

## CITY PEOPLE

Cephas Gilbert

## Cooking up wisdom

## Cephas Gilbert

AGE: 50

OCCUPATION: Owner, Cephas' Hot Shop, Ybor City.

## MENU FAVORITES:

Curried goat, jerk chicken and oxtail served with vegetables and peas and rice.

**SIGN OVER FRONT DOOR:** Together in Struggle.

**HOMETOWN:** Kingston, Jamaica

**LOCAL HERO:** Bob Marley. "He made you feel strong, even if you didn't feel strong."

**BIGGEST THRILL:** Skydiving. "I like the feeling of the ground coming up to meet me."

**DIET REGIMEN:** One meal a day, lots of vegetables, water and cranberry juice.

**DAILY VITAMIN:** One baby aspirin.

**COMPANIONS:** Linja, a Great Dane, and Daisy, a Rottweiler-chow mix named after his great aunt.

### ■ A restaurateur in Ybor City dispenses advice with his Jamaican dishes.

By SUSAN THURSTON  
Times Staff Writer

YBOR CITY — Cephas Gilbert's mother taught him three things for surviving on his own.

How to wash clothes.  
How to clean house.  
How to cook food.

Gilbert used all three to become a humble, self-reliant adult.

He used the cooking to make a living.

Gilbert owns Cephas' Hot Shop, an Ybor City destination for authentic Jamaican cuisine. He opened it 20 years ago, long before nightclubs and trendy shops took over the historic neighborhood.

"I decided to do something for myself," says a man known more by his first name than his last. "I didn't want to work for nobody."

Although in Tampa for nearly three decades, Gilbert has never strayed far from his island roots. His restaurant at 1701 E Fourth Ave. serves as a shrine to his native land. Posters of Bob Marley grace the walls. The smell of curry and jerk seasonings lingers on guests hours after leaving.

Jamaican red, yellow and green dominate the decor.

Gilbert, 50, got into the restaurant business after working for a ship repair company in the Port of Tampa. Faced with layoffs, he longed for permanent work and a steady paycheck. He hated idle time.

Gilbert began cooking out of his apartment and selling his creations to crew members. As business picked up, he graduated to a barbecue pit behind an old pool hall on Fourth Avenue, his current location.

Years later, he still remembers opening night. He started with \$35, enough to buy a 30-pound drumfish at the docks, curried goat, seasonings and oil.

He ended with \$260.

Blank then Ybor City was a different place. People mugged, such as Centro Ybor, were barely on paper. Restaurant pickings were slim.

"When I came to Tampa, Ybor was dead," he

says. "Everything was boarded up."

West Indians and ship workers initially made up the bulk of his clientele. Today, about three-quarters of his customers are tourists, lawyers and other professionals. Locals who have been coming for years make up the rest.

"The food is delicious. It's very healthy," said Mike Peri, a West Tampa lawyer who has been coming to the restaurant once a week for six years. "Cephas is a good guy."

Since the Sept. 11 attacks, Gilbert says business has dropped nearly in half. International visitors stopped coming, and many regulars saw tough times.

Still, it doesn't get him down.

"Maybe I'm not achieving a lot, but I'm keeping myself occupied and I'm paying my taxes," he says.

Staying busy means working long hours as the cook, waiter, bus boy and cashier. On weekends, he stays open until 3:30 or 4 a.m. He gets by on four to five hours of sleep a day.

Gilbert takes note of everything he puts in his body. He eats plenty of vegetables, drinks aloe vera shakes and has a glass of red wine with every meal. He won't touch pork, or even serve it.

"The pig don't sweat, so I don't eat it," says Gilbert, in a heavy Jamaican accent. "It can grow a tapeworm in your stomach three feet long."

Gilbert has strong opinions on everything from children to fitness.

On repeat juvenile offenders: "Make a school for them on a ship and take them out to sea."

On exercise: "All you need is three to five minutes in the morning and three to five minutes before you go to bed."

On living: "Your life is like a road. Some road is rough. Some is rocky. And some is a short cut."

Gilbert considers a true friend someone who elevates him, not one who brings him down. Signs posted outside his restaurant say, "Respect due whether you are black or white."

Next to cooking, his second passion is law. He keeps a leather-bound set of books on Florida cases and codes next to his cash register, and refers to them when a customer needs help. He follows current events closely



Customer Charles Miller takes money from Alicia Howell to pay a bill at Cephas' Hot Shop. Cephas Gilbert is at the register, and Miller's daughter, Aisha, 2, is in the foreground.



Times photos — MIKE PEASE

Cephas Gilbert has owned Cephas' Hot Shop in Ybor City for 20 years, a restaurant that specializes in authentic Jamaican cooking. He shrugs off a slow economy. "Maybe I'm not achieving a lot, but I'm keeping myself occupied and I'm paying my taxes," he says.

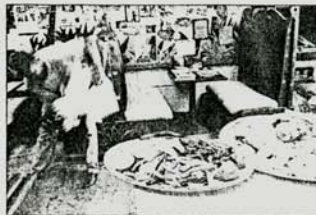
and never misses the nightly news.

Gilbert gets frustrated by people who let drugs and alcohol ruin their lives. He hasn't had a beer since his birthday in 1970, and he bans smoking in his restaurant. Every now and then, he enjoys a cigar at home.

Working hard keeps him strong and focused. "It also defines him.

"Your life is the way you make it. If you live like a crook, you are a crook," he says. "If you live like a cook, you are a cook."

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A plate of curried goat sits next to a red snapper dish called escovitech. In the background, Charles Miller plays with Aisha.