

# Travel the World without Leaving Your Kitchen

## International Cooking Series

### The Fusion of Traditions, Cultures, and Flavors of Cuba

Most of us can passionately describe a delicious recipe or meal that someone in our family has passed down for generations and the ensuing joy of sharing the dish around the table. Exploring, learning, and embracing cultural food traditions, both our own and others', can broaden our perspectives about the history and cultures from around the world. Whether you experience these cultural differences in eating while traveling, while visiting a restaurant in your community, or by preparing them at home, it can help you celebrate the cultural diversity found in all our communities. So, travel the world without leaving your kitchen and experience a taste of the tropics in Cuba.

The island of Cuba is 90 miles off the coast of Florida. Cuba is part of the Greater Antilles: a grouping of islands that includes Cuba, Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic), Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and the Cayman Islands. It includes more than four thousand islands, giving it a broad range of ecosystems, from forests and wetlands to caves and coral reefs. There are nine cultural and natural UNESCO World Heritage sites in Cuba, complete with cobblestone squares and modern high rises. Besides world renowned cigars, Cuba was also Ernest Hemingway's home for 20 years. Cuba has had a turbulent history. Beginning with Spanish colonization in the 1400s, natives were forced into slavery. When the natives soon died from diseases the Spaniards brought, they imported African slaves. When the enslavement of African people was outlawed, large groups were brought from China.



In 1961, Fidel Castro led a Cuban revolution causing a breakdown in U.S. relations, including a change in imported food, leaving little room for an American influence. Regardless, Cuba is full of eclectic culture and a rich history of ethnic diversity.

### The History of Food

Throughout history, different cultures have come to the island of Cuba, including Caribbean, Spanish, French, and African influences that have left their mark on the local dishes. The island's indigenous population used native tropical fruits and root vegetables, as well as seafood from its coastal waters. The Spanish introduced cattle and pigs which became part of the food culture. Plantains, bananas, and rice are remnants of African- and Chinese-inspired dishes from the past. The cuisine is known for its use of local spices, including cumin, oregano, garlic, and bay leaves. With Cuba's movement toward socialism and dependence on the Soviet Union, many skilled workers emigrated to the United States, principally to Miami, Fla. Cuba's food customs, traditions, and food practices changed greatly during this time,

leaving many of the old influences behind. When the French arrived from Haiti, coffee, cocoa, and exquisite pastries became common. Cuban desserts include the rich flavors of vanilla, cinnamon, coconut, guava, citrus, rum, and coffee. Cuban food is described as soul food, brimming with flavor, which is best shared with a large group of family and friends. Let's see how that culture and history have formed a rich blend of flavors worth trying.

## Cuban Picadillo

Picadillo is a traditional ground beef recipe made with sofrito and then simmered in a tomato sauce, which may include Spanish olives, raisins, wine, and spices, such as cumin and oregano. Picadillo is often served with rice and plantains.

Yield: 4 servings

Prep time: 10 minutes

Cook time: 20 minutes

*Nutritional analysis per serving ½-cup serving:*  
350 calories, 21 g fat, 70 mg cholesterol, 410 mg sodium, 18 g carbohydrates, 23 g protein

### Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- ½ cup onion, diced
- ½ cup green pepper, diced
- 3 large garlic cloves, minced
- 1 pound ground beef
- 2 small potatoes, diced
- ⅓ cup chicken broth
- 6 ounces tomato sauce
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- ¼ cup Spanish olives, cut in half
- 2 tablespoons raisins
- 1 tablespoon fresh parsley, minced

**Note:** Most olives are full of sodium, even if you use low-sodium olives. Consider using your favorite sliced pickled peppers as a substitute.



### Instructions

1. In a large skillet, over medium heat, heat the oil until shimmering. Add the peppers and onions and sauté for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally.
2. Add garlic and sauté for an additional minute. Or use the sofrito base included in the recipe below.
3. Add the beef and brown for about 5 minutes. (To reduce the amount of saturated fat and calories in this recipe, cook the beef separately until done, and rinse off the meat until the water runs clear. Then add beef to the sofrito.)
4. Reduce heat to medium-low and add the remaining ingredients, except for the olives and raisins. Simmer for 10 minutes or until sauce begins to thicken and potatoes are soft.
5. Remove from heat. Stir in olives and raisins.
6. Serve warm and garnish with parsley.

**Note:** Serve with rice, beans, or plantains. Other ways to use the picadillo are to make lettuce wraps, tacos or burritos, empanadas, or served over baked potatoes or sweet potatoes.



## Cuban Sofrito

An aromatic base of many Cuban recipes, each family had their own unique recipe that was passed down through the generations. Generally, it consists of green peppers, onions, and garlic. Other ingredients might include chorizo, ham, tomatoes, capers, olives, pimientos, white wine, and herbs and spices. It is added to a variety of dishes. You'll often find sofrito used in picadillo, Ropa Vieja, and Cuban black beans and rice dishes.

Yield: 4 servings

Prep time: 5 minutes

Cook time: 10 minutes

*Nutritional analysis per serving ¼-cup serving:*  
80 calories, 7 g fat, 4 g carbohydrates, 1 g protein

### Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- ½ cup bell pepper, diced
- ½ cup onion, diced
- 3 large garlic cloves, minced

### Instructions

1. In a small skillet, over medium heat, heat the oil until shimmering. Add the peppers and onions and sauté for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally.
2. Add garlic and sauté for an additional minute.

**Note:** If making ahead of time, cool, transfer to an airtight container and store in the refrigerator for up to three days. If you are going to use it immediately, combine it with additional ingredients depending on the chosen recipe. This small amount of sofrito is used in recipes serving four. You can double it for larger yielding recipes.

## Lechon Asado (Cuban Roast Pork)

The Cuban roast pork is marinated in a garlic-citrus marinade and then slow roasted until it is tender and juicy, with a crisp and crackly skin. Lechon asado is the go-to feast for every special occasion, especially as the main course for Cuban Noche Buena (Christmas Eve). Chinese laborers introduced the La Caja China, a makeshift box that allowed whole hogs to cook under a hot fire inside the box. A bone-in pork shoulder in the oven or the slow cooker is a more practical choice today, but the Chinese Box is still available for purchase if you can find a hog from a local farmer.

Yield: 6-8 servings

Prep time: 30 minutes

Cook time: 2½ hours

*Nutritional analysis per 6 – 8 ounce serving:*  
440 calories, 8 g fat, 110 mg cholesterol,  
710 mg sodium, 7 g carbohydrates, 33 g protein

### Ingredients

- 3 pounds bone-in pork shoulder OR pork butt

### Mojo Marinade Ingredients

- ¼ cup lime juice
- ½ cup lemon juice
- ½ cup orange juice
- 8 cloves garlic, minced
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- 1 tablespoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- ⅓ cup olive oil

### Marinade Instructions

1. Pierce the roast using a knife to make slits on both the top and bottom of the roast.
2. In a large baking dish, combine all the marinade ingredients and stir to combine. Reserve one cup of the marinade in a covered dish in the refrigerator for later use during service.



3. Add the meat to the marinade. Using a turkey baster, insert the marinade in the slits throughout the roast. Marinate the roast in the refrigerator for 12 to 24 hours, occasionally using the turkey baster to concentrate the marinade into the slits.

### Roasting Instructions

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Remove the roast from the refrigerator and allow to set at room temperature while the oven is preheating. The roast will take about 25 to 35 minutes per pound to cook, approximately three to four hours. If the meat is a bone-in roast, it will take longer to cook.
2. When the internal temperature reaches 190 degrees F, remove the roast from the oven. The higher internal temperature (rather than 145 degrees F for safe consumption) will result in the meat falling off the bone with a crispy outside.
3. Let the meat rest for 20 minutes before service.
4. While the meat is resting, place the reserved 1 cup of marinade in a small saucepan over medium-high heat. Cook until the mixture thickens, about 15 minutes, stirring often to prevent sticking.
5. Serve sauce over sliced roasted pork. Cubans often serve the roast with black beans and rice, fried yuca, fried plantains, or root vegetables.

**Note:** The roast may be cooled and stored in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to four days or frozen for up to two months.

## Cuban Sandwich

The Cuban sandwich is the perfect way to use your leftover lechon asado! Layer the pork roast between slices of crusty Cuban sandwich bread with a soft center. Add mustard, pickles, and Swiss cheese. Originally, the bread was stretched into a yard-long, thin loaf so it could be cut into small pieces for rationing. The Cuban sandwich began as a popular street food served in Havana known as sandwich mixto. When Cubans landed in Miami, they changed the version slightly by adding tomato, mayonnaise, and onions, influenced by the Latin American and Caribbean cultures of Miami. In Tampa, you can find the addition of Genoa salami, likely influenced by Italians living in the area.

Yield: 6 sandwiches or 12 servings

Prep time: 15 minutes

Cook time: 100 minutes if you make the sandwich bread

*Nutritional analysis per 1/2-sandwich:* 430 calories, 20 g fat, 85 g cholesterol, 1750 mg sodium, 34 g carbohydrates, 27 g protein

### Cuban Bread Ingredients

*This recipe is compliments of King Arthur Flour, located at <https://www.kingarthurbaking.com/recipes/cuban-sandwich-recipe>. The King Arthur baking site also has other culturally diverse recipes you might want to check out. If you don't want to make Cuban bread, you may substitute French baguettes or Italian bread.*

- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon + 1 teaspoon sugar
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 2¼ teaspoons instant yeast
- 4 tablespoons butter, cut into small cubes
- 1¼ cups water – 105 to 115 degrees F

**Note:** The original Cuban bread recipe calls for lard which gives a soft center and crusty outside. Substitute 3 tablespoons lard for the butter for a more authentic texture.



### Bread Instructions

- 1. Using a mixer method:** In a stand mixer bowl, using a paddle beater, combine all ingredients. Switch to a dough hook, and on low speed allow it to knead until the dough clings to the dough hook and the dough starts to leave the sides of the bowl, about three minutes. Continue to knead the dough into a smooth ball, about 3 to 4 minutes. Remove the dough and shape into a smooth ball. Place the dough in a large, lightly greased bowl.  
**For the manual method:** In a large bowl, combine all ingredients and stir until the dough starts to leave the sides of the bowl. Transfer the dough to a lightly greased surface and knead until the dough becomes a smooth, elastic ball, about 6 to 8 minutes. Place the dough in a large, lightly greased bowl.
- 2.** In 30 minutes, gently fold the dough in upon itself and turn it upside-down. Allow the dough to rise until it's puffy, though not necessarily doubled in size, about 20 to 30 more minutes.
- 3.** Using your fist, deflate the dough, and divide it into six even pieces. Shape each piece into a rough log. Cover the logs with a slightly damp paper towel. Allow the logs to rest for 15 minutes.
- 4.** Shape each piece into a smooth roll about 8 inches long, slightly tapered at each end. Place the rolls on a parchment-lined or lightly greased baking sheet.



5. Allow the baguettes to rise, covered with a slightly damp paper towel, for 1 hour.
6. Before the last rise time, preheat the oven to 375 degrees F.
7. Brush the rolls with water and slash one long lengthwise slit down the middle of each. Bake for about 30 minutes, or until golden brown.
8. Remove the rolls from the oven, and cool on a rack.

**Note:** You can make the baguettes one day in advance and store at room temperature, or several weeks in advance and frozen.

### **Sandwich Ingredients**

- 1 pound roasted pork, sliced or pulled, OR 3 cups
- ½ pound smoked deli ham, thinly sliced
- ¾ pound Swiss cheese, thinly sliced, OR 12 slices
- 2 whole dill pickles, thinly sliced lengthwise
- ¼ cup mustard

### **Sandwich Assembly Instructions**

1. Slice the rolls in half horizontally. Brush the cut surfaces of the rolls with mustard.
2. Layer each sandwich with cheese, pickle, roast pork, ham, and cheese.
3. If you have a panini press, grill the sandwiches following the manufacturer's instructions. Use a medium press. If you don't have a panini press, simply grill in a large pan, over medium heat for 5 to 7 minutes on both sides, pressing slightly to smash the ingredients together.
4. Cut the sandwich in half and serve.

**Note:** Try adding thin slices of Genoa-type salami for a totally different flavor.

## Ropa Vieja (Beef Stew)

Ropa Vieja was first reported as a dish cooked in Cuba in 1857. Today, it is known as the national dish of Cuba. It was brought to Cuba by immigrants from the Canary Islands, Spain. It usually features a sofrito base and stewed beef and tomatoes. While beef is most often used, you can substitute pork or chicken.

Yield: 8 servings

Prep time: 30 minutes

Cook time: 2½ - 3 hours

*Nutritional analysis per 8 – 6 ounce serving:*  
380 calories, 130 mg cholesterol, 1290 mg sodium, 15 g carbohydrates, 51 g protein

### Ingredients

- 3 pounds chuck roast, brisket, or flank steak
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 red bell peppers, chopped
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 8 garlic cloves, finely diced
- ½ cup dry white wine OR white grape juice
- 1 tablespoon smoked or sweet paprika
- 1 tablespoon dried oregano
- 2 teaspoons ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 28-ounce can crushed tomatoes
- 2 bay leaves
- ½ cup pimiento-stuffed Spanish olives, halved

### Instructions

1. In a large heavy duty pan, over high heat, add the oil and heat until shimmering. Add chuck roast and turn occasionally until all sides are browned, about 5 minutes per side. Remove from pot.



2. Reduce heat to medium. Add onions and peppers, and cook until softened and beginning to brown, stirring occasionally, about 8 to 10 minutes.
3. Add garlic and cook, stirring frequently until browned, about 3 to 5 minutes.
4. Stir in wine and allow to simmer, stirring occasionally, until evaporated.
5. Stir in spices and cook about 1 minute.
6. Add tomatoes and bring to a boil, stirring occasionally, until liquid is reduced by half, about 5 minutes.
7. Add roast back to pot. Braise roast and vegetables until meat is tender and reaches an internal temperature of 160 degrees F, about 2½ to 3 hours. The meat should be tender.
8. Remove the pot from heat, and using two forks, shred the beef. If you cannot shred it easily with the forks, place it back into the sauce and cook for another half hour, then try again.

**Note:** Serve with Cuban black beans and rice or fried plantains. You can store leftovers in an airtight container for up to five days in the refrigerator and in the freezer for up to three months.



## Cuban Black Beans and Rice

Beans and rice are a staple in everyday Cuban meals. Black beans are the most popular but red beans, navy beans, and garbanzo beans also give some variety to the everyday staple. Often, a bit of vinegar is added to the dish to cut the bitterness.

Yield: 8 servings

Prep time: 15 minutes

Cook time: 45 minutes

*Nutritional analysis per 6 – 8 ounce serving:*  
450 calories, 2 g fat, 5 mg cholesterol, 360 mg sodium, 53 g carbohydrates, 13 g protein

### Ingredients

- 2 slices bacon, cut into ¼-inch slices
- ¾ cup onion, finely chopped
- ¾ cup bell pepper, finely diced
- 1 tablespoon garlic, minced
- ¼ cup olive oil
- 2 bay leaves
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 1 ½ cups long-grain rice

- 2 15.5-ounce cans black beans, undrained
- 1 ¾ cups water or vegetable broth
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
- ½ cup cilantro, minced or green onions, thinly sliced (optional for garnish)

### Instructions

1. In a large saucepan, over medium-high heat, cook bits of bacon until fully browned, about 6 minutes.
2. Add onion, bell pepper, and garlic, stirring often until onions are soft and translucent, about 5 minutes.
3. Add spices and rice, and stir until rice is coated with bacon grease, about 1 minute.
4. Add the canned beans with their liquids, red wine vinegar, and water. Bring to a boil, stirring occasionally and then reduce to a simmer. Cover tightly and continue to simmer for 45 minutes, without stirring.
5. Remove pan from heat and allow to set for 10 minutes.
6. Fluff rice with a fork and serve. Garnish with chopped cilantro or green onions, if desired.





## Roasted Root Vegetables

Root vegetables are edible parts of a plant that grow underground. They are an easy way to add nutrients, antioxidants, and fiber to your diet. While the Cuban root vegetables of jicama and yucca root may be foreign to you, carrots, acorn squash, sweet potato, and beets are also delicious roasted.

Yield: 6 servings

Prep time: 20 minutes

Cook time: 35 minutes

*Nutritional analysis per ½-cup serving:*  
190 calories, 5 g fat, 610 mg sodium,  
35 g carbohydrates, 3 g protein

### Ingredients

- 1 pound jicama OR potatoes, peeled and cubed
- 1 pound fresh or frozen yucca root OR parsnips, peeled and cubed
- 1 large boniato OR sweet potato, peeled and cubed
- 1 small calabaza squash OR pumpkin, peeled, seeded, and cubed
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper

- 2 teaspoons dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 2 tablespoons olive oil

**Note:** Substitute like vegetables if you can't find the indigenous vegetable indicated. Many of these vegetables are hard to cut. So, using a sharp paring knife on a wooden cutting board, make four small slits in the vegetable, and place in the microwave for several minutes or until a little soft. If the vegetable has a hard skin, try 1 minute at a time to prevent overcooking the vegetable.

### Instructions

1. Preheat the oven to 425 degrees F.
2. Using a sharp 10-inch knife and wooden cutting board, cut the vegetables into 1- to 1¼-inch cubes.
3. On two large baking sheets, add all the vegetables in a single layer.
4. Drizzle with olive oil and sprinkle with salt, pepper, and spices.
5. Bake for 30 minutes, or until all vegetables are tender and slightly browned, stirring once during cooking.

# Cuban Merenguitos (Meringue Cookies/Kisses)

Cuban meringue cookies are easy to make and have only four ingredients: egg whites, sugar, cream of tartar, and salt. These sweet, melt-in-your-mouth meringue kisses pair perfectly with strong Cuban coffee.

Yield: about 30 kisses

Prep time: 25 minutes

Cook time: 1 hour 30 minutes

*Nutritional analysis per one:*

15 calories, 10 mg sodium, 3 g carbohydrates

## Ingredients

- 2 large egg whites, at room temperature
- ¼ teaspoon cream of tartar
- Pinch of salt
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- Pastry bag with large star tip

## Instructions

1. Preheat oven to 200 degrees F. Line two large baking sheets with parchment paper.
2. In a medium bowl, using a hand mixer with a whisk attachment, on low speed, combine egg whites, cream of tartar, and salt. Beat about 1 to 2 minutes until frothy.
3. While the mixer is on, slowly add the sugar, until stiff peaks form, about 5 to 6 minutes total. The peaks will hold their shape when they are stiff enough.

4. Gently transfer the meringue into a piping bag fitted with a large star tip. Pipe meringue kisses 1½-inches in diameter onto the baking sheet or drop large teaspoonfuls onto the baking sheet.
5. Place the baking sheets in the oven and bake for 1 hour. After 1 hour, turn the oven off but leave the meringues in the closed oven for 30 minutes. Do not open the oven door until all the time has passed.
6. Remove the baking sheets from the oven. The meringue kisses should be dry, firm, and crispy, but not brown or sticky.
7. Allow to cool completely before serving drizzled with chocolate or fruit sauce.

The traditional recipes of Cuba provide an adventure for your taste buds! Exploring your local library or websites and food blogs can provide you with additional ideas for your everyday meals.

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July 2024

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