

SPICY-SWEET CUBAN CLASSICS

What's What in Cuban Cooking

Sofrito

A sofrito serves as the fundamental flavor base for many Cuban dishes, including Picadillo. The combination of onion, green pepper, and garlic (and often cumin and oregano) is a close relative of the French mirepoix, which features onion, carrot, and celery.

Mojo

This tangy-tart marinade is used to add Cuban flavor to all types of meats—from flank or skirt steak to roasted pork and chicken. This powerful solution traditionally contains a hefty amount of garlic, sour orange juice, cumin, and dried oregano.

Black Beans and Rice (Arroz Moro)

Perhaps the most ubiquitous dish in Cuba, this simple but hearty meal is a staple in home kitchens. A sofrito builds a base of flavor and infuses the beans as they cook. Rice is added to the mix (sometimes pork, too) for a stick-to-your-ribs meal with knockout flavor.

Tropical Produce in and Around Cuba



Plantain

This large, starchy variety of banana is popular in Latin American, African, and Asian cuisines. Plantains mature from green to yellow to black. Though fully ripe plantains can be eaten out of hand, most plantains are cooked when they are still underripe. Their flavor is reminiscent of squash and potato, and they have a dense, spongy texture. Peel and fry, sauté, or boil.



Cassava

Also called yuca or manioc, cassava has a dry, super-starchy texture and a mild flavor that is vaguely reminiscent of popcorn, according to tasters at the test kitchen. Although raw cassava can be poisonous, thorough cooking eliminates any danger. Steam, boil, or fry.



Sour Orange

If you've tasted bracingly bitter Seville orange marmalade, you've eaten sour oranges. This orange is also used in much Latin American cooking, which is why in the U.S. you see it in Latin food stores. Use the juice from sour oranges (along with oregano, garlic, and cumin) to make a tasty marinade for grilled chicken. If you can't find it, use a test kitchen trick to mimic its flavor: Combine lime and orange zests with ordinary orange juice.

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Papaya

Papayas come in a wide range of shapes, colors, and sizes (they can weigh up to 20 pounds!). Their juicy, custard-smooth flesh holds hundreds of edible, peppery seeds. Papaya is very sweet but musky, like overripe cantaloupe. Ripe papaya is best eaten raw, but unripe papaya can be shredded and used in salads or cooked like a vegetable. Ripe papayas will yield to gentle pressure.



Guava

The pebbly skin of this fruit can be green or purple, and its soft flesh can range from stark white to bright pink. Guava's complex flavor is honey-sweet and funky, with hints of berry and pear. Fresh guavas are riddled with rock-hard seeds and are highly susceptible to fruit fly infestation: We recommend sticking with prepared guava juices or purees.



Pineapple

Most Cuban-produced pineapples are the same extra-sweet or gold variety as Costa Rican-grown pineapples, which are consistently honey-sweet in comparison to the acidic Hawaiian pineapples with greenish (not yellow) skin. Pineapples will not ripen further once picked, so be sure to purchase golden, fragrant fruit that gives slightly when pressed. Store unpeeled pineapples at room temperature.



Mango

Native to Southeast Asia, mangos have sweet, floral, and silky-smooth flesh that clings to a large, flat pit. Mangos are very fragrant when ripe; they will ripen at room temperature. To determine ripeness, look for flesh that yields slightly when pressed but doesn't feel mushy, similar to the ideal texture of a peach.

How to Cut Up a Mango



1. Cut thin slice from one end of mango so it sits flat on counter.



2. Resting mango on trimmed end, cut off skin in thin strips from top to bottom.



3. Cut down along each side of flat pit to remove flesh.



4. Trim around pit to remove any remaining flesh. Chop or slice according to recipe.