



NALWO Puerto Rican Cooking Demonstration

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Brief history of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico

The ancient history of Puerto Rico begins with the Amerindians that first made the island their home. The migration of the nomadic Arawak peoples in 300 AD from present day Venezuela began the next chapter in Puerto Rico's history, before they were either replaced or adapted to include the first longstanding group of people to live on Puerto Rico: the Taino Indians. While the Taino called many different islands of the Caribbean their home, they flourished on the islands of Puerto Rico and Hispaniola (the current home of the Dominican Republic and Haiti), numbering around 250,000 on Puerto Rico alone. They had been native to the region for hundreds of years when, in 1493, Puerto Rican history took its most drastic turn. It was the year the Tainos would see their first white man.

Colonized and enslaved by Spanish settlers, by 1508 the island was entirely under Spanish occupation, and Ponce De Leon was named the first governor of Puerto Rico. At this time in Puerto Rican history, the island was known as San Juan Bautista (the name was retained for the capital city), named by none other than Christopher Columbus. The Tainos were unable to endure the harsh conditions of slavery, and the European diseases brought across the Atlantic wreaked havoc with their immune systems. Soon they were quickly replaced by slaves shipped over from Africa.

Before long, Puerto Rico was the stronghold of the Spanish Empire in the Caribbean Sea. It was then that the many fortresses on the island sprang to life, most notably El Morro along the shores of Old San Juan. Puerto Rican history saw its share of warfare, as the fort repelled numerous invasion attempts by the Dutch, French, British - even marauding pirates.

The Spanish would rule the island for hundreds of years. As the Tainos gradually disappeared and revolutions were snuffed out, Spain never wavered in its authority. That is, until 1897, when political pressure forced the European nation to grant Puerto Rico (and Cuba) autonomy. But this freedom would only last for a tiny fraction of Puerto Rican history.

The Spanish-American War began in 1898 and ended with the Puerto Ricans finding themselves under U.S. martial law. The history of Puerto Rico would now take another significant turn, as the island gradually garnered more and more autonomous power. First, they were allowed to elect their own House of Representatives (though they wouldn't be allowed to elect their own governor until 1948), and then given full U.S. citizenship. Harry S. Truman finally made the island an official commonwealth of the United States, and Puerto Rico's history began to shape into what we see now. Though the political status of Puerto Rico remains a debate topic across the island, it seems like the title of commonwealth is a slightly more popular option. Politicians hoping to make Puerto Rico the 51st state continue to make their voice heard, as well as those seeking complete independence.

Menu

Lechon Asado (Roast Pork)
Arroz con Gandules (Rice with Pigeon Peas)
Pollo en Fricasse (Chicken Stew)
Arroz Blanco (White Rice)
Habichuelas Rosadas (Red Beans)
Ensalada de Bacalao (Cod Fish Salad)
Ensalada de Aguacate y Tomate (Tomato and Avocado Salad)
Flan de Jugo de Pina (Pineapple Juice Flan)
Flan de Almendras (Almond Flan)

Recipes

Lechon Asado/Pernil (Roast Pork) – for 8



Buy a pork 'shoulder picnic cut.' It looks like the picture. In Spanish it's "lechón" or "pernil" or can be described as "el hombro del puerco". In English in some places it's also called a 'fresh ham'. Notice it has a nice layer of fat or cuero on top. If you don't find this particular piece then buy any large chunk of pork. This is the preferred cut because it has the fat on top to make cueritos.

All it needs is lots of garlic (fresh is best, powder is ok), black pepper, oregano or cumin seeds, and salt. Sprinkle the meat and bake. How easy is that?

Note: Season the meat one day ahead and refrigerate (if you are short on time just season and cook).

7 lbs. pork shoulder – picnic cut (with fat and skin)

9 garlic cloves (You may use powdered garlic or ground garlic sold in glass jars – 1 tsp. equals one clove.)

1/2 teaspoon black pepper

1/2 teaspoon crushed oregano (or 1 tsp. cumin seeds and 2 packets Sazon seasoning)

1 1/2 tablespoons olive oil

1 1/2 teaspoon salt

Crush the garlic in a pilón. If you don't have a pilón (shame on you!) crush the whole garlic with the side of a wide knife then dice the pieces. In a small bowl mix together the garlic, salt, pepper, oregano, and olive oil. Mix well.

Wash the meat and pat dry. With a sharp knife cut the fat away from the meat, leaving an edge attached and keeping it all in one piece. Start at the wide end and go to the narrow end. You don't have to separate it completely – just leave enough still connected so that you can flip the fat over to the side while you season the meat itself. The fat will be placed over the seasoned meat and will cook over the meat giving it more flavor. Season the side of the fat that goes over the meat with a bit of the seasoning also – just that one side by running your hand on it. The other side – the top – should only have salt.

Make very deep slits all over the meat and season the meat making sure that seasoning goes into all the slits. You can also tuck garlic cloves into the slits. Put the fat back over the meat to look the same as before it was cut and sprinkle it with salt.

Refrigerate the shoulder, covered with plastic wrap, for 24 hours (if you are short on time bake at this time)

Let the meat get back into room temperature before cooking, if it was refrigerated (about one hour).

Place the meat in a deep pan with the fat side up. There will be a lot of grease so be sure to use a deep pan that is at least 2" deep. The fat side up will make nice crunchy "cueritos." **Do NOT** cover with foil. Preheat the oven for at least 30 minutes before placing the meat inside. Cook uncovered in a 400° oven for one hour, then reduce temperature to 300° for about 4 hours or so – **DO NOT TURN MEAT**. When the meat is done, you can prick it on the side with a fork to see if it shreds. If the "cuerito is not crispy enough for your satisfaction, then leave it in the oven and raise the temperature again to 400° and cook another 15 or so until it is crispy. It will crisp fast so keep your eye on it. For a crispier skin, sprinkle the skin with a bit of cold water every 20 minutes during the last 2 hours of cooking. (This is humorously called "bautizando" or baptizing the lechon!)

Remove the meat from the oven and let it rest on the counter for about 20-30 minutes before carving.

To carve, remove the cuerito completely and set aside. Carve the meat and then cut the cuerito into pieces and place over the meat. If you're going to take this to a party, put it in an oven-safe container and put it back in a 200° oven to keep it warm. DON'T COVER IT because the crispy cueritos will get soft if you do. Cut the cuerito and serve meat with a piece of cuerito on each plate. Enjoy!

Arroz con Gandules (Rice with Pigeon Peas) – for 8



This is our traditional holiday rice dish. Gandules are also known as Pigeon Peas and can be found in many markets either canned or frozen.

Ingredients:

2 cups grain rice (rinsed)
4 to 5 cups of hot water, or beef broth– approximately
½ cup sofrito (see page 5)
16 ounce can of gandules ('pigeon peas')
2 tablespoons of alcaparrado (capers and olives, mixed together)
2 packets of sazón with achiote
1 small can tomato sauce
3 tablespoons of oil
Salt & pepper to taste

Directions:

In a medium-sized heavy pot (caldero) add the oil, sofrito and sazón. Cook over medium heat for 4 minutes. Add all other ingredients, and enough water to cover the rice 1" above the rice line. Start with 1 teaspoon of salt; stir and keep adding and mixing well until you are satisfied with the taste. Bring to a boil and cook over high heat until most of the water is absorbed. Once the water has been absorbed, stir gently from bottom to top – once or twice only, cover and turn the heat down to low. Cook for 30 minutes or until the rice is tender.

Stirring the rice after it has begun cooking may cause it to get sticky or "amogollao."

Any rice that sticks to the bottom of the pot is called "pegao" and is crispy and tasty and a favorite of all true Puerto Ricans. However, not everyone is skilled at making pegao – it is an art. To make great pegao make sure to use plenty of oil. Cook for about 10 minutes longer so the pegao gets crispy and keep your eye on it. Each time you cook rice – check to see how long it takes to make pegao just the way your family likes it. Finally – if you want a lot of pegao – use a bigger caldero which, of course, will have a larger bottom surface.

Pollo en Fricasse (Chicken Stew) – for 8

Ingredients:

10 tablespoons sofrito with olive oil (see page 5)
10 full chicken legs, fat removed and most, although not all, skin
5 potatoes, peeled and cut into 4
4 large carrots, skinned and cut
2 small cans tomato sauce
3 packets sazón
Salt and pepper to taste



Directions:

Note: Sofrito has olive oil in it but you can use 1 – 2 additional tablespoons on bottom of very large pan. Sauté sofrito for 1 minute or so.
Add cleaned chicken, sazón, pepper, mix and let chicken brown a little.
Add about ½ cup water mix, add potatoes and carrots and cover till cooked.
Keep checking on moisture; the stew should have some gravy but not be watery.
If needed add a little more tomato sauce or paste.

Habichuelas Rojas (Red Beans) – for 8

Ingredients:

2 lbs. dry red beans (small red beans)
5 tablespoons sofrito (see page 5)
4 tablespoons oil
3 packets sazón
1 ½ small cans tomato sauce
1 small bottle of olives and capers
½ lb. diced smoked ham or chorizo
Optional: yellow pumpkin “calabacito de casco” or butternut squash



Directions:

Soften dry beans by covering with boiling water and letting sit overnight, then cooking them until soft in water to cover (1 – 2 hours, unless you use a pressure cooker).

In a large pan, saute chorizo (if using that) and sofrito in oil. Add cooked beans and some of their liquid, 3 packets sazón, salt and pepper to taste, tomato sauce, olives and capers, and ham (if using that).

A delicious addition is yellow pumpkin or squash. Skin a piece about ½ lb in weight, cut in small chunks and add with the spices, etc.

Mix and let simmer for 20 minutes or till the vegetable is cooked.

Sofrito (seasoning base for many dishes)

garlic cloves, peeled
fresh cilantro, washed and shaken dry
onions, peeled and roughly chopped.
olive (or other) oil

Combine 1 part garlic, 2 parts cilantro, and 3 parts onion in a food processor or blender and chop/grind together finely in enough oil to process to a flowing paste. Use this to fry as the spicing basis for bean and rice dishes and stews. It is fried briefly, until the oil begins to separate off, before other ingredients are added.

Ensalada de Bacalao (Warm Codfish Salad) – for 8

Ingredients:

2 lbs. dry/salted bacalao, desalted
6 large white potatoes
2 lbs. carrots
1 dozen eggs, hard boiled
1 large red onion, peeled and sliced into thin rings
3 tomatoes, sliced
½ green bell pepper, thinly sliced
½ red bell pepper, thinly sliced
½ cup Spanish olives
Powdered garlic
2 avocados, sliced
Salt and pepper to taste
½ cup olive oil
1 small jar of red pimientos, sliced



Directions:

Rinse codfish under warm running water to rinse off excess salt. Then add to a pot of boiling water, let it come up to one boil. Drain the water, add fresh water and boil again. Drain and let it cool. Shred or pull apart into bite-size pieces using your fingers. Set aside to let drain and cool.

Peel and cut the carrots and potatoes into large cubes and boil them (separately) until tender (do not overcook), and cool. Hard boil the eggs, cool, and peel.

Place the fish in the salad bowl as the first layer. Add the other ingredients except for the olive oil and hard boiled eggs. Make other layers with the codfish and all the ingredients until all is used up. Season with garlic powder, salt, and pepper. Drizzle olive oil and seasoning over the salad. Gently toss until all ingredients are well coated with the dressing. Add sliced boiled eggs & garnish with red pimientos.

Flan de Almendras (Almond Flan) – for 8

Ingredients:

3/4 cup sugar to caramelize pan
1/4 lb. shelled almonds
13 unsalted soda crackers
8 eggs
1/2 tsp. salt
1 quart whole milk
3 tablespoons margarine
1 1/2 cups sugar
1 tablespoon vanilla



Directions:

1. Heat oven to 400 degrees.
2. Find two containers of metal or glass (rectangular is usual) – one needs to fit into the other. The inside one is the one you will make the flan in (use whatever size would normally hold a full cake mix). The larger one holds the water in which the flan gets cooked. One is nested inside the other.
3. Caramelize the smaller rectangular container by melting 3/4 cup of the sugar in a frying pan on low heat. As it melts, it will start turning a medium brown color. Stir continuously to keep the sugar from burning. You know it is done when it looks like maple syrup—clear medium brown thick liquid. Be careful...it is VERY HOT! Immediately pour the melted sugar into the rectangular container and quickly turn the container back and forth to coat the bottom. Again – be careful. Set aside.
4. Put all the rest of the ingredients into a blender and blend.
5. Pour into the caramelized container.
6. Carefully place the caramelized container with the flan mixture into the larger one. Put on shelf in oven. Pour enough water into the larger container to reach 3/4 of the way up the smaller container. Be careful not to get water into the flan itself! This process is called “Bano Maria” and is used to keep the caramel from burning as it would if exposed directly to the heat of the oven.
7. Cook about one hour at 400 then lower to 375. You know it’s done when a flat knife inserted into the center comes out clean.
8. Cool completely in the fridge. It is usually best to make the flan the day before you want it.
9. It is traditionally served unmolded. The nuts will make a crunchy layer followed by the custard, topped by the liquidly caramel sugar. However, it is also fine to serve it right from the pan as the nut layer is an attractive topping.

Flan de Jugo de Pina (Pineapple Juice Flan) - for 8

Ingredients:

1 cup of sugar for caramel
2 tsp. cornstarch
1/4 tsp. salt
15 ounce can pineapple juice
2 cups sugar
8 eggs



Directions:

1. Make caramel by melting 1 cup of sugar directly in a frying pan until golden brown (be careful- it is very hot)
2. In a mixing bowl, combine the cornstarch, salt, 2 tbsp. of pineapple juice, and 2 cups of sugar.
3. Transfer to a blender. Add 8 eggs, two by two to mixture, mixing only enough to pull mix together.
4. Add the rest of the pineapple juice, mix well and run through a sieve if needed.
5. Pour into caramelized mold.
6. Put mold into another larger pan; add enough water to larger pan to roughly cover the bottom half of the flan mold.
7. Cook about one hour or until knife inserted into middle comes out clean.
8. Refrigerate overnight.

A couple of local markets where you can buy Latin ingredients:

El Guero, 850 N. Farnsworth Ave., Aurora

La Chiquita, 133 W. Roosevelt Ave., West Chicago