

Von Diaz's Essential Puerto Rican Recipes

The journalist and cookbook author, who grew up traveling between Atlanta and Puerto Rico, collects dishes that tell stories about life on the island, and the flavors that bring her back to it.

By Von Diaz

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Intensely green, verging on chartreuse, plantains hang like chandeliers from tall broad-leafed plants across the Caribbean. The botanical name is *Musa paradisiaca*, the second word meaning “of paradise.”

The plátano is generous, and can be eaten in all stages of ripeness. In Puerto Rico, the greenest ones can be fried, smashed and blended with garlic, olive oil and chicharrones — pork cracklins — to make mofongo, one of the island's best-known dishes. When their peels turn bright yellow, speckled with dark spots, plátanos can be fried and served alongside rice and beans for that signature agridulce flavor, sweet and salty. And when they finally become black and squishy, seemingly past their prime, their flesh can be boiled, then blended with butter, and then pressed into a pan to make pastelón, a casserole layered with sofrito-laced beef.

I was born in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico, but raised in the suburbs outside Atlanta. My family traveled back to Puerto Rico often — not always the case for those of us on the U.S. mainland — and I was fascinated by those plantain chandeliers. I lived in two worlds in my mind: a lush, loud, exciting tropical wonderland, and a seemingly cultureless, strip mall-laden labyrinth of subdivisions.



When their peels turn bright yellow, speckled with dark spots, plátanos can be fried and served alongside rice and beans. Lauren Vied Allen for The New York Times

The island beckoned me. I longed for the feeling of hot, tropical air hitting my face as I exited the plane, for the interlaced smells of garlicky grilled meat and car exhaust, for the sonorous canopy of El Yunque rainforest.

I love Puerto Rico deeply. It's where my heart lives, where my mind wanders at night when I can't sleep. But we don't always love the places we're from. My mother, in fact, hasn't been back to the island in 11 years. For her, Puerto Rico is chaos, rife with machismo, economic instability, crumbling infrastructure and bad memories. Despite the fact that Puerto Rico is part of the United States, those on the island have long struggled with inequities that can make life there extremely difficult.

And yet, my soul dwells there.

The Times asked me to write about some of Puerto Rico's essential dishes, to choose and share 10 that both resonate with me and reflect the island's people. It's challenging, even audacious, to distill a cuisine to any number of recipes, and, because of Puerto Rico's complex colonial history, it's particularly difficult to describe its food in simple terms. And so I chose to look closely at dishes that express the innate hybridity of the culture, and celebrate the foundational techniques and ingredients that make its food so compelling, and satisfying.

Ingredients for sancocho, a stew whose name is synonymous with a mix of whatever is available. Lauren Vied Allen for The New York Times

The cuisine is a culinary *mejunje*, or mix, of Indigenous, African, Spanish and American ingredients and techniques. In “Eating Puerto Rico,” the food historian Cruz Miguel Ortíz explores how Indigenous herbs and root vegetables; African plantains and coconuts; Spanish olive oil, pork and tomatoes; and American canned foods form the *mestizo* or Creole cuisine exemplified on the island. And the culinary *bricolage* of the island continues to expand as a younger generation of farmers and chefs insist on modernizing the cuisine.

“Porque es vivo,” Mr. Ortiz said. “Y simple.” The cuisine is alive, in flux, he said, yet simple and intensely flavored. Its foundation is *sofrito* — a blend of garlic, onions, peppers, and *recao* or *culantro* (cilantro’s earthy cousin, which thrives on the island). Even in the darkest times, the smell of *sofrito* sizzling in olive oil is a balm; blended with tomato sauce and rice, its flavor conjures comfort.

Made from a blend of garlic, onions, peppers, and recajo or culantro (cilantro's earthy cousin, which thrives on the island), sofrito is the foundation of Puerto Rican cuisine. Christopher Simpson for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Simon Andrews. Prop Stylist: Paige Hicks.

Sofrito, for me, is essential. But what is “essential” is subjective, so I believe it’s about what fulfills a need. For some of us, that need is nostalgia. A dish may be essential because it fills your heart with joyful memories, of smells and flavors, of your grandmother loudly playing Juan Luis Guerra, teaching you to dance, her hair still in rollers. For others, essential might mean nourishing to the body, or a meal that fills you ahead of a long day of work.

The dishes below are essential to me because of the stories they tell, the ways they embody my people’s strength and creativity, and how cooking them has helped me make sense of the brutality of my island. As Jessica B. Harris wrote of African enslavement in her 2011 book “High on the Hog”: “It must be looked at in all its horror and degradation, complicity and confusion, for it tells us where and what we have come from.”

I am a journalist, oral historian and professor of food studies in North Carolina, and, in these roles, I look closely at the global scale of imperialism, and investigate similarities among island cultures. The more I study the impact of colonization on bodies and ecosystems, the tremendous violence that occurs when monoculture replaces biodiversity, when enslavers replace Indigenous cultures and cosmologies with their own, the paradox of loving a place as difficult and complex as Puerto Rico becomes clearer. Because while much has been done to subjugate and disrupt Puerto Rico, its spirit remains.

These recipes tell the story of that spirit — of an Indigenous Taíno population believed to have been exterminated, but still living in the mitochondrial DNA of thousands of Puerto Ricans. You see that story in dishes like yuca con mojo, a humble celebration of the root vegetable that was once the cornerstone of the Taíno diet.

They describe fortitude and la brega, a term often used by Puerto Ricans to describe improvising, hustling and making do. Sancocho, its name synonymous with a mix of whatever ingredients are available, is a stew brimming with classic island flavors: yuca, yautia (taro), plantains, often pumpkin. Arroz mamposteo — just one of the many ways rice and beans are prepared — is scrappy, making magic of leftovers.

Sancocho epitomizes the resilience of Puerto Rican people, as it is often prepared in times of crisis. Lauren Vied Allen for The New York Times

They are stories of creativity and tradition, blending colonial ingredients with ancestral cooking techniques. Take pernil, the coveted garlic-and-herb-marinated pork shoulder that is traditionally slow-roasted whole over coals. On the island, there's an entire stretch of highway through densely forested Guavate — La Ruta del Lechón — dedicated to pork made with precision by families committed to the craft.

These dishes celebrate the contributions of the tens of thousands of Africans taken to the island in bondage, who introduced processes like deep frying, among many other things, and who are credited with cultivating rice, the cornerstone of the Puerto Rican diet to this day. Fritters such as alcapurrias de jueyes — a blend of green banana and yautia, stuffed with delicate crab — hark back to Loíza, a town on the northeastern coast with rich African ancestry.

And then there are completely modern dishes that reference what has always grown on the island. In pastelillos de guayaba, guava — the epitome of tropical flavor — is balanced by crumbly, salty queso en hoja, fresh cheese, which is baked into a beignet and delightfully dusted with powdered sugar. Nothing ancestral here; it's just extremely delicious, and makes use of the island's bounty of fruit.

Above all, these dishes exemplify a deeply creative people, who make food that is flavorful and soul-nourishing.

What I want to suggest here is that, instead of holding European foods and cooking techniques as the highest standards, we look to the cuisines of islands, of places that have struggled, to gain inspiration from how they managed to make things taste so good against all odds. This is old, deep knowledge, and we can all learn from it, regardless of background, and find ways to integrate this way of thinking into the way we cook.

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And to keep culinary cultures vibrant, we must adapt. For the past 15 years, the Puerto Rican diaspora has outnumbered the population on the island, and many of us have been forced to recreate our favorite dishes using very different ingredients and tools. I might need to use a bell pepper instead of ají dulce, or paprika instead of annatto. But as I say in the introduction to “Coconuts and Collards,” my first book, “It’s Puerto Rican because I made it.” These microadjustments ensure that I can still keep the flavors of my homeland in my mouth.

Many of my fellow Puerto Ricans may see this list and exclaim: “What about bacalao?” “What about tostones?” Or plátanos maduros, or coquito. There are so many things. I humbly offer these recipes in the spirit of sharing what for me is like mother’s milk, the flavors from which my palate was born — sofrito in the womb, a lifeline to the island.

As you explore and prepare these recipes, I encourage you to consider the blends of flavors. That combination of yautia and green banana with the sofrito and crab in alcapurrias is unmistakably earthy and robust, salty crispness balanced by delicate seafood. The richness of the chicken thighs in pollo en fricasé, simmered in tangy tomato and white wine, punctuated by briny olives, immediately conjures Mami's kitchen for many Puerto Ricans, just as the smell of pernil roasting in the oven transports us to every family Christmas and Thanksgiving we ever attended.

You may notice there aren't many vegetables in this collection. That is not a reflection of how most Puerto Ricans eat today. On my last trip to the island, just as Covid-19 was setting in, I ate whole ají dulce peppers, flash-fried tempura style, at the chef Natalia Vallejo's restaurant Cocina al Fondo, which will soon reopen. At Vianda, I had locally sourced radishes with grapefruit and XO sauce. At Bacoa Finca + Fogón, I was enthralled by a spread made from local beets.

But growing up, and in the cafeteria-style Puerto Rican joints I've frequented here on the mainland, the most common vegetable accompaniment to our food is a simple side salad. Oftentimes it's forgettable: limp iceberg lettuce with tomatoes, canned green beans or peas, dressed with olive oil and vinegar. But salads are the perfect pairing for Puerto Rican dishes — they balance the richness with roughage — so I often pair these recipes with a simple salad of mixed greens, avocado, tomatoes and hearts of palm in a cilantro vinaigrette.

The dishes I present here were foundational to my understanding of flavor, and everything I cook springs from them. In my conversations with fellow Boricuas of all ages and walks of life, both here and on the island, these were all mentioned. Above all, I love each one of these dishes, and I hope you will enjoy making them too.

Von's Essential Recipes

Yuca con Mojo

Yuca is among the most commonly eaten viandas — the local word for starchy fruits and vegetables, such as plantain and taro — in Puerto Rico. It is the root of the cassava, an extraordinarily resilient plant that was the principal food of the Indigenous Taínos of the island. Among its many preparations, this is my favorite: boiled yuca doused in a garlicky citrus mojo dressing, my grandmother’s recipe. She never wrote it down, but my mother had it deep in her memory, and we cooked it together for this version you see here. The mojo will keep for several weeks in the fridge, and is also delicious on crispy fried tostones, roasted vegetables and fish. (View this recipe.)

Pollo en Fricasé

The ultimate comfort food, this dish bears the mark of Spanish and French colonial influence, but takes a decidedly Puerto Rican approach. Bone-in chicken thighs are braised to perfection in a rich, oniony, tomato-based sauce with a lot of garlic, balanced with white wine and vinegar, and punctuated by briny olives and capers. Potatoes are added toward the end, for a satisfying meal. Like so many Puerto Rican dishes, this one is highly adaptable. My take is pared down and incredibly simple, making it an easy weeknight meal that can be prepared while you’re getting your house in order after work. This recipe is adapted from “Cocina Criolla,” which has remained the island’s most popular cookbook for more than 60 years. (View this recipe.)

Sancocho

Christopher Simpson for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Simon Andrews. Prop Stylist: Paige Hicks.

Sancocho, a word often used as slang by Puerto Ricans to mean a big old mix of things, is a rustic stew eaten across the Caribbean and made with every imaginable combination of proteins and vegetables. My father cooked his with beef, corn and noodles; my mom with chicken breasts, lean pork and sweet plantains; my grandmother with beef, pork on the bone and yautia. As such, I've rarely used a recipe, so this one is based largely on observation, taste memory and what I like. Pretty much every ingredient can be swapped out, and, without meat, it also makes for a robust vegetarian dish. Sancocho epitomizes the resilience of Puerto Rican people, as it is often prepared in times of crisis — such as after a hurricane — and made with whatever you have on hand. ([View this recipe.](#))

Pernil

Christopher Simpson for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Simon Andrews. Prop Stylist: Paige Hicks.

Perhaps the best-known and most coveted dish from Puerto Rico, pernil is a positively sumptuous preparation for pork shoulder. It's marinated in garlic, citrus and herbs, then slow-roasted on high heat to achieve a crisp chicharrón, or skin. Traditionally, it's prepared for Thanksgiving or Christmas, but, for those of us in the diaspora, it's often made for special occasions. This recipe is indebted to the chef Maricel Presilla and her recipe in "Gran Cocina Latina," her cookbook published in 2012. Her method is a foolproof way to get that chicharrón as well as tender meat that falls off the bone. It's blessed by her brilliance. (View this recipe.)

Pescado Frito

Christopher Simpson for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Simon Andrews. Prop Stylist: Paige Hicks.

Fishing is an extraordinarily complex issue in Puerto Rico. Much of the seafood eaten doesn't come from the island's own waters, in part because of arcane legislation that controls fishing rights. And yet, whole deep-fried fish is a staple on the island, particularly along the west and southwest coast. There, you'll find red snapper, simply marinated in adobo, fried and served with tostones, avocado salad and white rice. It is, in my opinion, the absolute best way to enjoy a whole fish. The frying turns the head and the tail into a crunchy fish chicharrón, and the skin and flesh cook evenly, keeping the flesh moist and the skin crisp. While bones are

often a concern for those uncomfortable eating whole fish, there's a simple solution: Eat it with your hands. Your fingers will do a much better job of finding bones than your fork will, and the experience is more visceral, and delicious. ([View this recipe.](#))

Gandules con Bolitas de Plátano

Christopher Simpson for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Simon Andrews. Prop Stylist: Paige Hicks.

Good cooks need good eaters, and preparing food for people I care about brings me tremendous joy. This dish is among those I've shared with others, and one that I share here in honor of my dear friend Liyna Anwar, who died a year ago. We were colleagues, and, because she was Muslim and ate strictly halal, I often brought her vegetarian dishes to sample. This was among her favorites. Green plantains are finely grated, mixed with simple spices, formed into balls with a spoon, and then dunked directly into simmering pigeon peas; the natural starch of the plantains sets up without added flour. Liyna once prepared this dish alongside me, delighting in the experience of forming the buoyant dumplings. The memory of her happiness blends now with my own memories of eating it. ([View this recipe.](#))

Carne Guisada

Christopher Simpson for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Simon Andrews. Prop Stylist: Paige Hicks.

Among the most recognizable dishes of my culture, carne guisada will cure what ails you. Beef is slowly braised with aromatic sofrito and tomatoes, producing an incredibly rich dish you're likely to eat too much of. For those who have lived in Puerto Rican enclaves in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago or Orlando, Fla., this is a daily staple at cafeteria-style lunch counters, as it is on the island. You can also use this recipe to make pollo guisado, equally popular and common, simply by using chicken and adjusting the cooking time accordingly. (View this recipe.)

Arroz Mamposteao

Rice and beans are religion in Puerto Rico, though they're typically prepared separately but served together, several spoonfuls of beans on top of white rice. But *mamposteao* — easily my favorite name for a Puerto Rican dish — combines the two. It's a preparation intended to make use of leftovers, as it benefits from day-old rice and prepared beans. Traditionally, pork and tomato sauce are added — but, for a more subtle approach to this recipe, bacon fat replaces ham or *tocino* (fatback) here, giving the dish a smoky richness without any meat. You can prepare this dish from start to finish with fresh rice and fresh beans, but it's not recommended. (View this recipe.)

Alcapurrias de Jueyes

Puerto Rico is famous for its fritters, and *alcapurrias* are among the most desired. Imagine a tamale made of green banana and root vegetable masa that is stuffed with savory meat or seafood, and then deep fried. You typically get them from the kioskos, roadside stands along Puerto Rico's beaches and highways, particularly in Loíza, a town on the northeastern coast that is the island's African heart. At home, they're often made over the holidays, as many hands make light work. The flavor is unmistakable: earthy green banana and taro cut by savory *sofrito*, briny capers and delicate crab meat. This recipe is adapted from one by María Dolores "Lula" de Jesús, the 84-year-old owner of El Burén de Lula in Loíza, who is considered by many to be a *madrina*, or godmother, of this and other dishes with African origins. (View this recipe.)

Pastelillos de Guayaba

Christopher Simpson for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Simon Andrews. Prop Stylist: Paige Hicks.

Panaderías in Puerto Rico are magical. Their brightly lit glass cases are lined with fresh-baked bread and rich pastries, begging you to order too many. As a child, I clamored for pastelillos (also called pastelitos) de guayaba. The pastries typically have a flaky crust and are filled with a generous smear of concentrated guava paste — an embodiment of tropical Caribbean flavor — and often with cheese, served glazed or dusted with powdered sugar. In East Harlem, or El Barrio, New York’s historic Puerto Rican enclave where I lived for some time, I discovered Valencia Bakery on East 103rd Street, which made a bite-size version with a generous amount of confectioners’ sugar, creating a portal between the island and my new home. My recipe is inspired by theirs. ([View this recipe.](#))

Sofrito

Christopher Simpson for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Simon Andrews. Prop Stylist: Paige Hicks.

Sofrito — a blend of garlic, onions, peppers and recajo (culantro) — is the backbone of Puerto Rican flavor. Also referred to as recaito, it's typically sautéed in oil as the foundation for sauces, braises, beans, stews and rice dishes, including many of the recipes above. My grandmother often kept sofrito in the freezer stored in a repurposed plastic margarine container, or frozen into cubes and saved in plastic zip-top bags. (View this recipe.)

Sazón

Christopher Simpson for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Simon Andrews. Prop Stylist: Paige Hicks.

Cumin-heavy sazón is among the most commonly used spice blends in Puerto Rican cooking, and is also popular throughout Latin America. Commercial brands are flavor bombs pumped with monosodium glutamate — MSG — that can make almost anything taste better. While I'm not MSG-phobic, I do prefer making my own blends to control both the flavor and the salt content. This is my take on sazón, minus the MSG, and with turmeric added along with the standard annatto to imbue dishes with a golden hue. (View this recipe.)

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