



Tempo trio:
(from left)
Sipho, IQulah
and Ras Keen.

Slow the tempo

Sipho's monthly celebration of Jamaican culture

My introduction to Jamaican music came in 1973, when I bought The Wailers' first major American-released album, *Catch a Fire*, with its silver cover in the form of a giant Zippo lighter. The reggae masterpiece is a study in contrasts, with somber lyrics and what critic Robert Christgau called "anguished rhythms" sharing space with celebratory paeans to earthly physical love and dance-inducing brightness.

story and
photo by
Carey Wilson

Review:
Tempo parties, every second Saturday. Next up: March 9. Buffet (\$20/\$15 students) starts at noon; music (free) at 5 p.m.

Sipho's Jamaica
1228 Dayton Road
895-1866

inducing brightness.

Hoping for a bit of that brightness, I headed to the outskirts of Chico where the orchards meet Dayton Road last Saturday (May 9) to join the monthly Tempo reggae party at Sipho's Jamaica. Every second Saturday, in the ultimate expression of his intention to bring Jamaican culture to Chico, owner Newton "Sipho" Merritt opens the restaurant's doors and its spacious patio for a day-long party featuring a buffet and an evening of live and DJ reggae music.

The music is set on the enclosed patio, its backdrop of bamboo painted in the emblematic

Rastafarian colors of red, yellow and green and the DJ station set on a slightly elevated stage. In addition to frequent performances by Sipho (who is Jimmy Cliff's nephew) and other local reggae musicians, the live portions of Tempo often include visiting players. This month, the headliner was Jamaican roots ambassador IQulah (who also happens to live in Chico).

Amazingly, the shows are always free, and the buffet is only \$20 (\$15 for students). Sipho's serves a variety of traditional Jamaican dishes—from jerk chicken to curried goat—most of which are presented during the monthly self-serve, all-you-can-eat buffets.

I arrived relatively early in the festivities, and was happily surprised to encounter a half-dozen friends who invited me to join them for a celebratory dinner in the main dining room. The communal table was already covered with sturdy paper plates filled with aromatic bounty from the banquet and dotted with bottles of Red Stripe Jamaican-style lager, and I hastily endeavored to catch up with everyone.

The variety of dishes proved larger than could practically fit on one plate, so I had to take two passes at the buffet. For the first round, I selected a protein-heavy mix of jerk chicken, escovitch fish (fried and covered in peppers, onions and carrots), stewed oxtail

and rice and peas (red beans), with a serving of green salad splashed with oil and vinegar. Each dish's flavor complemented that of the others, with the jerk chicken—slightly blackened on the outside, but tender, moist, and appropriately and pleasantly spicy—the star of my plate.

A second pass yielded rasta pasta (with tofu and vegetables) and Ital stew, the latter of which is a savory vegetarian concoction including pumpkin, root vegetables, red beans, coconut milk, scallions, garlic and Scotch bonnet peppers. It was my favorite of the meal.

As for the music, the highlight of the evening was a live percussion and vocal trio consisting of Sipho, IQulah and Ras Keen, each playing hand drums of different sizes and tonalities to accompany their voices. It was music stripped to its most basic rhythmic and melodic components. Hearing the "Rasta Man Chant" from The Wailers' *Burnin'* album rendered in this fashion, with the three voices intoning, "One bright morning when my work is over/Man will fly away home," imparted a sense of spiritual unity that enhanced the genuine hospitality and friendliness exuded by host Sipho and his staff.

This is good work: sharing the flavors of Jamaican culture to bring the community together. □

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