

Cuban Food

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You don't have to travel far for the flavors of Cuba.

LAST YEAR, WHEN THE UNITED STATES and Cuba reestablished diplomatic relations, many Americans traveled to Cuba for the first time. I was not among them. So I decided to explore this Caribbean island from the comfort of my kitchen with Chef David Gear as my tour guide.

In his role as executive chef at Seasons Culinary Services, a boutique food service management and catering company, Gear calls on techniques and ingredients of various world cuisines to create inventive, flavorful dishes. When I caught up with him, he'd just taught "The Cuban Table" through Albertson's Cooking School and Main Line School Night.

"Cuban food is peasant food," explains Gear. "It's got lots of influences—African, Spanish, Chinese—and while it's often salty, sweet or bitter, it's generally not spicy." He also emphasizes that although Cuban, Mexican and other Latin and Caribbean cuisines share similarities, they have their own unique identities.

Cases in point: Cuban food is not "tortilla-driven," and it generally does not rely on fresh herbs. It also often uses plantains when they are green and therefore more savory than sweet—like a potato with banana essence.

In his classes, Gear introduces students to Cuban food's two main flavor profiles—sofrito and mojo (also called mojito). While every Cuban cook puts a personal



twist on these flavor combinations, sofrito usually includes onions, garlic, sweet or hot pepper, tomatoes, cumin and bay leaves. Mojo incorporates sour orange juice (or a mix of orange and lime juices), garlic, olive oil and oregano. In addition, warming spices—like clove and nutmeg as well as capers, olives and raisins—add depth and complexity

to numerous Cuban dishes.

As for the main ingredients, let's just say carnivores find a lot to love on Cuban plates. Chicken, pork and goat are mainstays as are many inexpensive, lean cuts of beef that take kindly to braising. The popular ropa vieja ("old clothes") is made with flank or skirt steak, cooked low and slow then shredded. Gear's favorite is brisket cooked for 14 to 16 hours, yielding tender meat and a rich broth. And a Cuban meal would be incomplete without frijoles negros (black beans) and arroz (rice).

For a sweet finish, plain desserts—what many think of as comfort foods—top the list. There's tres leches cake, ("three milks"), flans (rich egg custards) and many versions of arroz con leche (rice pudding).

Whether you take a plane or travel by way of your kitchen table, the flavors of Cuba are worth a trip.



Bala del Porci

Cuban-Style Chicken Fricassee

You can find fricassees in many cultures, but this chicken stew showcases *mojo*, a marinade central to Cuban cuisine. Recipe courtesy of David Grear, *Seasons*.

- 1/3 C. fresh lime juice
- 1/3 C. fresh orange juice
- 5 cloves garlic, lightly smashed
- Kosher salt and ground black pepper, to taste
- 6 chicken thighs, 1 per person
- 3 oz. oil
- 1 green bell pepper, stemmed, seeded and thinly sliced
- 1 white onion, thinly sliced
- 1 C. semi-sweet white wine such as an Argentinian sauvignon blanc
- 1 lb. Yukon potatoes, peeled and cut into medium-size pieces
- 1/3 cup pimento-stuffed queen olives
- 2 Tb. capers
- 1/4 C. raisins
- 1, 28-oz. can plum tomatoes, chopped
- 1/2 C. chicken stock
- 1 C. frozen peas

In a bowl, stir together lime and orange juices, garlic, salt and pepper. Add chicken and refrigerate for 1 hour.

Heat oil in a saucepan over medium heat. Remove chicken from marinade; pat dry using paper towels. Reserve marinade.

Sauté chicken until browned, 3–4 minutes per side. Transfer chicken to a plate.

Add the pepper and onion to the pan and cook until onion is translucent, 3–5 minutes. Add wine and cook, scraping up everything from the bottom of the pan, until it has reduced by half, 3–6 minutes.

Put chicken back into the pan and add the rest of the marinade, potatoes, olives, capers, raisins, tomatoes, salt, pepper and stock. Reduce the heat to low and cook, until chicken and potatoes are tender, about 12–15 minutes.

Stir in peas at the last minute. Serve over rice.

Makes 6 servings.

Ropa Vieja

This dish is tailor-made for the slow cooker. Its name (“old clothes”) refers to the tattered look of the steak after it’s been cooked and shredded.

2 lbs. flank steak

- 1 1/2 Tb. Adobo seasoning*
- 3 oz. tomato paste
- 1/4 C. plus 1 Tb. red wine vinegar
- 1 C. beef broth
- 1/2 tsp. cumin
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 5 large garlic cloves, roughly chopped
- 1 red pepper, cut into strips
- 1 green pepper, cut into strips
- 1 large onion, cut in half and sliced into 1/4” pieces
- 1/2 C. green olives (with or without pimentos)

*I used Goya brand Adobo with Pepper.



Rub the flank steak on both sides with Adobo. Allow to sit for 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, in a small bowl, whisk together tomato paste, vinegar, beef broth and cumin. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Place flank steak in slow cooker. Scatter garlic cloves on top. Then add peppers and onions. Pour in tomato sauce mixture. Cook on high for 4 hours.

Using two forks, shred beef. (You can do this right in your slow cooker.) If beef doesn’t shred easily, cook it another 1/2 hour or more.

Turn heat to warm and let sit for 15 minutes or more. Mix in olives. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve over rice.

Makes 6 servings.

Cuban Tres Leches Cake

This cake (meaning “three milks”) is popular in Cuba and many other Latin countries with recipes passed down from generation to generation. Here is Chef David Grear’s version of the classic.

For the cake:

- Butter for greasing pan
- 1 C. sugar
- 6 large eggs, separated (3 of the whites will be reserved for meringue topping)

- 1/3 C. coconut milk
- 3/4 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1 C. all-purpose flour
- 1 1/2 tsp. baking powder
- 3/4 tsp. cream of tartar

For milk syrup:

- 1, 12-oz. can evaporated milk
- 1 C. sweetened condensed milk
- 1 C. heavy cream
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1 Tb. dark rum

For the meringue topping:

- 3 reserved egg whites (see cake above)
- 3/4 C. white sugar
- 1/4 C. water
- 2 Tb. sugar

To make the cake:

Preheat oven to 350°. Butter a 13x9” baking dish.

In a large bowl, beat 3/4 C. sugar and all 6 egg yolks until they are fluffy, about 7 minutes. Fold in the coconut milk, vanilla, flour and baking powder.

In another bowl, beat 3 egg whites to soft peaks, adding the cream of tartar after a minute. Slowly add the remaining 1/4 C. sugar and continue beating until the egg whites are firm.

Fold the white mixture into the yolk mixture. Pour the batter into the baking dish.

Bake the cake until it’s firm and a toothpick comes out clean, about 35–45 minutes. Let the cake cool completely. Unmold onto a platter. Pierce the cake all over with a fork or toothpick.

To make milk syrup:

Combine evaporated milk, condensed milk, heavy cream, vanilla and rum in a bowl. Whisk together. Pour the syrup over the cake.

To make the meringue topping:

Place 3/4 C. sugar in a heavy saucepan with 1/4 C. water. Cook on high heat to the soft ball stage (240° on a candy thermometer) about 8–10 minutes.

Meanwhile, beat the 3 remaining egg whites to soft peaks. Add the 2 Tb. sugar and continue beating to stiff peaks.

Pour the boiling sugar syrup in a slow stream into the stiff egg whites. Continue beating until the mixture is cool to the touch. Hot syrup cooks the egg whites.

Using a spatula, spread the top and sides of the cake with a thick layer of the meringue. Refrigerate the cake for a few hours before serving.

Makes 8 servings.

Cuban-Stuffed Pork Chops

What's better than a Cuban sandwich? A Cuban sandwich stuffed inside a pork chop! Chef David Grear pays homage to Cubans' love of pork in this inventive dish.

- 1 C. fresh orange juice
- ¼ C. fresh lime juice
- ¼ C. lemon juice
- 2 Tb. fresh oregano
- 8 garlic cloves, chopped
- 1 Tb. ground cumin
- 3 Tb. palm or brown sugar
- ¼ C. oil (cook's choice but **not** olive oil)
- 4, 5-oz. pork chops, pounded thin, about ¼"
- Kosher salt and ground black pepper, to taste
- 1 Tb. Dijon mustard
- 8 slices Swiss cheese
- 8 slices ham
- 2 dill pickles, sliced thin
- Oil as needed to cook cutlets
- 2 Tb. cilantro leaves and stems, chopped

In a bowl, stir together orange juice, lime juice, lemon juice, oregano, garlic, cumin, sugar and ¼ C. oil.

Add the pork and coat all the cutlets. Refrigerate and let them marinate for at least 2 hours.

Take the pork cutlets out of the marinade and pat dry. Reserve marinade.

Put the cutlets on a table and season them with salt and pepper. Paint one side of each cutlet with Dijon mustard.

On the mustard-painted side, place a piece of Swiss cheese, 2 pieces of ham, a couple pieces of pickle and another piece of cheese.

Fold one side over to the other to make a half moon shape. Repeat with the rest of the ingredients until they are all used. Season with salt and pepper.

Put a little oil into a sauté pan. Add cutlets and cook 2–3 minutes on each side until they are browned and the cheese is melted. Remove from pan.

Add reserved marinade and cilantro to the sauté pan you used to cook cutlets.

Bring to a boil. Season with salt and pepper as needed and pour over cutlets.

Makes 4 servings.

Ham Croquettes

Crispy on the outside and soft in the center, these croquettes deliver a big ham flavor and are very filling. You can also substitute cooked chicken. I adapted the recipe from Martha Cortina's Authentic Cuban Cooking.



- 1½ Tb. butter
- 1 Tb. finely chopped onion
- ¼ C. flour
- ½ C. whole milk, room temperature or warmed
- ¼ tsp. salt
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1 lb. ground ham
- 2 Tb. finely chopped parsley
- Garlic salt to taste
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1½ C. breadcrumbs
- Oil for frying (I used canola.)

Melt butter over medium heat and cook onion for a minute. Do not let onion brown. Add flour and stir to combine. Whisk in milk, salt and pepper and cook until the consistency is very thick and resembles mashed potatoes.

In a large bowl, combine “mashed potatoes” with ham, parsley and garlic salt. Cover and refrigerate for 15–30 minutes so mixture will be cold enough to hold its shape.

Shape into 8–10 cylinders (about 3” long and 1” thick). Roll in bread crumbs, egg and in bread crumbs again. Place on a plate, cover with plastic wrap and freeze for ½ hour.

In a large skillet, heat ¼” oil to 350°. Fry croquettes until golden. To make sure you end up with crispy exteriors, do not over-

crowd the pan. (You'll probably have to do two batches.) Drain on paper towels.

Makes 8–10 croquettes.

Piñon (Cuban-style meat and plantain pie)

This Latin “lasagna” is also popular in Puerto Rico. The recipe comes courtesy of my friend, Sarah Lopez. In addition to seasoning with salt and pepper, Sarah sometimes adds Goya's Adobo, Sazon, or Ham Concentrate.

For the filling:

- 2 lbs. lean ground meat (beef or pork)
- 2 medium onions, chopped
- 1 green pepper, chopped
- 2, 14-oz. cans chopped tomatoes
- ½ C. pimento-stuffed olives, cut in half
- Generous ½ C. raisins
- 4 garlic cloves (or more to taste), finely chopped
- 2 Tb. ground cumin
- 2 tsp. crushed oregano
- Salt, pepper and seasoning, to taste (see headnote)

For the plantains:

- 6 ripe plantains (yellow with dark spots) or frozen (El Sembrador brand is good.)
- ⅓–½ C. olive or canola oil

For assembly:

- 4–5 eggs
- 2 Tb. water
- 1 lb. grated white cheese (Cotija and farmer's cheese both work)

To make the filling:

Heat a large nonstick skillet and crumble meat into it. Cook over medium high heat, stirring and breaking up any clumps, until no longer pink, about 5 minutes.

Add onion and bell peppers and stirring frequently, cook until vegetables are softened, juices evaporate and meat browns, about 6 minutes. Stir in tomatoes with reserved juice, olives, raisins, garlic, cumin, oregano and seasoning to taste.

Simmer, partially covered and stirring occasionally, until most of the liquid evaporates, about 30 minutes. Cook filling uncovered. (Filling may be made 2 days in advance, covered and refrigerated.)

To make the plantains:

Cut ends from plantains and peel. Diagonally cut plantains into ⅓”-thick slices.

In a large nonstick skillet, heat $\frac{1}{3}$ C. oil over moderately high heat until hot but not smoking.

Sauté plantains in batches, without crowding, until golden brown, 1–2 minutes per side. Add remaining oil to skillet as necessary. With a slotted spatula, transfer plantains to paper towels to drain.

To assemble:

Preheat oven to 350°. Oil a 9x11" (about 1½" deep) baking dish.

In small bowl, beat together eggs and water. Pour half of mixture into baking dish, tilting to coat bottom and sides.

Tightly layer one-third of the plantains over the bottom of the baking dish. Spread half of meat filling on top and sprinkle with half of cheese. Arrange half of remaining plantains on top. Then top with the rest of the meat filling and then the rest of the cheese. Top pie with remaining plantains. Pour the rest of the egg mixture over the top, tilting dish so egg spreads to the edges.

Cover with foil and bake in the middle of the oven until heated through and bub-

bling at edges, about 1 hour.

Makes 8 servings.

Coconut Rice Pudding

I adapted this recipe from the cookbook Three Guys from Miami Celebrate Cuban.

- 2 C. uncooked white rice
- 4 C. water
- 6–8 (or more) very thin 1–2" ribbons of lemon zest
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. salt
- 2 C. unsweetened coconut milk
- 3 C. whole milk
- 1 C. sweetened coconut flakes
- $\frac{3}{4}$ –1 C. sugar
- 2 C. whipping cream
- 1 mango

Combine rice, water, lemon zest ribbons, cinnamon sticks and salt in a large saucepan. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat to a simmer and cook uncovered until rice is soft. Remove cinnamon sticks.

Stir in the coconut milk, whole milk, coconut flakes and sugar. Stirring frequently, cook on very low heat for an

hour until liquid is absorbed.

Stir in the cream and heat through.

Top with thin mango slices or cubes.

Makes 8–10 servings. ♦

Laura traces her love of all things culinary to the first time she leafed through her mother's Betty Crocker's Cooky Book—which still occupies a place of honor among her 600+ cookbooks. A passionate supporter of local food, she co-founded a farmers market, judges area food contests, and anticipates restaurant openings with the excitement most people reserve for winning a Mega Millions jackpot.



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