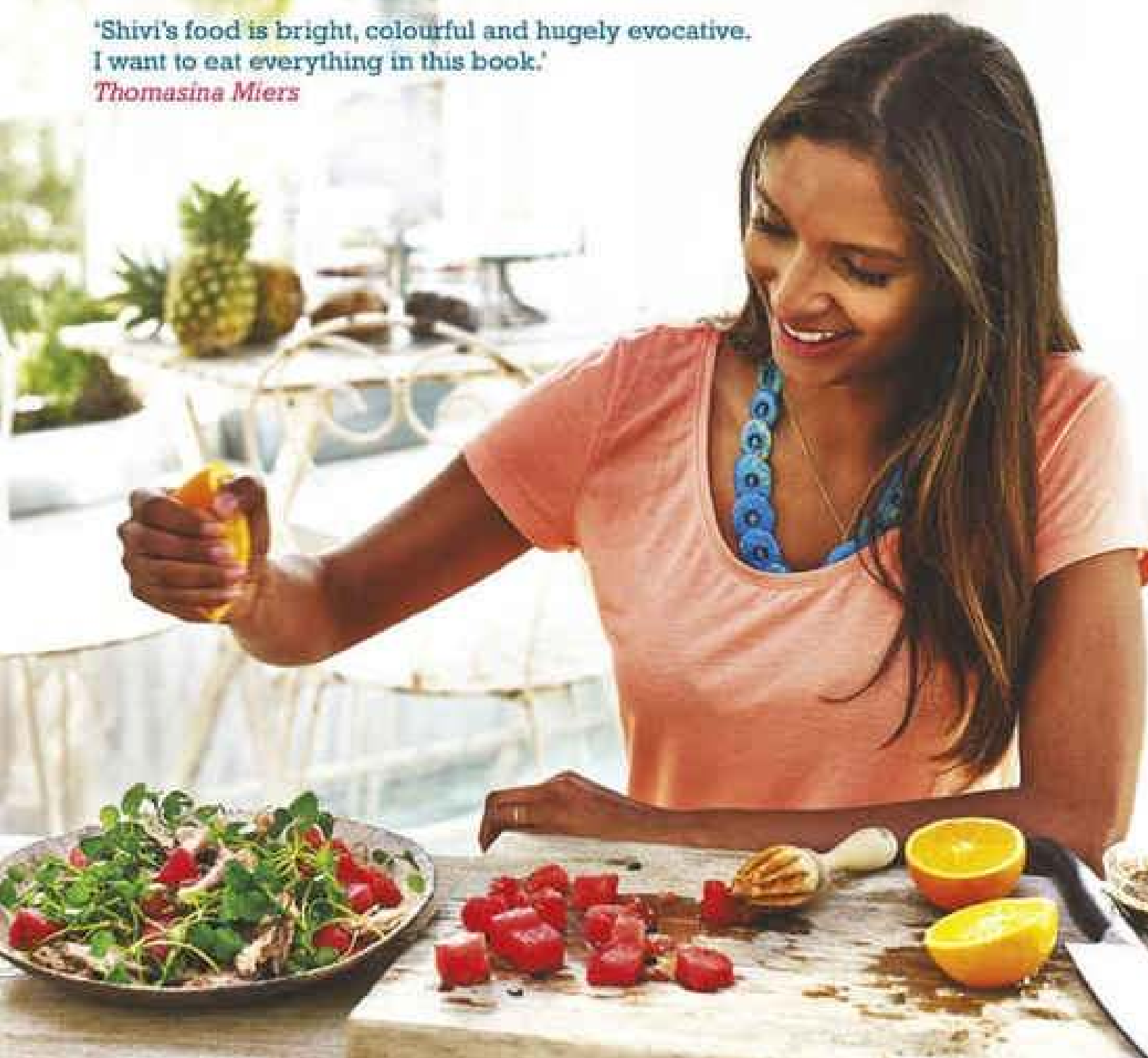


CARIBBEAN MODERN

RECIPES FROM
THE RUM ISLANDS
SHIVI RAMOUTAR

'Shivi's food is bright, colourful and hugely evocative.
I want to eat everything in this book.'

Thomasina Miers





CARIBBEAN MODERN

SHIVI RAMOUTAR

headline

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For Ma and Pa.

Thank you for Roald Dahl's Revolting Recipes, for putting up with the blue eggs and other kooky creations that I forced down your throat and for never complaining about the bomb site that I'd leave behind in the kitchen. For everything, I am eternally grateful.





INTRODUCTION

I find it quite astonishing that when the word 'Caribbean' is mentioned, a hundred beautiful clichés bubble to the surface: white sand, blue sky, crystalline water, sea-salt breezes, sticky days, balmy nights, palm-fringed shores, rum-laced cocktails ... And yet, when the words 'Caribbean' and 'food' are thrown together in a sentence, the first thing that generally springs to mind is the stereotypical 'Jerk Chicken, Rice and Peas'. (Mutton Curry usually comes in second and there is normally a struggle to think of a third!) I am not certain how this particular dish has become representative of Caribbean cuisine – and, don't get me wrong, it is utterly moreish – but there are so many other tantalising treats that deserve to battle it out for centre stage among the flamboyant islands known as the Caribbean.

What exactly comprises the Caribbean is a moot point. Geographically, it can be classified as the thousand-odd islands in the Caribbean Sea and the surrounding coastal territories, tucked in between the American continents and east of Central America. Culturally, it is a melting pot of various nations – East Indian, West African, Chinese, European, American and the indigenous Amerindians – that together represent what is now the Caribbean identity. With such wide-ranging ethnic influences, the Caribbean is flamboyant, vibrant and colourful.

Food is at the heart of Caribbean life. No matter how many people turn up at a home here – and no matter what the hour – someone will always gravitate towards the kitchen to whip up some food. I have vivid memories of my childhood in Trinidad, growing up in a mixed Caribbean/South American/Indian family where life was bustling and there were always plenty of people – friends, family, tag-alongs – around. There was always more than enough food for everyone, and yet not a single scrap remained by the time the last person left. Nothing ever went to waste!

Laughter was one of the most familiar sounds. Whether sunshine was streaming in or hot rain was pelting down, there was always a reason to laugh, to drink rum, to play cricket in the streets and to 'lime' (see [here](#)). This hasn't changed over the years: even now when I go back to visit family, it is like everyone has a revolving door and the kitchen is always full to bursting with friends. Social cooking, eating and spontaneous hospitality feel as natural to us Caribbeans as our own heartbeat.

Outside of the home, too, the Caribbean has one of the most vibrant and varied street-food scenes that I have ever come across, with vendors selling from stalls on street corners, out of the back of vans in car parks and at beach shacks – a clear indication of how much our lives revolve around our stomach!

CARIBBEAN FOOD

I am often asked what exactly is Caribbean cuisine? What are its defining flavours, influences and origins? What is it about the range of dishes that gives Caribbean cuisine its unique identity?

Usually, the concept of 'identity' implies an obvious unifying factor. If you think about Indian, Chinese or Italian food, it seems quite obvious, doesn't it? But with Caribbean food, the unifying factor is diversity – at its most extreme. We Caribbean folk have a huge variety of origins, religions and colours. You only need to look at my family to see what I mean: our different skin and eye colours reflect our indigenous, Indian, South American, Hispanic and even Asian ancestry. (I can't imagine where I'd end up if I were to trace my family tree!) The Caribbean can be seen as one of the first multicultural societies in existence due to its colourful history and the continuous 'musical chairs' of colonists throughout the islands, which have influenced Caribbean food and ways of eating.

If we were to go on a little food tour of the Caribbean, you would quickly discover how each island differs from its neighbours. Jamaica is known for its jerk, ackee and saltfish as well as its patties (see [here](#)). Jerk (see [here](#)) was inspired by the African slaves who came to Jamaica with a method of heavily spicing pork and cooking it over hot coals to preserve the meat. The runaway slaves adopted this method and used the vegetation and spices found in the mountains to preserve wild boar, as often they didn't know when they would next eat! The method has continued to evolve over the centuries into the jerk we now know and love. Patties were inspired by the British, who brought with them recipes for pasties, amongst other things.

Hopping over to Guyana, we meet the famous Caribbean one-pot dish, Lamb Pepperpot (see [here](#)), derived from local Amerindian ancestry, as well as a host of Caribbean–Chinese mash-up meals that emerged from the mass influx of indentured Chinese servants mixing their traditional food with Caribbean flavours.

Leaping north to the Bahamas, the array of chowders (see my [Shellfish Chowder, here](#)), crayfish salads and grits point to the Deep South as the main influence, with South America having inspired ceviche (see my [Mock Conch Salad, here](#)).

The lovely little haven that is Curaçao still exhibits the influence of its principal colonists, the Dutch, in local dishes, such as the tasty little dumplings called oliebolle, amongst other Creole food (krioyo) which evolved from the African–European ancestry.

Trinidad is another example of this melting-pot syndrome, with Persian-originated Pelau, Indian-derived Roti, fried chicken from the Deep South and the South American-influenced Pasteles (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), to name just a few. Here, flavours have evolved, using local produce, to create dishes that are familiar and yet quite different.



So how did all this variety come about? Way before the fifteenth century and the arrival of the Europeans, the Caribbean was inhabited by indigenous groups: foraging American–Indian nomads from Central America who were followed by agriculturalists from South America. Their diet was mostly made up of vegetables and fruit, such as peanuts, guava, papaya, cassava (a starchy root vegetable), cocoa and pineapples. Additionally, they were reliant on fish (and were skilled fishermen) and hunted small mammals (some similar to guinea pigs), turtles, lizards and birds (there are no large species of animal native to the Caribbean). The practice of using hot chilli peppers to spice food is thought to have started at this time and has continued. The indigenous people can also be credited with inventing one of the first barbecue techniques known to man, making ‘grills’ (barbacoa) out of green wood (green to prevent burning) over a fire, on which they would slow-cook meats.

The colonial era of the Caribbean began soon after Christopher Columbus’s voyages to the Americas in the late 1400s and early 1500s, with Spain being the main colonial power. The Spaniards introduced sugar cane (which was found to make rum and which became the key crop cultivated in the Caribbean, giving rise to the plantation system that dictated much of the area’s history), as well as much vegetation now referred to as ‘tropical’, including ginger, figs, bananas, plantain, grapes, oranges, limes, onion, garlic, chickpeas and – surprising to some – coconuts. They also brought with them cattle, pigs, goats and chickens. With the arrival of the conquistadors, the indigenous people were captured, enslaved and nearly wiped out (not only by forced labour and war, but also by diseases introduced from Europe). Soon after the Spanish had settled, the Portuguese, English, French, Danish and Dutch arrived, bringing their own culinary techniques and ingredients, including coffee, black pepper, mangoes (from Asia), methods for salting cod (bacalao), sweet pudding recipes, souse and black pudding (the latter, in particular, became a much-loved Caribbean food, see my [Scallop, Puddin’ and Sour](#), [here](#)).



During the 1600s, as the enslaved indigenous population dwindled, the European colonists turned the slave trade for the mass manpower required to support the sugar plantation systems across the Caribbean. As well as slaves, the colonists brought back from Africa yam (a root vegetable), okra, black eye peas, callaloo (a leafy plant) and ackee (a fruit).

The slaves were usually given a small piece of land, generally of poor quality, on which to grow their own food crops, which included sweet potatoes, yams and other 'ground provisions', in addition to plantain and the measly rations of salted meat or lacklustre leftovers with which the plantation owners would provide them. Thus these foods became stigmatised as 'slave' foods that the Europeans would not eat themselves. Nowadays, however, they are very much a commonplace staple within the Caribbean diet and immensely enjoyed by all.

The slaves also developed a method of cooking that is still evident in the modern Caribbean kitchen. Due to limited and poor-quality cooking utensils – normally no more than an iron pot, a wooden spoon and a pestle and mortar – and the need for making food as hearty as possible, the 'one-pot' meal emerged. All the ingredients would be cooked up together and made incredibly thick. As ground provisions or leftovers could be bland, and were sometimes even going off, meals were heavily seasoned with an array of herbs and spices and meat was marinated, not only to enhance flavours but also to disguise unpleasant ones. This influence is strongly evident in many Caribbean dishes.

Once slavery was abolished in the 1800s, the Europeans brought indentured servants from China and India as a new form of cheap labour to work the plantations. At first the Chinese couldn't prepare

their native dishes because they couldn't get hold of their traditional ingredients, but they did make noodles. Eventually they were able to bring across spices, soy sauce and then rice and mustard, but the Chinese influence on Caribbean cuisine really became evident only during the twentieth century when these ingredients arrived.

The Indians brought curry recipes (which they adapted to take into account the ingredients available in the Caribbean), roti (a very popular flatbread) and eating meals on banana leaves, a custom that is still prevalent in some homes and restaurants in the Caribbean. As you will see from my recipes, Indian food has had an important influence on Caribbean cuisine.

During the last century, with the dawn of television, ease of travel and our natural, human inquisitiveness, the influence of the rest of the world on the Caribbean has become evident in the proliferation of fast-food outlets (fried chicken being one of the most popular) and the range of ingredients and products available to buy in the supermarkets. We Caribbeans like to dabble in all these other-worldly flavours, trying them in their original state and then doing what we do best: reinterpreting dishes to make them our own.

MY CARIBBEAN KITCHEN

The recipes in this book are my own interpretation of the Caribbean flavours, cooking and eating experiences that have shaped my life. They are a reflection of how I eat and cook at home: light, fresh and nutritious, but also satisfyingly homely and hearty food with all the excitement and exotic flavour of a faraway place. There are also definite streaks of decadent ‘naughtiness’, without which the book wouldn’t be authentically Caribbean!



I am very conscious of what I eat, but at the same time I do love food. I love to try new things and I love the occasional (or regular) treat, so I have tried to balance this book in the same way. I’ve translated age-old, local recipes into fresh, easy and contemporary ones, which will bring the essence of the Caribbean into your home, via day-to-day meals but also more extravagant feasts. The recipes range from Caribbean interpretations of well-loved and familiar foods to simplified Westernised versions of classic Caribbean dishes, substituting ingredients that you will easily find in your local supermarket where appropriate. I want to show you the versatility of both tropical and local British produce and how you can use them together to create some really special dishes.



And ingredients? I like food preparation and the sourcing of ingredients to be as easy and enjoyable as sitting down to eat a meal, so you won't find particular Caribbean ingredients – for example breadfruit, plantain or chataigne – listed here. As delicious as these are, I have had to adapt my way of cooking to take account of British produce and the fact that it isn't always easy to find some of the far-flung ingredients, especially if I want to whip up something exotic at short notice. That said, however, it is now common for high-street supermarkets to stock the ingredients – or more than ample substitutes – you will need to recreate absolutely any dish from the Islands.



And so I am happy to present you with this colourful collection of fresh and easy recipes, inspired by the Caribbean approach to cooking (and eating) and by its wealth of flavours and ingredients. I hope that this book will bring a little bit of the tropics into your kitchen and on to your table and that it will encourage you to create sun-drenched recipes of your own.

NOTES ON THE RECIPES

These recipes are to inspire you, so feel free to add or replace ingredients and to develop the recipes as you wish.

- All temperatures are listed for a conventional oven. If you are using a fan-assisted oven, reduce the temperature by 20°C.
- When pumpkin is out of season, or difficult to get a hold of, feel free to substitute butternut squash.
- My 'go-to' cooking oil is cold-pressed rapeseed oil as it is low in saturated fat, high in mono-unsaturated fats, a source of omegas 3, 6 and 9 and can be heated to a high temperature whilst maintaining the quality of its antioxidants. Feel free to use olive oil or vegetable oil, if you prefer.
- For deep-frying, I use peanut (or groundnut) oil as it is flavourless and has a high smoking point, so doesn't burn easily. Sunflower or vegetable oil makes a good substitute, though.
- Ideally, all stock (vegetable, chicken, beef, fish) would be home-made, but I do realise that this isn't always a viable option, so any good-quality, fresh, store-bought variety will be fine.
- Onions and garlic are considered peeled unless otherwise stated.
- All butter is salted unless otherwise stated.
- If possible, use free-range eggs, I swear by Clarence Court Burford Browns. Unless otherwise stated, use medium-sized eggs.
- Feel free to swap brown rice for white rice and vice versa; just make sure that you adjust the cooking time as brown rice takes much longer to cook than white.
- My go-to tamarind concentrate is Natco (available at supermarkets and online). If you can't find this, don't worry, but try to use a concentrate, or paste that is thick, rather than a heavily diluted version.
- When working with hot chillies, wear gloves (or rub your fingers first with a little cooking oil) to protect your skin, and wash your hands, the chopping board and the knife thoroughly afterwards.
- The easiest and least wasteful way to peel ginger and turmeric is by using a spoon, angled towards you, to gently scrape away the skin.
- Before juicing citrus fruits, roll them firmly on a hard surface with the palm of your hand a few times to release the fibres and therefore more juice.
- Cracking a fresh coconut can sometimes be a little tricky. You need first to pierce the 'eyes' and 'mouth' at the end of the coconut and allow any milk to drain off (this isn't coconut water and, although it can be used in recipes, it tastes a little 'off'). Pop the drained coconut into a bag and, on a hard surface (the kitchen floor), using a hammer and a little 'spirit', smash the coconut. Remove the

coconut from the bag and carefully, using a sharp knife, prise apart the hard shell from the nut. The brown skin remaining on the nut is absolutely fine to eat, but you can peel this away with a potato peeler, if you wish.

- I strongly suggest that the rum you use for the recipes is dark rum of good quality. This will give your dishes complexity and spiced mellowness rather than that horrid sharp alcohol taste that you get when using cheaper bottles. As most of the recipes that use rum require only a small amount of the tippie, it's definitely worth spending just that little bit more on a bottle and keeping it for when needed (and for enjoying the odd sip in the evening).

- Angostura Bitters, from Trinidad, is renowned in the cocktail world and is made from botanical aromatic ingredients. It acts as a phenomenal flavour-enhancer not only in drinks but also in food. There is alcohol in the bitters, which acts as a solvent and a preservative, but as you tend to use only the odd dash in the recipes, the alcoholic content added is insignificant.

- Sterilise your jars and bottles by washing them on the hottest setting in the dishwasher. Alternatively, you can place washed jars upside-down on a baking sheet in an oven preheated to 160°C/Gas 3 for 15 minutes. It is best to fill the jars when they are still hot. Pop wax discs on to the still warm surface of jams, pickles and preserves to lengthen their shelf life.

A NOTE ON 'LIMING'

This has nothing to do with the green-skinned citrus fruit, but rather is a wonderful cultural phenomenon, originating in Trinidad, that has been defined as 'the art of doing nothing'. It isn't a party, it isn't idle laziness, but rather it's purposeful chilling out, letting the world go by, usually with a glass of rum in hand, food in close proximity (i.e. in the other hand) and laughter and conversation flowing.



CUTTERS

(SNACKS FOR SHARING)

CHOKA

Choka, taken from our Indian heritage, is a generic word for vegetables that have been roasted and then crushed. It's as simple as it sounds and gives you the most full-bodied, tasty and healthy dips! Not only do I whip this up and serve it with warm pitta bread or flatbread as a nibble for peckish friends, I also make it regularly for 'Meatless Monday' dinners to eat with Fried Bakes (see [here](#)) or Buss-Up Shut (see [here](#)) – just like my grandmother, Mama, would make us for breakfast.

SERVES 4–8

TIME 5 MINUTES PREP
+ 15 MINUTES COOKING

FOR THE BAIGAN CHOKA

3 large aubergines
3 garlic cloves, smashed
3 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
generous pinch of cayenne pepper, plus extra for garnishing
½ tsp finely chopped flat-leaf parsley leaves
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

FOR THE TOMATO CHOKA

6 overripe tomatoes
¼ onion, finely chopped
1 ½ tbsp finely chopped coriander leaves
3 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
3 large garlic cloves, crushed

1. Heat a griddle pan on a high heat.
2. To make the baigan choka, use the tip of a sharp knife to slash a deep 2cm-long line in each aubergine and stuff the smashed garlic deep inside the slash.
3. When the griddle pan is smoking, pop the aubergines on and cook for about 8–10 minutes, turning regularly, until all sides are blackened and blistered and the aubergines are soft and tender. Remove the aubergines and set aside to cool.
4. In the meantime, pop the tomatoes for the tomato choka on to the griddle pan and cook for about 3–5 minutes, turning regularly, until blackened and blistered. Remove the tomatoes and set aside to cool.
5. To finish the baigan choka, cut off the stems, peel the skins from the aubergines and discard the crushed garlic. In a large bowl using a stick blender, blitz the aubergines, along with the oil, until smooth. Add the cayenne pepper, stir well and season to taste. Serve in a small bowl, sprinkling over a little cayenne pepper and the chopped parsley.

6. Remove any stems from the tomatoes and peel off the blackened skin. In a large bowl, crush the tomatoes with a potato masher or a fork and add the chopped onion and coriander.

7. To finish the tomato choka, heat the oil in a small frying pan on a medium heat and fry the garlic until it starts to turn gold, about 30 seconds or so, stirring continuously, then remove from the heat and tip the oil with the crushed garlic into the crushed tomato. The choka will be runny with some chunks of tomato. Mix well and season with salt and pepper. Decant into a small serving bowl. Both chokas will keep for up to 3 days in the fridge.

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