

# *History and Influences of Dominican Cuisine*

Like many traditions that have survived in the Dominican Republic, the cuisine is a vibrant mix of cultures, a blend of Spanish, African and even Arawaks indigenous (Taínos) influences. The particular type of cuisine is known as “comida criolla”, which is also found in other Caribbean areas and adapts classic Spanish and African recipes to indigenous cooking methods.

The technology of barbecue, today popular and considered exotic in our country, originated from the barbacoa (from which it takes its name), the method the Tainos used to roast their food. Hutias, iguanas, birds, fish and seafood were roasted on this primitive grill.

One of the most produced foods, cazabe, made of yuca, would become, because of its excellent preservation period, the “bread of the Conquista.” In 1783, Moreau de St. Mery observed that bread was sometimes made from bananas, corn and cazabe. This bread was, by 1860, named the “arepa”.

Christopher Columbus and the chroniclers of the Indies, like Fernández de Oviedo, left us with their impressions of the fruits of the island. The sweet potatoes, the admiral tells us approvingly in his diary, are “del grosor de la pierna”, the meat on the bone of Hispaniola. Fernández de Oviedo, speaking of the loquat, exclaimed that this fruit, upon “putting it in the mouth, as soon as it is bitten, a bold flavor enters the palate, and at that moment an aroma rises to the nose and head that is unequalled.”

With the development of cattle-raising as the main productive activity of the Colony, the high consumption of meat began, especially of mountain cattle, which filled the plate of Spaniards, slaves and those from the New World. This diet was completed by, beans, tubers and the banana, brought from Africa as food for the workers, which eventually extended its blessings to the rest of the population. Plantain is today is one of the favorites ingredients boiled known as “mangú,” “pasteles en hojas,” which are wrapped turnovers cooked in banana leaves, and fried as delicious “tostones”.

Africans also brought their rich casseroles, stews, and meat dishes featuring braised goat, pork and chicken rinds that gave birth to the national dish: “Sancocho”. Sazón, or Sofrito as it is known throughout Latin America, forms the basis for a vast range of food recipes in the Dominican Republic. It is a sautéed mix of local herbs and spices that is used to bring out the flavors of the dishes.

Later on other, by the end of the 19th Centuries as a result of significant migration to the Dominican Republic from China, Italy, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine new ingredients and techniques infiltrated into the Dominicans kitchens introducing.

There are some truly unique drinks in the Dominican Republic. One of the most popular are “Morir Soñado”, Mabí, a drink made primarily from tree bark, and Mama Juana, an indigenous drink made from rum, red wine and honey which is left to soak with tree bark and herbs.

Desserts in the Dominican Republic are typically sweet. Most are based on milk and fruit. Some are original Dominican sweets and puddings, while others are shared with neighboring nations and Spanish cousins. Classic Dominican desserts include “majarete” (sweet corn pudding) and the strangely named “mala rabia” a sweet, syrupy compote made with sweet potatoes and fruits such as pineapple. Pineapple, orange, grapefruit, papaya and coconut are the basic ingredients in simple sweets made with fruit and sugar, sometimes spiced with a bit of cinnamon or nutmeg.

With its vibrant variety and flavorful combinations, the food of the Dominican Republic is definitely worth a try!