

WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



EDITED BY KALIA BROOKS, CHERYL
FINLEY, ELLYN TOSCANO AND
DEBORAH WILLIS



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40. Coconuts and Collards

Recipes and Stories from Puerto Rico to the Deep South¹

Von Diaz

La Cocina de Tata

I had my last guava the day we left Puerto Rico. It was large and juicy, almost red in the center, and so fragrant that I didn't want to eat it because I would lose the smell. All the way to the airport I scratched at it with my teeth, making little dents in the skin, chewing small pieces with my front teeth so I could feel the texture against my tongue, the tiny pink pellets of sweet.

Esmeralda Santiago, *When I Was Puerto Rican*

Already an insomniac at age eleven, I had a hard enough time sleeping in my air-conditioned room back home in Georgia. Now in Puerto Rico, I was on a hard mattress on the floor, with a rusty box fan blowing hot air across my body. It was impossible to sleep there. Most nights I just stared at the cracks in the ceiling and worried. *How many awkward conversations in broken Spanish will I have? Who's going to make fun of how gringa I am?*

It was my second full summer in PR, and things at home were a mess. The last thing I remembered before getting on the plane—this is

¹ Recipes from Von Diaz, *Coconuts and Collards: Recipes and Stories from Puerto Rico to the Deep South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018). Reprinted with permission of the University Press of Florida.

back when folks could take you all the way to the gate—was the dark circles under my mother's eyes and my little sister sobbing.

I hadn't wanted to go to Puerto Rico that summer. I wanted to stay home, watch television, and hang out in the playground with the other kids in our apartment complex. But my mom couldn't afford camp and I was too old for daycare, so I was shipped off to PR... to suffer. My parents had split up earlier that year, and—still in the Army at that time—Papi had been given orders to go to Korea. He'd already been pretty absent, but he was literally on the other side of the world from me at that time.

It wasn't *all* bad. I liked traveling, and the beach, and (most of) my family. But more than anything else on the island, I *loved* Puerto Rican food and my grandmother Tata. And as I reluctantly boarded the plane, my thoughts turned to *bacalaitos*, *alcapurrias*, *aguacates*, and *chicharrón*. And Tata, my favorite person in the world, was a beacon of light in my otherwise dismal prepubescence.

On that particular morning in Altamesa, sweaty and miserable, I let a smile creep across my face because it was Saturday—Tata's day off. I caught a whiff of her Benson & Hedges cigarettes and the pungent, burnt smell of the *cafetera* sputtering. I got up, put on my pink plastic-rimmed glasses and my *chancletas*, and shuffled out to greet her.

Tata was standing in the living room wearing a loose-fitting pink cotton tank top and pale orange shorts, her hair in rollers, a cigarette in her mouth as she finished her morning routine. She'd already watered the dozen or so plants on her *marquesina* (front patio) and hosed down and squeegeed the tile floors and concrete walls.

Her *marquesina* was a mini botanical garden. Seven spider plants hung side by side on the railing, their leaves making it difficult to see the street. The floor, side tables, and shelves were covered with potted ferns, bromeliads, and philodendrons. The entire porch was surrounded with a decorative grate painted white, its bars forming an intricate interlocking geometric pattern. Its front door was wound with a heavy-duty steel chain and two padlocks because she'd been robbed four times in the last three years. The wooden cocktail bar against the right side of the porch, facing the street, was decorated with figurines, photographs, and paintings of Boxers, her favorite dog, which she spent much of my mother's early childhood breeding, training, and exhibiting.

"Ay, mira quien esta despierta!" (Look who's awake!), Tata said, giving me a toothy smile. I learned later those weren't her real teeth. *"Que te preparo?"* (What can I make for you?)

Because I never slept well, I rarely woke up hungry. But when I was in Puerto Rico, I ate whenever there was food.

"No se Tata," I replied slyly, with a yawn. *"Que hay?"*

"Conflake?"

"No..." I replied.

"Una tostada con jelly?"

"Eh, no. I'm not really hungry. Don't worry about me," I lied.

"Ay, yo se!" she said, her eyebrows bouncing mischievously. *"Un sanguich de picadillo!"*

A meat sandwich for breakfast?! Yes.

Most folks are familiar with a handful of Puerto Rican foods. Mofongo, pernil, and picadillo. If you don't know the latter, it's ground beef cooked with sofrito and other spices, with green olives and (sometimes) raisins added. It's often stuffed into empanadas and other *cuchifritos* (deep-fried snacks), but my grandmother always kept some on hand like other folks keep lunchmeat. And I usually just ate it straight out of the fridge—cold, with a spoon.

I sat on a bar stool at the counter and watched her carefully orchestrated movements. Tata's kitchen was incredibly modest—only slightly larger than the one I would later have in my early thirties in New York's East Harlem, with one counter, a small sink, and a four-burner gas range. She spread butter on a piece of white sandwich bread, then placed it in the center of a sandwich press. Next came a slice of Kraft American cheese, a heaping scoop of picadillo, and another slice of cheese. Then she topped it all off with more buttered bread and pulled down the press handle to toast. The whole time I talked, telling her about my latest dream, mouth watering as I rattled on to pass the time. She opened the press and there were two perfect triangles with crisped edges, the caramelized filling clinging to tiny eruptions in the bread.

I marveled at how a woman born in the Dominican Republic, who lived most of her life in Puerto Rico, could make what was ultimately a perfect grilled cheese sandwich. But then I remembered her roots.

Tata was born Sara Canario Linares in the Dominican Republic in 1936, when Rafael Trujillo was at his height of power. My great grandfather Faustino was the owner of Santo Domingo Motors, which was one of the only car dealerships in the DR at the time. One night, when my grandmother was six years old, three men came to the house and shot her father. She, along with her mother and sister, Zora (whose mother was their housekeeper, though they had the same father), fled the country in the trunk of a Cadillac and ended up in Biloxi, Mississippi, where two of her aunts lived. She spent most of her childhood and teenage years living in that small coastal town in the Deep South.

Her life after was a whirlwind. She studied pre-med at Loyola in New Orleans, had a short-lived marriage to an Italian military officer that resulted in my aunt Sara, and ultimately landed her in Puerto Rico—where she lived most of her life. And where she became the best cook in the world.

That morning in Puerto Rico, we returned to the *marquesina*, me with my breakfast on a small white plate and Tata with a cigarette and a strong, sugary, black cup of coffee. I took a bite of my *sanguich* and molten cheese burst out of its toasty, buttery casing, burning the roof of my mouth with creamy, salty-sweet filling. I didn't care.

The air was hot and thick with the smells of car exhaust and hot asphalt, coffee, cigarette smoke, and cheesy meat. I took another bite and got a briny pimento-stuffed olive, a sweet, plump black raisin in the next. Tata watched me intently, with the eyes of a chef who knows a good eater. I chattered on in broken Spanglish between bites, because I'd been practicing my Spanish and she spoke perfect English.

I finished, wiping off my beaming, euphoric face with a paper towel. She smiled slyly.

"Quieres otra?" (Do you want another?), she asked.

I was stuffed and wasn't even hungry to begin with. "Si," I replied, grinning.

The rest of my summer in Puerto Rico went pretty much the same. Folks fed me too much; I ate everything and got round.

But when I wasn't eating or talking to Tata (or both), I was pretty miserable. I sulked, complained, sat as close to the fan as I could, craved TV, read *Jurassic Park* for the fifth time, and become agoraphobic. Kids my age and adults alike constantly mocked my shitty Spanish, and even though they jokingly said my mispronunciations and misused words

were cute, they also laughed at me when I used *usted* instead of *tu*. When I went to stores by myself, I never seemed to move fast enough, and cashiers would impatiently yell at me so rapidly that I couldn't figure out what I had done.

The island seemed to be against me. I was constantly sunburned, whereas my family members never seemed to even get pink. Mosquitoes loved me, even biting my eyelids. The oppressive heat made me sweat constantly, which meant I was always self-conscious, grumpy, and exhausted. It all made me feel incredibly insecure and alone on the island where I was born but no longer felt I belonged—although I wanted to badly.

But Tata seemed to get it, and she understood that food was a way home for me and a strong bond between us. In many ways, I think food was a similar comfort for her.

That summer, she started teaching me how to cook well. I had some basics under my belt, but she took me on a journey full of new discoveries. First, she let me make *mojo caliente*, a warm sauce made by mashing garlic and salt in a *pilón*, or wooden mortar and pestle. Together we brought olive oil to a low simmer and she showed me how to carefully pour the oil into the *pilón*; garlic sizzled, filling the air with its smell and that of seasoned wood. We added lime juice and black pepper and saved it for dinner when we'd pour it over yucca or dip in some bread.

Each day, she showed me something new. She drove out of the way to get the best *mantecaditos*—a cookie similar to shortbread, often made with lard and decorated with rainbow sprinkles—from a hidden bakery in Guaynabo, and took me all the way to the coast to have *alcapurrias de langosta*, a root vegetable fritter stuffed with lobster.

On one of those weekend trips to Luquillo, Tata spotted a *kiosko*, or roadside food stand, along the highway and said it looked like a good one.

"Why this one?" I asked. It was barely a shack; four wooden poles held up a thatched palm leaf roof and a limp sign read COCO FRESCO, BACALAÍTOS. A man and woman sat in white plastic chairs under the shade of a palm tree next to a large bin filled with ice and green coconuts, their little shack outfitted with two deep fryers.

"Tu ves ahí," (You see there) she said. "They only have coco and *bacalaítos*. That means they're experts at that."

We pulled over; palm trees lining the road to our left, the coastline peeking through. I leapt out of the car and was hit with a burst of salty sea air. The vendors looked in my direction, startled by this enthusiastic child running full-speed toward their stand.

"*Un bacalaíto, por favor,*" I said, breathless, having perfected that phrase.

"*Uno nada más?*" the vendor asked, winking. How did he *know*?

Bacalaítos are flat salty codfish funnel cakes—crisped and golden brown on the outside, moist and chewy on the inside. The batter is subtly sweet with a hint of funky fishiness that accentuates the sweet/savory combination that is such a signature of Puerto Rican food.

We walked across the highway to the ocean, taking our fritters and coconuts with us. The vendor had cut the tops off our coconuts and sliced pieces of hard shell off the sides for us to use as scoops. We sipped from our coconuts, then scooped bits of coconut meat out, licking our fingers. The fresh coconut meat tasted more like avocado than sweetened grated coconut—creamy, rich, and barely sweet.

Tata and I sat side by side on the sand and looked out past the sea. If I have one regret, it's that I didn't share more with her about what was going on in my life back home and how much I struggled to feel like I belonged on the island. I wanted so badly for her to think I was okay. And maybe part of me thought that if I stuffed myself with Puerto Rican food, with *her* food, I could somehow unlock the secrets of that place, that identity, its history, and this nagging sense that I belonged there even though it didn't seem to want me. I think she would have understood what I was going through much better than I could have imagined.

Recipes

The recipes in this chapter are largely adaptations of classic Puerto Rican dishes. They are inspired by cookbooks including *Cocina Criolla* (Carmen Aboy Valldejuli, 1954), *Cocine a Gusto* (Berta Cabanillas, 1954), and *Cocinando en San Germán* (Marina Martínez de Irizarry, 1989), as well as my family's home recipes. My goal of this chapter is to lighten up heavy dishes and make the flavors brighter and more balanced.

If you're looking for the kinds of meals a Puerto Rican abuela might have made, here's where you'll find it. You can pick and choose from

among these recipes or make a fabulous, complete classic Puerto Rican banquet.

- Culantro Chimichurri
- Salsa Ajili-Mojili
- Picadillo
- Sanguiches de Picadillo (Picadillo Sandwiches)
- Brussels Sprouts with Chorizo Sofrito
- Sancocho
- Boliche (Chorizo-Stuffed Beef Roast)
- Chuletas a la Jardinera (Pork Chops with Garden Vegetables)
- Pescado en Escabeche (White Fish Escabeche)
- Buñuelos de Viento en Almibar (Fried Doughnuts in Cinnamon Syrup)
- Pie de Limón (Lemon Meringue Pie)
- Mami's Bizcocho de Ron (Mami's Rum Cake)
- Coquito (Coconut Eggnog)

Culantro Chimichurri

Tata loved vegetables *and* meat. One of her favorite condiments to have ready in the fridge or make on the fly was *chimichurri*. She often served it with green beans or Brussels sprouts and alongside a steak cooked medium-rare or a roast chicken. It's a great quick sauce you can use like Tata did, or with grilled vegetables and meat.

Makes 3{1/2} cups

1 large garlic clove

1 cup chopped fresh culantro

1 cup chopped fresh cilantro

1 cup chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

{1/4} cup white or red wine vinegar

{1/3} cup olive oil

{1/2} teaspoon salt

Place the garlic in a small food processor and process to finely mince it.

Add the culantro, cilantro, parsley, vinegar, oil, and salt and pulse into a fine paste, scraping the sides as needed to make sure the ingredients are fully incorporated.

Scrape into a bowl and serve immediately.

Note: Chimichurri is best eaten the same day, though it will keep up to a week in the refrigerator (the color will change from bright green to brown after a few days).

Salsa Ajili-Mojili

This sauce is extremely versatile and pairs particularly well with steamed or lightly sautéed vegetables, avocado, white beans, and seafood. I've added a variation in honor of a good friend who has a garlic allergy, which is just as delicious and a good substitute if you don't enjoy raw garlic or want a milder flavor.

Makes 1{1/2} cups

3 garlic cloves, minced (or 4 scallions, whites and greens,
thinly sliced)

{1/2} cup *ají dulce* chiles, seeded and finely chopped

2 tablespoons fresh lime juice

{1/2} cup olive oil

1 teaspoon salt

{1/8} teaspoon ground black pepper

Combine all the ingredients in a medium bowl and mix well. Let sit for at least fifteen minutes or up to an hour before serving. It will keep in the refrigerator for up to a week, though it is best within the first couple days.

Picadillo

This was one of a handful of dishes always found in Tata's refrigerator. As a kid I would sneak into the kitchen at night when I couldn't sleep and eat it out of a container with a spoon. It can be eaten as a main course

alongside rice and beans or root vegetables, but it's also commonly used as a stuffing in empanadas, fritters, and *pastelón*. I prefer turkey, but beef is traditional.

Makes 3 cups

2 tablespoons olive oil

{1/2} cup Sofrito (page 000)

{1/2} cup tomato sauce

1 tablespoon Sazón (page 000)

2 bay leaves

1 pound ground turkey or beef

{1/4} cup pimento-stuffed manzanilla olives, halved

1 tablespoon drained capers in brine

1 tablespoon raisins (optional)

{1/2} teaspoon salt, or to taste

{1/8} teaspoon ground black pepper, or to taste

Heat the oil in a large, deep sauté pan over medium-high heat. Add the sofrito and cook for five minutes, stirring frequently.

Add the tomato sauce, sazón, and bay leaves to the pan and cook for about five more minutes, stirring frequently, until the sauce darkens and the liquid is mostly evaporated.

Reduce the heat to medium and fold in the ground turkey, breaking it up and mixing it into the sauce. Cook, uncovered, stirring occasionally, for ten minutes (fifteen minutes if using beef), or until the meat is fully browned, the liquid is completely reduced, and a thick sauce is created.

Add the olives, capers, raisins, salt, and pepper and cook for two more minutes to heat through. Taste and add more salt and pepper if needed.

Sanguiches de Picadillo (Picadillo Sandwiches)

This bomb of a breakfast sandwich will stay with you all day. It's decadent and incredibly flavorful. If you don't own a sandwich press, make it like you would a grilled cheese.

Makes 2 sandwiches

1 tablespoon unsalted butter, plus more as needed

4 slices white bread

4 slices American cheese

6 to 8 tablespoons Picadillo

Butter one side of each slice of bread. Place two slices of bread, butter-side down, on a large plate.

Layer each of these two slices with one slice of American cheese, then top each with three to four tablespoons picadillo. Stack each with a second slice of American cheese. Top with the remaining bread slices, butter-side up.

Place in a sandwich press and cook until the cheese is melted, three to five minutes. The cheese may begin to creep out of the edges, which is okay.

Let rest for one minute before eating (the cheese is molten and can burn the roof of your mouth).

Brussels Sprouts with Chorizo Sofrito

Of all the things my grandmother cooked, the one that Mami said she hated and refused to eat was brussels sprouts. It appears Tata used frozen, whole brussels sprouts (likely the only ones she could find in Puerto Rico at the time). She would boil them and then toss in *chimichurri*, *salsa ajili-mojili*, or another sauce. Sadly, Tata was the only one who liked them. This recipe pays homage to Tata's good intentions. I think she would have loved it.

Serves 4 as a side

1{1/2} tablespoons olive oil

{3/4} cup Sofrito (page 000)

{1/2} cup finely minced Spanish chorizo

1 pound Brussels sprouts, trimmed and thinly sliced

{1/2} cup Chicken Stock (page 000)

1 teaspoon fresh lime juice

{1/2} teaspoon salt, plus more if needed

Cracked black pepper

Heat the oil in a large skillet or wok over medium-high heat. Add the sofrito and chorizo and cook, stirring frequently, for seven minutes, or until the mixture is browned and the liquid is mostly evaporated.

Lower the heat to medium and add the Brussels sprouts and stock. Bring to a simmer and cook for seven to ten minutes, until the brussels sprouts are tender.

Turn off the heat, add the lime juice and salt, and season with pepper. Taste and adjust the salt and pepper if needed.

Sancocho

This stew is eaten across the Caribbean and has every imaginable variation. When I traveled to Cuba as a graduate student, I ate it at a *rumba* (an all-day dance event based on Yoruba spiritual practices). There, it's called *ajiacó* and is often served from a giant pot on the porch with a ladle, meant to keep us all energized (or sober us up). In Puerto Rico, my family makes *sancocho* a number of different ways. My father makes his with beef and noodles; Mami prefers chicken breasts and lean pork; Tata used beef, chicken, and pork on the bone. Here's my take, but I encourage you to adapt it to include whatever meats and vegetables you love.

Serves 8

1 medium yucca

1 medium yautía

1 green plantain

1 ripe yellow plantain

1 tablespoon olive oil

1 pound boneless chicken thighs

1 pound boneless pork stew meat, trimmed of excess fat

{1/2} cup Sofrito (page 000)

10 cups Beef and Pork Stock (page 000)

3 bay leaves

- 1 tablespoon salt
- 1 cup thinly sliced Spanish chorizo
- 2 cups 1-inch cubes peeled *calabaza* (pumpkin) or kabocha squash
- 1 ear sweet corn, husk removed and cut into 1-inch slices

Peel and cut the yucca, yautía, green plantain, and yellow plantain into one-inch pieces. Put in separate bowls, add water to cover, and set aside until ready to use. This keeps them from turning brown while you prepare the rest of the soup.

In a large stockpot, heat the oil over medium-high heat. Add the chicken and cook until browned on both sides, about five minutes total. Remove to a plate. Add the pork to the pan and cook until browned on both sides, another five minutes or so. Remove to the plate with the chicken.

Reduce the heat to medium and add the sofrito to the same pot, scraping up any browned bits of meat and incorporating them into the mix. Cook for five to seven minutes, stirring frequently, until the mixture is browned and the liquid is mostly evaporated.

Return the chicken and pork and any accumulated juices to the pot. Add the bay leaves and salt, increase the heat to medium-high, and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer, uncovered, for about ten minutes, stirring occasionally, until the stock is slightly reduced. Stir in the chorizo.

Add the remaining ingredients in order of firmness (to keep softer vegetables from falling apart), leaving each for five minutes before adding the next: first the yucca, then the yautía, followed by the green plantain, then the yellow plantain, pumpkin, and, finally, the corn, for a total of thirty minutes cooking, or until the meat and vegetables are tender enough to break apart with a fork.

Remove from the heat, taste, and add more salt if needed. Serve with fresh bread or white rice on the side.

Note: Root vegetables such as yucca and yautía can be difficult to find in basic supermarkets, though you may be able to find them in the freezer section. There's no real substitute for the rich, earthy flavor of these tubers, but potatoes can be used. Reduce the cooking time by half if using potatoes.

Boliche (Chorizo-Stuffed Beef Roast)

My mother might as well be a vegetarian. Growing up she hated meat and was vocal about it. But on special occasions, Tata made *boliche*. It's a Cuban dish in which a whole eye of round roast is stuffed with a mixture of Spanish chorizo, *sofrito*, spices, and vegetables, then marinated overnight and braised. The end result is an incredibly tender, flavorful roast with a bright filling in the center that's gorgeous when served. To this day, if I even say the word *boliche*, my mother licks her lips.

Serves 8

- 6 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 bay leaf
- 1{1/2} tablespoons fresh orange juice
- 1{1/2} tablespoons fresh lime juice
- 1 cup dry white wine
- 2 teaspoons salt, or to taste
- {1/4} teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 red bell pepper, seeded and finely chopped
- 1 carrot, thinly sliced
- 2 small Spanish chorizos, thinly sliced
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 (5-pound to 6-pound) eye-of-round beef roast
- 1 (8-ounce) can tomato sauce

Prepare a marinade by combining the garlic, oregano, cumin, bay leaf, orange juice, lime juice, wine, salt, and pepper in a container large enough to hold the roast.

Place the bell pepper, carrot, and chorizos in a small bowl and toss to combine.

Trim the meat of excess fat, rinse it, and dry with a paper towel. Using a long knife with a sharp tip, slice into the roast lengthwise until you reach the other end. Cut through several more times from end to end,

making an X-shaped cut and rotating the knife back and forth inside the cut to make space.

Place the roast in a large bowl, cut-side down, and stuff it with the chorizo mixture. Begin with about one tablespoon of the mixture and push in with your thumb, then use the end of a wooden spoon to push down farther. Rotate the roast to make sure both sides are equally stuffed. Place the roast in the container with the marinade, turning several times to coat fully in the marinade, then return it to the refrigerator. Marinate for at least one hour or overnight if possible.

Preheat the oven to 350°F. In a Dutch oven or heavy-bottomed saucepan with a cover, heat the oil over medium-high heat. Sear the meat for about eight minutes total, until thoroughly browned on all four sides.

Add the marinade left from the meat, cover, and place in the oven for two and a half to three hours, until the meat is tender and falls apart easily when pierced with a fork. Transfer the meat to a cutting board and let rest for five minutes.

Meanwhile, add the tomato sauce to the marinade in the pot. Place over medium heat, bring to a simmer, and simmer for three to four minutes. Add any juices released from the meat while it is resting.

Carve the meat into half-inch slices, divide among plates, and serve topped with the tomato sauce.

Chuletas a la Jardinera (Pork Chops with Garden Vegetables)

This one-pot dish is traditionally made with canned veggies but using fresh ones makes it bright and surprisingly light. Serve over plain white rice.

Serves 6

6 bone-in, center-cut pork chops (about 3 pounds)

3 batches Adobo for Pork (page 000)

1 tablespoon olive oil

{1/4} cup Sofrito (page 000)

1 large onion, diced

- 2 medium carrots, diced
- 4{1/2} cups peeled and diced tomatoes
- 1 large ear of corn, shucked, kernels cut off the cob
- {1/2} pound fresh green beans, ends trimmed and cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 cup fresh or frozen green peas

Place the pork chops in a large bowl and pour the adobo over them, rubbing them well to fully incorporate it. Transfer the pork chops to a large zip-top bag or plastic container with a lid and marinate in the refrigerator for at least thirty minutes, or overnight if possible.

Heat the oil in a large, heavy-bottomed saucepan or Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Brown the pork chops well on both sides for five minutes total, then transfer to a plate.

Reduce the heat to medium and add sofrito. Cook, stirring frequently, for about five minutes, until the mixture starts to brown and the liquid is mostly evaporated, then add the onion and carrots and cook for five minutes more, or until the onion starts to turn golden. Add the diced tomatoes, scraping up any browned bits stuck to the bottom of the pot.

Return the pork chops to the pot and nestle them into the tomato sauce, spooning the sauce over them to cover. Bring to a simmer, then lower the heat, cover, and cook for thirty to forty minutes, stirring lightly every ten minutes to keep the sauce from burning, until the pork chops are tender and almost falling apart.

Transfer the pork chops to a clean plate and tent with foil. Add the corn, green beans, and peas to the sauce and cook for five minutes, or until the vegetables are cooked through but still crisp.

Serve the pork chops with the sauce and vegetables spooned on top.

Pescado en Escabeche (White Fish Escabeche)

This is a great summer dish and perfect to make ahead of time for a brunch. Serve with a side salad, salted sliced tomatoes, avocado, or *tostones*.

Serves 4

Marinade

1 cup olive oil

{1/2} cup white vinegar

{1/4} teaspoon ground black pepper

{1/2} teaspoon salt

1 bay leaf

2 large white onions, sliced into thin rounds

Fish

1{1/2} pounds grouper steaks

{1/4} cup fresh lemon juice (about 1 large lemon)

2 teaspoons salt, or to taste

{1/4} cup all-purpose flour

1 cup olive oil

Combine the marinade ingredients in a large bowl.

Line a large plate with paper towels and set it aside.

Rinse the fish well and pat dry with paper towels. Place the fish in a large bowl and pour the lemon juice over it. Sprinkle with the salt and toss well.

Pour the flour onto a large plate. One by one, dredge each fish steak in flour and transfer them to a separate plate.

Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat until just simmering, about one minute. Do not overheat the oil, or it will burn and turn bitter. Reduce the heat to medium, add the fish steaks, and fry for ten minutes, turning every two minutes or so to make sure they brown evenly.

Transfer the fish to the prepared plate and let sit for five minutes to let excess oil drain, then transfer the fish to a large casserole dish with a lid.

Pour the marinade over the fish, cover, and refrigerate overnight. Taste, add more salt if needed, and serve chilled.

Buñuelos de Viento en Almibar (Fried Doughnuts in Cinnamon Syrup)

These simple doughnuts in syrup were a staple in Tata's house. They can be eaten warm or chilled.

Makes 20 *buñuelos*

Syrup

3 cups sugar

4 cups water

1 cinnamon stick

{1/2} teaspoon vanilla extract

{1/2} teaspoon fresh lemon juice

Buñuelos

1 cup water

4 tablespoons ({1/4} cup) unsalted butter

{1/2} teaspoon salt

1 cup all-purpose flour

4 large eggs

Canola oil for frying

Ground cinnamon for dusting

Make the syrup: in a medium saucepan, combine the sugar and water over medium-high heat and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to a simmer, add the cinnamon stick, and cook, uncovered, for eight to ten minutes, until slightly thickened into a light syrup. Add the vanilla and lemon juice and cover until ready to use.

Make the *buñuelos*: While you are cooking the syrup, combine the water, butter, and salt in a large saucepan and bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Remove from the heat, add the flour all at once, and mix with an electric hand mixer on low speed until combined.

Add the eggs one by one, mixing well until the dough is fully blended, thick, and sticky but not pasty.

Line a large plate with paper towels.

Heat one and a half to two inches of oil in a large deep skillet or wok over medium-high heat until simmering. Drop a bit of dough in to see if it's ready—you'll know once the dough sizzles and rises to the surface.

Use two large tablespoons to scoop small balls of dough one by one into the hot oil (scoop with one and use the back of the other to gently drop the dough into the oil). The doughnuts will float to the surface of the oil.

Fry, turning the balls frequently, for two to three minutes, until they are evenly browned. Remove from the oil with a slotted spoon and place on the prepared plate to drain.

Arrange the *buñuelos* in a nine-by-nine-inch casserole dish and pour the syrup over them. Serve dusted with cinnamon.

Pie de Limón (Lemon Meringue Pie)

Tata was full of stories, but one that would have Mami and me in stitches was the story of the pie de limón. One day, Tata made this pie for a potluck. She was walking through the parking lot to her car, holding the pie up in her right hand like a waitress. Suddenly, a gust of wind came, lifted the pie, and it splat against the nearest car windshield. Tata, in shock, put her hand down, turned, and kept walking. If I'd been there, I would have licked that pie right off that stranger's windshield, because this pie is *that* good.

Serves 8

Pie Crust and Filling

{1/3} cup cornstarch

1 cup sugar

{1/8} teaspoon salt

1{1/2} cups water

{1/2} cup fresh lemon juice

1 tablespoon lemon zest

4 large egg yolks

1 tablespoon unsalted butter

1 (9-inch) prepared piecrust, baked

Meringue

4 large egg whites

{1/4} teaspoon salt

{1/2} cup sugar

Make the filling: Combine the cornstarch, sugar, and salt in a medium saucepan and whisk to incorporate.

Whisk in the water, lemon juice, and lemon zest, place over medium heat, and heat, stirring constantly, until the mixture just begins to boil and thicken. Remove from the heat.

In a small bowl, whisk the egg yolks, then quickly whisk the yolks into the hot filling.

Return the pot to medium heat and bring to a near boil.

Add the butter and stir until fully melted and incorporated.

Preheat the oven to 400°F.

Make the meringue: in a large bowl, beat the egg whites and salt with an electric hand mixer on high speed until soft peaks start to form. Continue beating while slowly pouring in the sugar and beat until firm peaks form.

To assemble: pour the hot filling into the prepared piecrust, wiggling to spread the filling out evenly.

Using a rubber scraper, scrape the meringue out of the bowl and into the center of the pie and spread it out evenly to the edges of the crust.

Put the pie in the oven and bake for seven to ten minutes, until the meringue starts to turn golden brown, watching closely to make sure it doesn't get overly browned.

Remove from oven, place on a wire rack, and cool completely, about one hour. Refrigerate until cold and serve chilled.

Note: I hope the bakers out there will forgive my recommending the use of a premade piecrust. It's what Tata used, and I'm sticking as close as I can to the perfection she created.

Mami's Bizcocho de Ron (Mami's Rum Cake)

When my friends found out I was writing this cookbook, several asked if Mami's rum cake would be in it. And so it is. First I give you her original recipe, which uses a boxed cake mix. I highly recommend this

recipe if you need to make something quickly and easily or aren't very comfortable baking. It's perfectly balanced and is my favorite cake to this day. But in homage to Mami, I've adapted her recipe to give it a little more depth, and that version follows. In case you were wondering, my family calls me Bombi.

Special thanks to chef, friend, and mentor Kathy Gunst for her help adapting this recipe.

Serves 6 to 10

Mami's Recipe

Cake

Canola oil cooking spray

1 cup finely chopped walnuts

1 box butter-flavor cake mix

1 (3.4-ounce) box instant vanilla pudding mix

Unsalted butter

Eggs

{1/4} cup white rum

Syrup

4 tablespoons {1/4} cup unsalted butter

1 cup light brown sugar

{1/2} cup white rum

{1/4} cup water

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Grease a Bundt pan with cooking spray and sprinkle in the walnuts.

In a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment or a large bowl using a handheld electric mixer, combine the cake mix and pudding mix, then add the butter and eggs as directed by the instructions on the cake mix box. Add the rum. Beat at medium speed for four minutes.

Pour the batter into the prepared Bundt pan and level it with a spatula.

Bake for thirty-three to thirty-five minutes, until the cake is pale golden in color, slightly risen, and a toothpick or cake skewer comes out clean when poked in its center.

Remove from the oven and place on a wire rack to cool slightly.

Meanwhile, make the rum glaze: combine all the glaze ingredients in a small saucepan and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer for five to seven minutes, until the sugar is fully dissolved and the glaze thickens just slightly.

While the cake is still warm, poke holes throughout the cake using the same toothpick or skewer you used to test it for doneness. Pour the hot glaze on top; don't worry if the cake doesn't take in the glaze immediately. It takes at least ten minutes for the glaze to be absorbed.

Cover the pan with aluminum foil and allow to soak for at least three hours or up to overnight. Invert onto a plate, then slice and serve.

Bombi's Recipe

Cake

Canola oil cooking spray

1 cup finely chopped walnuts

2 cups all-purpose flour

1 cup sugar

1 (3.4-ounce) box instant vanilla pudding mix

{1/2} cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, cut into small pieces

2 teaspoons baking powder

1 teaspoon salt

{1/2} cup milk

4 large eggs

{1/2} cup coconut oil

{1/2} cup white rum

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

Rum Syrup

{1/2} cup (1 stick) unsalted butter

{1/2} cup white rum

{1/2} cup light brown sugar

{1/4} cup water

{1/2} teaspoon vanilla extract

Preheat the oven to 325°F. Grease a Bundt pan with cooking spray and sprinkle in the walnuts.

In a stand mixer with the paddle attachment or a large bowl using an electric handheld mixer, combine the flour, sugar, pudding mix, butter, baking powder, and salt. Mix on medium speed for about two minutes, until fully incorporated.

Add the milk, eggs, and coconut oil and blend on low speed for about two more minutes, until smooth. Pour in the rum and vanilla and blend on low speed for about one more minute to form a thick batter.

Pour the batter into the prepared Bundt pan and level it with a spatula. Bake for fifty to sixty minutes, until the cake is pale golden in color, slightly risen, and a toothpick or cake skewer comes out clean when poked in the center of the cake.

Remove from the oven and place on a wire rack to cool slightly.

Meanwhile, make the rum glaze: combine all the glaze ingredients in a small saucepan and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer for five to seven minutes, until the sugar is fully dissolved and the glaze is just slightly thickened.

While the cake is still warm, poke holes throughout the cake using the same toothpick or skewer you used to test the cake for doneness. Pour the hot glaze on top. Don't worry if the cake doesn't take in the glaze immediately; it takes at least ten minutes for the glaze to be absorbed.

Cover the pan with aluminum foil and allow to soak for at least three hours or overnight. Invert onto a plate, slice, and serve.

Coquito (Coconut Eggnog)

Coquito is Puerto Rican, coconut-y eggnog. We claim it as our own, but it's beloved by Dominicans and Cubans alike. It's frothy and rich like a traditional eggnog, but it's made lighter by using coconut milk instead of heavy cream and swaps cinnamon for nutmeg and rum for bourbon or brandy.

It certainly was essential in my home over the holidays. Mami isn't much of a drinker, but she loves *coquito*. My dad was always the *coquito* master, and so this is an adaptation of his recipe.

Makes about 2 quarts

1{1/4} cups water

3 cinnamon sticks

8 large egg yolks

1 (13.5-ounce) can coconut milk

1 (14-ounce) can condensed milk

1 (15-ounce) can cream of coconut (Coco Lopez)

{1/2} teaspoon vanilla extract

Pinch of salt

{1/2} teaspoon lime zest

1 quart white rum, or to taste

Ground cinnamon

In a small saucepan, combine the water and cinnamon sticks. Bring to a boil over high heat, then reduce the heat and simmer while you prepare the remaining ingredients.

Pour the egg yolks into a large blender and blend on high speed for three minutes, or until they thicken into a cream.

Add the coconut milk and blend for one minute, then add the condensed milk and cream of coconut and blend for three minutes, or until thickened.

Remove the cinnamon sticks from the boiling water and reserve them. Pour the boiling water into the egg yolk mixture.

Add the vanilla, salt, and lime zest and pulse once to incorporate. Pour the contents of the blender into bottles or a pitcher.

Pour in the rum and the reserved cinnamon sticks and stir or swirl the bottles to mix well.

Refrigerate until fully cooled, then serve over ice in rocks glasses with a sprinkle of cinnamon.

Note: This can get messy. It's important that you use a large blender, or, alternatively, cut the recipe in half if your blender can't fit this amount of liquid. Plan ahead by reserving a few liquor bottles for storing. A funnel is useful for helping transfer the *coquito* into containers.



Fig. 1 Von Diaz, *Coconuts and Collards: Recipes and Stories from Puerto Rico to the Deep South*. 2018. Photo by Cybelle Codish. Image author's own.