PUERTO RICAN CUISINE: A FUSION OF CULTURES AND CONTINENTS

Rich History Enhances Flavor of Island’s Culinary Delights

A fusion of European, Afro-Caribbean and Latin American cultures has produced one of the most palate-tempting cuisines throughout the western hemisphere. Although Puerto Rican cooking is somewhat similar to both Spanish and Latin American cuisine, it has a unique style, using such indigenous seasonings and ingredients such as coriander, papaya, cacao, níspero, apio, plantains, cassava and yampee.

Cocina Criolla (Créole cooking) can be traced back to the Arawaks and Taínos, the original inhabitants of the island, who thrived on a diet of corn, tropical fruit, and seafood. With the arrival of the Spanish in 1493, other ingredients such as beef, pork, rice, wheat and olive oil were incorporated into the native diet.

The Spanish soon began planting sugar cane and importing slaves from Africa, who brought with them okra and taro, known in Puerto Rico as yautía. The mingling of flavors and ingredients passed from generation to generation among the different groups that passed through and settled on the island, resulting in the exotic blend of today’s Puerto Rican cuisine.

Homestyle Cooking

The aroma that wafts from kitchens throughout Puerto Rico comes from adobo and sofrito – blends of herbs and spices that give many of the native foods their distinctive taste and color. Adobo, made by crushing together peppercorns, oregano, garlic, salt, olive oil and lime juice or vinegar, is rubbed into meats before they are roasted. Sofrito, a potpourri of onions, garlic and peppers browned in either olive oil or lard and colored with achiote (annatto seeds), imparts the bright yellow color to the island’s rice, soups and stews.

(more)
Lunch and dinner generally begin with sizzling hot appetizers such as bacalaitos (crunchy cod fritters), surullitos (sweet cornmeal fingers) or empañadillas (crescent-shaped turnovers filled with lobster, crab, conch or beef). Soups also are a popular beginning and diners have many choices: sopón de pollo con arroz (chicken soup with rice), which tastes differently across the island’s regions, sopón de pescado (fish soup), which is prepared with the head and tail intact, or sopón de garbanzos con patas de cerdo (chickpea soup with pig’s feet), which is made with pumpkin, chorizo (Spanish sausage), salt pork, chile peppers, cabbage, potatoes, tomatoes and fresh cilantro.

Not really a soup, the most traditional Puerto Rican dish is asopao, a hearty gumbo made with either chicken or shellfish – and every chef has his or her own recipe. One well-known and low-budget version is asopao de gandules (pigeon peas). Another is asopao de pollo (chicken), which takes a whole chicken flavored with oregano, garlic and paprika, and adds it to a rich gumbo of salt pork, cured ham, green peppers, chile peppers, onions, cilantro, olives, tomatoes, chorizo and pimientos.

Stews, which are usually cooked in heavy kettles called calderas, loom large in the Puerto Rican diet. A popular one is carne guisada puertorriqueña (Puerto Rican beef stew). The ingredients that flavor the beef vary but might include green peppers, sweet chile peppers, onions, garlic, cilantro, potatoes, pimento-stuffed olives, capers and even seeded raisins.

Pastelón de carne, or meat pie filled with salt pork, ham and spices, is a staple of many Puerto Rican dinners. Other typical dishes include carne frita con cebolla (fried beefsteak with onions), ternera a la parmesana (veal parmesan) and roast leg of pork, fresh ham, lamb or veal, which are prepared Créole style and flavored with adobo. Exotic fare, such as Cabrito en Fricasé (Goat Meat Fricasse,) Carne Mechada (Larded Pork or Beef Loin with Chorizo Sausage,) Cuajito and Mollejas Guisadas (stews popular during Christmas season), are also enjoyed by locals.

A festive island dish is lechón asado (barbecued pig), a recipe dating back to the Taino Indians, which is usually cooked for a party of 12 to 15. It is traditional for picnics and outdoor parties. The pig is basted with jugo de naranja agria (sour orange juice) and achiote coloring. Green plantains are peeled and roasted over hot stones, then served as a side dish. The traditional dressing served with the pig is aji-li-mojili, a sour garlic sauce consisting of garlic, whole black peppercorns and sweet seeded chile peppers, flavored further with vinegar, lime juice, salt and olive oil.

Chicken is a Puerto Rican staple, arroz con pollo (chicken with rice) being the most common dish. Other preparations include pollo al Jérez (chicken in sherry), pollo agríduco (sweet-and-sour chicken) and polilitos asados a la parrilla (broiled chicken). However, most visitors to the island prefer the fresh fish and shellfish. A popular dish is mojo isleño, fried fish in a typical sauce of olives, olive oil, onions, pimientos, capers, tomato sauce, vinegar, garlic and bay leaves.

(more)
Puerto Rican Cuisine/3

Caribbean lobster is usually the most expensive item on any menu, followed by shrimp and crab. Puerto Ricans often cook camarones en cerveza (shrimp in beer) or jueyes hervidos (boiled crab).

Rice and plantains are staples of the Puerto Rican diet and, prepared in dozens of ways, accompany nearly every meal. Rice (arroz) is simmered slowly with sofrito and generally served with habichuelas (beans) or gandules (pigeon peas). Another typical rice specialty is pegao, which is rice that is prepared so that it sticks to the bottom of the pan and gets crispy. Plantains also are served in many forms. Amarillos are ripe plantains fried with sugar to enhance their sweetness. Green plantains are either mashed into discs and deep fried to make tostones or mashed into balls of mofongo and mixed with pork or seafood and spices.

Agriculture

The rich and fertile fields of Puerto Rico produce a wide variety of vegetables, such as the pear-shaped chayote, which is reminiscent of summer squash; breadfruit, which is similar to the sweet potato; and plantains, which are the single most popular side dish on the island. Plantains are a variety of banana that cannot be eaten raw. They are coarser in texture, harvested when green and then baked, fried or boiled.

Of all that is grown in Puerto Rico, none is more famous than coffee or sugar cane, from which the national drink of rum is produced. Coffee beans have been produced in the island’s high-altitude interior for more than 300 years and still rank among the island’s leading exports. Only three coffees in the world belong to the top super-premium class: Blue Mountain coffee of Jamaica, kona coffee from Hawaii and Puerto Rico’s homegrown Alto Grande. The best brand names for Puerto Rican coffee are Café Crema, Café Rico, Rioja and Yaucono. Visitors can ask for their brews puya (unsweetened), negrito con azúcar (black and sweetened), cortao (black with a drop of milk) or con leche (with milk).

It is believed that Ponce de León introduced rum to Puerto Rico during his governorship, which began in 1508. Since then, sugar cane cultivation and rum production has become a national pastime. Puerto Rican rums are generally light, gold or dark – ideal for mixed drinks or on the rocks, depending on which type is selected. There are 24 different rums from Puerto Rico sold in the U.S. under 11 brand names: Bacardi, Don Q, Barrilito, Ron Bocoy and Ronrico, to name a few.

The island’s topography and mix of urban and rural areas accounts for the variety in cuisine from region to region. For example, the restaurant scene in the metropolis of San Juan is booming with international cuisine enhanced by Puerto Rican flavors. The central mountainous region of the island is known for coffee plantations and the taste of lechon asado.

(more)
The southern end of the island grows in root vegetables and sugar cane, and is home to the Don Q rum headquarters. Finally, the western region of Porta del Sol offers a large variety of gastronomic inns, or Mesones Gastronómicos, small, family restaurants serving up the freshest seafood, citrus fruit and other local produce, served in traditional or new “nuevo criollo”-style Puerto Rican cuisine.

Celebrations of Food

Because food is an intrinsic part of Puerto Rican culture, it is no wonder festivals celebrating regional specialties take place practically year round. The southern region of Salinas, known for seafood, is host to the Salinas Carnival in April. Shrimp lovers should consider visiting the western town of Moca in May for the Festival del Camarón de Río (The River Shrimp Festival), where local restaurants and kiosks hold tastings and showcase local recipes. In Lares, located in western Porta del Sol, one can sample at least 12 varieties of bananas at the Banana Festival. Those with a sweet tooth should visit the island during the last weekend of August for the Puff Pastry Festival in the western town of Añasco. In October, the northern town of Corozal hosts the National Plantain Festival. The coastal town of Arecibo, where the sardine is considered a delicacy, holds the annual Cetí (a miniature relative of the sardine) Festival. These are just a few of the culinary celebrations that visitors traveling to Puerto Rico might stumble across at any time of year.

The pinnacle of Puerto Rico’s culinary festivals takes place every spring on beautiful and world-famous Escambrón Beach in San Juan. Visitors are invited to experience a celebration of gastronomic offerings at Saborea, a weekend that also educates attendees on recreating favorite dishes and developing new ones. With tastings and daily demo kitchens boasting renowned chefs, both local and nationally known, Saborea offers a true paradise for culinary enthusiasts.

No matter what part of the island, Puerto Rico offers visitors a treasure of culinary flavors. Through its food, one can see the international influences that created a fusion of cuisine, long before “fusion” was mainstream.

For more information about Puerto Rican cuisine, restaurants, Mesones Gastronómicos and food celebrations, call (800) 866-7827 or visit the Puerto Rico Tourism Company website at seepuertorico.com.

###
About the Puerto Rico Tourism Company
The Puerto Rico Tourism Company (PRTC), founded in 1970, is a public corporation responsible for stimulating, promoting and regulating the development of the tourism industry. It markets Puerto Rico as a tourism destination through advertising, public relations and promotional activities; promotes tourism among local residents; provides visitor orientation and technical assistance to investors; evaluates tourism facilities and establishes standards of quality; and regulates and oversees gaming operations. PRTC has offices and representatives in the U.S. mainland, Canada, Europe and Latin America.