

Cook

Cuban

in America

Recipes with love from

**The Robot Book
Club**

Cook Cuban in America

Authentic Flavors and Classic Recipes for the Modern Home

The Robot Book Club

Copyright © 2026 Edward Benson

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Published by The Robot Book Club

Table of Contents

La Despensa y El Sofrito (The Foundation)

La Ventanita at Home (Mornings & Miami Rhythms)

Almuerzo y La Merienda (The Midday Fuel & The 3 PM Pick-Me-Up)

El Caldero (Weeknight Arroz y Frijoles)

Comida (Grandma's Mains for Busy Tuesdays)

Viandas & Sides (The Supporting Cast)

Un Dulcito (Simple Sweet Endings)

Preface

This book, and The Robot Book Club, is an experiment large scale AI generation. Every page, from layout to images to copy, was generated with zero human review.

The authoring and publishing teams were implemented in the Kaya scripting language. They were given only the input: Cuban Home Cooking.

This is the only page authored by a human: Hello there!

— Ted Benson

Prologue

There are smells you never forget. The scent of a proper *sofrito* blooming in olive oil, garlic and onion sizzling, peppers softening to a sweet, aromatic surrender. It's the very breath of home, of childhood kitchens, a sensory echo across miles and decades, a pull that binds the diaspora. For first-generation Cubans living in America, that aroma is both a cherished comfort and a quiet, persistent challenge. The memory of *that* taste, *that* feeling—the sheer, undeniable *Cuban-ness* of it all—remains vivid. But how does one conjure that magic on a busy Tuesday night, after work, in a kitchen that might never have embraced a traditional *caldero*?

This is not a book for the tourist's gaze, nor for those seeking convenient, whitewashed approximations. This is for the cook who craves the genuine article: the *picadillo* exactly as Abuela made it, the *ropa vieja* that evokes profound nostalgia, the *frijoles negros* simmered to perfection, even if modern practicality dictates an Instant Pot. Here, the respect is profound—for the heritage, for the uncompromised flavor, and for the demanding realities of a contemporary life.

Cuban cuisine, at its heart, is a testament to ingenuity, born from humble ingredients transformed by technique and an abundance of love. It is deeply seasoned, yes, but distinctly non-spicy, relying instead on the slow, careful dance of garlic, onion, and bell pepper, brightened by a splash of *vino seco*. This book demystifies the process, focusing on mastering that foundational *sofrito*, understanding the rhythm of rice and beans, and elevating everyday staples into feasts worthy of any family gathering, even on a weekday. The integrity of dishes like *Pan con Timba* or *Vaca Frita* remains paramount.

Consider this your trusted companion, a pragmatic guide to those essential flavors. The work has been done, translating generations of culinary wisdom into clear, accessible steps using ingredients found in any supermarket. No need for exotic spices or single-purpose gadgets gathering dust. Just honest food, honest methods, and the enduring promise of a taste that transports you back to where it all began. The kitchen awaits its call.



La Despensa y El Sofrito (The Foundation)

The essential pantry staples, cooking bases, and substitutions that build the authentic flavor profile of a Cuban home kitchen.

Every great culinary tradition relies on a pulse, a reliable heartbeat that pumps life into the pot before the main event even hits the pan. For the Cuban home cook, that rhythm starts in the despensa and culminates in the sofrito. You don't need a rusted caldero from the old country or a specialty grocer two towns

over to get it right. You just need to understand the holy trinity of garlic, onion, and bell pepper, sweating it out in hot oil until the kitchen smells exactly like a Sunday afternoon in Hialeah.

It is the foundation, the unapologetic soul of the cuisine. Whether you're making do with Midwest supermarket finds for vino seco or mixing a homemade sazón, these pages aren't about compromise—they're about survival. It's how the diaspora kept the flavor alive, adapting without ever losing the plot. Get this base right, and the rest will follow.





Picadillo a la Habanera

pee-cah-DEE-yo ah lah ah-bah-NEH-rah

If there is a dish that pulls a first-generation Cuban American back to their childhood kitchen by the collar, it is Picadillo a la Habanera. Born from a working-class need to stretch a dollar, it is a masterclass in Moorish-influenced magic. We are chasing a very specific memory here: the deep earthiness of cumin, the briny punch of olives and capers, and the unexpected sweet pop of raisins, all bound by heavily salted vino seco. The secret to keeping it authentic is in the texture. You fry the potatoes separately so they keep their bite, and you hit the browning beef with a splash of liquid so it stays velvety instead of

turning into chewy pebbles. It is a profoundly comforting, weeknight masterpiece that demands nothing more than a trip to your local supermarket.

INGREDIENTS

1 large	Russet or Yukon Gold potato <i>peeled and cut into 1/4-inch cubes</i>	1 tsp	dried oregano
4 tbsp	olive oil <i>divided</i>	2 med	dried bay leaves
1 med	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	1/2 cup	plain tomato sauce
1/2 large	green bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	1/3 cup	vino seco or dry white wine
4 clove	garlic <i>minced</i>	1/3 cup	pimento-stuffed Spanish green olives <i>halved</i>
1 1/2 lb	ground beef	1 tbsp	capers <i>drained</i>
1/4 cup	water or olive brine	1/3 cup	dark raisins
1 tsp	ground cumin	1 tsp	kosher salt
		1/2 tsp	black pepper

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Fry the potatoes until golden and crisp.

Heat 3 tablespoons of the olive oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Fry the diced potatoes in a single layer for 6 to 8 minutes until crispy. Transfer to a paper-towel-lined plate, salt lightly, and wipe out all but a thin film of oil from the pan.

2. Build the sofrito base.

Return the skillet to medium heat and add the remaining tablespoon of olive oil. Sauté the diced onion and bell pepper for 4 to 5 minutes until soft and translucent, then add the garlic and cook for 30 seconds until fragrant, taking care not to let it brown.

1. Brown the meat using the grandmother's water trick.

Add the ground beef to the skillet and immediately pour in the 1/4 cup of water or olive brine. This old-school secret tenderizes the meat as it cooks, keeping the texture velvety instead of dry and pebbly. Break the meat apart constantly with a wooden spoon for 6 to 8 minutes until no longer pink.

2. Simmer and marry the flavors.

Stir in the cumin, oregano, and bay leaves, letting them toast in the meat juices for a minute. Pour in the tomato sauce and vino seco, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom of the pan. Fold in the olives, capers, and raisins.

3. Reduce the sauce to a rich glaze.

Lower the heat to a gentle simmer. Let the picadillo bubble uncovered for 10 to 12 minutes. The liquid will reduce and thicken into a savory glaze that coats the meat—it should be juicy, or al jugo, but not swimming in soup.

4. Fold in the potatoes and serve.

Remove the bay leaves and taste for seasoning, adding the salt and black pepper as needed. Right before taking the pan off the heat, gently fold in the crispy fried potatoes so they warm through but maintain their bite. Serve immediately alongside fluffy white rice, black beans, and sweet plantains.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Do not skip the raisins.**

As kids, many of us picked them out, but as adults, we realize the dish falls completely flat without them. The raisins absorb the wine and meat juices, swelling into savory-sweet flavor bombs that perfectly balance the harsh brine of the olives and capers.

● **Sourcing and substituting Vino Seco.**

True Cuban vino seco, like Edmundo or Goya, is a heavily salted cooking wine. If you cannot find it in the international aisle of your supermarket, substitute an affordable dry white wine like Sauvignon Blanc mixed with a tiny splash of white wine vinegar and an extra pinch of salt.

- **The Alcaparrado shortcut.**

If you prefer not to buy separate jars of olives and capers, look for a jar labeled Alcaparrado in the Latin foods aisle. It is a pre-mixed blend of pitted manzanilla olives, capers, and pimento strips.

- **Leftovers are mandatory.**

Picadillo is arguably the greatest leftover meal in existence. Making it on a Sunday ensures you have incredible dinners for busy weeknights, as the raisins continue to plump and the spices deepen in the fridge. Reheat it with a crispy fried egg on top, or use it as the traditional filling for empanadas.



Frijoles Negros Rápidos

free-HOH-les NEH-gros RAH-pee-dos

A proper pot of Cuban black beans is the rhythmic heartbeat of the home kitchen, traditionally demanding an overnight soak and hours of simmering. But for the diaspora cook racing against a Tuesday night clock, nostalgia requires a clever cheat. By deploying high-quality canned beans, respecting their starchy canning liquid, and building an uncompromising sofrito, you can replicate the thick, velvety cuajado of a grandmother's stovetop in under thirty minutes. It is a deeply savory, earthy bowl of absolute comfort—and fundamentally, unapologetically, never spicy.

INGREDIENTS

3 tbsp	extra virgin olive oil	1 large	bay leaf
1 med	yellow onion <i>finely chopped</i>	1/4 cup	dry white wine
1 large	green bell pepper <i>cored, seeded, and finely chopped</i>	1 tsp	kosher salt
6 large	garlic <i>minced or crushed into a paste</i>	1/4 tsp	black pepper
1 tsp	ground cumin	1 tbsp	white distilled vinegar
1/2 tsp	dried oregano	1 tsp	granulated white sugar
3 15-oz can	canned black beans <i>undrained and unrinsed</i>	1 tbsp	extra virgin olive oil <i>for drizzling</i>

PREPARATION

- **Mise en place is critical.**

Chop the onion and bell pepper finely and evenly before you begin, as the sofrito requires your full attention to prevent scorching.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Build the flavor foundation slowly.**

Place a heavy-bottomed pot over medium heat and warm three tablespoons of olive oil. Add the onion and green bell pepper, sautéing patiently for 8 to 10 minutes until deeply softened and translucent, then stir in the minced garlic for another minute until highly fragrant.

- 2. Bloom the dry spices in the hot oil.**

Scatter the cumin and oregano directly into the sofrito, stirring constantly for 30 seconds to wake up their essential oils.

1. Combine the beans and forcefully release their starches.

Pour all three cans of beans—liquid included—into the pot along with the bay leaf, white wine, salt, and pepper. Using the back of a wooden spoon or a potato masher, gently crush about a quarter of the beans against the side of the pot to release their internal starches into the broth.

2. Simmer to achieve the velvety cuajado texture.

Bring the pot to a gentle boil, then immediately reduce the heat to low. Simmer uncovered for 15 to 20 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the watery liquid reduces into a thick, luxurious gravy.

3. Finish with the essential trinity off the heat.

Remove the pot from the heat and discard the bay leaf. Stir in the white vinegar and sugar, adjusting the salt if necessary, to perfectly balance the earthiness of the beans.

4. Serve with a final drizzle of raw oil.

Ladle the thick beans over perfectly steamed long-grain white rice, finishing each bowl with a splash of high-quality extra virgin olive oil.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Never drain the canned beans.**

The starchy canning liquid is liquid gold; it is entirely responsible for giving the beans their thick, stew-like body without hours of reducing.

● **Respect the flavor profile by omitting the heat.**

Traditional Cuban cooking relies on the aromatic sweetness of the ají cachucha, here replicated by the green bell pepper. Do not introduce jalapeños or chili powder; authentic frijoles negros are never spicy.

● **The acid must always go in last.**

Adding the vinegar and a pinch of sugar at the very end brightens the entire pot without toughening the skins of the beans during the simmer.



Arroz con Salchichas

If you want to understand the resilience and quiet genius of the Cuban kitchen, look no further than this legendary dish of refuge. When exiles arrived in the States in the 1960s with tight budgets, grandmothers who once cooked elaborate seafood feasts turned to cheap American pantry staples like canned Vienna sausages. By marrying these humble proteins with the sacred rhythm of the motherland—the holy trinity of the sofrito, the sharp tang of vino seco, and the golden hue of bijol—they created a masterpiece of survival that defined an entire generation. It isn't restaurant food; it's Tuesday night salvation that comes together in one pot and makes a Midwestern kitchen smell exactly like Havana.

INGREDIENTS

2 tbsp	extra-virgin olive oil	2 1/2 cup	water
1 med	yellow onion <i>finely chopped</i>	1 med	Maggi chicken bouillon cube <i>crumbled</i>
1/2 med	green bell pepper <i>finely chopped</i>	1/2 tsp	Bijol powder
4 med	garlic clove <i>minced</i>	1 med	bay leaf
8 oz	Spanish-style tomato sauce	1/2 tsp	ground cumin
1/4 cup	Vino Seco	1/2 tsp	dried oregano
9 oz	Vienna sausages <i>drained and sliced into thirds</i>	4 oz	roasted red pimientos <i>diced and undrained</i>
2 cup	long-grain white rice <i>washed thoroughly in cold water and drained well</i>	1/2 cup	canned sweet peas <i>drained</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Build the foundational aroma.

Heat the olive oil in a large, heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Add the chopped onion and green bell pepper, sautéing for about 5 minutes until soft and translucent. Push the vegetables slightly to the side, add the minced garlic, and cook for just 30 to 60 seconds until fragrant without letting it burn.

2. Caramelize the base and deglaze.

Pour in the tomato sauce, the sliced sausages, the cumin, and the oregano. Stir well to coat the sausages in the sofrito, letting the tomato sauce bubble and deepen in color for about 2 minutes. Pour in the Vino Seco to deglaze the pot, scraping up any flavorful bits from the bottom.

3. Toast the grain.

Add the washed and drained rice to the pot, stirring continuously for 1 to 2 minutes so that every single grain is coated in the fragrant oil. Sprinkle in the Bijol powder and mix until the rice turns a beautiful golden-yellow.

1. Simmer the rice without looking.

Pour in the water, crumble in the chicken bouillon cube, and add the bay leaf. Bring the liquid to a vigorous rolling boil, immediately cover the pot with a tight-fitting lid, drop the heat to the lowest possible setting, and set a timer for 20 minutes—do not open the lid under any circumstances.

2. Create the legendary raspitas.

After 20 minutes, keep the lid securely on and turn the heat up to medium for exactly 2 to 3 minutes. Stand by the stove and listen closely for a soft frying, crackling sound coming from the bottom of the pot; as soon as you hear it crackling well, turn the heat off completely.

3. Rest and fluff gently.

Leave the pot on the turned-off burner, lid still on, to rest for 5 minutes so the moisture redistributes. Remove the lid, add the drained sweet peas and the entire jar of pimientos with their liquid, and gently fluff the rice with a fork—never a wooden spoon—folding the crispy bits from the bottom evenly throughout the pot.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Embrace the crisp.**

The raspitas—the caramelized, crispy layer of rice at the bottom of the pot—is the prize of the dish. Do not skip the step of turning the heat up at the end, and be brave enough to let it toast.

● **Pantry substitutions.**

If you cannot find *Vino Seco*, substitute a dry white wine like Pinot Grigio mixed with a teaspoon of white vinegar. High-quality beef hot dogs or smoked chicken sausages are perfectly acceptable modern alternatives to Vienna sausages. If *Bijol* is unavailable, a quarter teaspoon of ground annatto mixed with a quarter teaspoon of turmeric works perfectly.



Camarones Enchilados

Don't let the name fool you. An authentic Cuban enchilado isn't out to scorch your palate; it's a deeply comforting, rich tomato and wine stew brought to the island by Haitian immigrants centuries ago. For first-generation kids trying to pull this off in an American suburb, the secret to hitting that exact Havana nostalgia requires zero pretense: a splash of standard supermarket ketchup for the perfect sweet-tangy balance, and the absolute discipline to add the shrimp at the very last second. Keep it simple, don't overcook the seafood, and serve it the right way—over a mountain of white rice.

INGREDIENTS

2 lb large raw shrimp
peeled and deveined

1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil

1 large yellow onion
finely diced

1/2 large green bell pepper
finely diced

1/2 large red bell pepper
finely diced

5 large garlic cloves
minced

8 oz plain tomato sauce

1/4 cup ketchup

1/2 cup dry white wine

4 oz diced pimientos
undrained with liquid reserved

1 tbsp white vinegar

1 tbsp Worcestershire sauce

1 tsp Tabasco or similar hot sauce

1 tsp dried oregano

1/2 tsp ground cumin

1 med bay leaf

1/2 tsp salt
plus more for seasoning

1/4 tsp black pepper

1/4 cup fresh parsley
finely chopped

PREPARATION

- **Prep your ingredients before you apply heat.**

This recipe moves fast once the sofrito is built. Have your onions, peppers, and garlic diced and ready to go before you turn on the stove.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Dry and season the shrimp.**

Rinse the shrimp and pat them ruthlessly dry with paper towels—wet seafood will water down the beautiful sauce you're about to build. Toss them with a light pinch of salt and pepper and set aside.

- 2. Build the foundational sofrito.**

Heat the olive oil in a heavy-bottomed skillet or Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Add the diced onion and bell peppers, sautéing for about five to seven minutes until they surrender and soften. Push them to the edges, drop the minced garlic in the center, and cook for just thirty seconds until fragrant.

1. Simmer the enchilado sauce.

Pour in the tomato sauce, ketchup, dry wine, the entire jar of pimientos along with their liquid, vinegar, Worcestershire, and hot sauce. Stir in the oregano, cumin, and bay leaf. Bring it to a gentle boil, immediately drop the heat to medium-low, cover, and let it simmer for fifteen minutes to let the harsh edges burn off and the magic happen.

2. Poach the shrimp.

Uncover the pan. The sauce should be dark, thick, and smelling unmistakably of home. Fold in the seasoned shrimp, cover the pan again, and leave the heat on low for exactly four to five minutes.

3. Finish and serve immediately.

The second the shrimp curl into loose C-shapes and turn bright pink, cut the heat to avoid rubbery seafood. Pluck out the bay leaf, stir in the fresh parsley, and serve immediately in shallow bowls over fluffy white rice.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Replicating authentic vino seco.**

Cuban 'vino seco' is a highly salted cooking wine. If you can't find a bottle of Edmundo or Goya at your local grocer, standard dry white wine works beautifully, but be sure to add the half teaspoon of salt called for in this recipe to replicate that classic saline profile.



Potaje de Garbanzos Express

Eating a blistering hot stew in tropical weather defies common sense, yet in Cuba, it is a non-negotiable pillar of life. To pull this off on an American weeknight without sacrificing the dish's soul, we rely on high-quality canned chickpeas and a fiercely defended sofrito. The secret to authenticity isn't endless simmering; it's respecting the rendered fat of Spanish chorizo, and the grandmother-approved trick of mashing a few beans at the end to instantly transform a thin broth into a rich, velvety masterpiece.

INGREDIENTS

30 oz canned chickpeas
drained and thoroughly rinsed

4 cup low-sodium chicken broth

1 large Russet potato
peeled and cut into 1-inch chunks

1 cup	kabocha or butternut squash <i>cut into 1-inch chunks</i>	4 clove	garlic <i>mashed into a paste with a pinch of salt</i>
4 oz	Spanish-style semi-cured chorizo <i>cut into 1/4-inch rounds</i>	1/4 cup	tomato sauce
4 oz	thick-cut smoked bacon <i>diced</i>	1/4 cup	vino seco or dry white wine
1 tbsp	olive oil	1 tsp	ground cumin
1 med	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	1/2 tsp	dried oregano
1/2 large	green bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	1/2 tsp	Spanish smoked paprika
3 med	ají cachucha or mini sweet bell peppers <i>seeded and minced</i>	1 med	bay leaf
		1 packet	Sazón with culantro and achiote

PREPARATION

- **Wash off the canning liquid entirely.**

Do not skip rinsing the canned chickpeas. Removing the metallic, starchy canning liquid is essential for the beans to properly absorb the complex flavors of the sofrito and rendered pork fat.

- **Mash the garlic with salt.**

Using a mortar and pestle to mash the garlic cloves with a pinch of salt breaks down the cell walls more effectively than mincing, releasing the volatile oils necessary for a true Cuban flavor base.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Render the meats to build the foundation.**

Place a heavy-bottomed Dutch oven over medium heat. Add the diced bacon and chorizo. Sauté until the meats are browned and have released their deep, smoky fat into the pot, about 5 to 7 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, remove the meats and set them aside, leaving the rendered fat in the pot.

1. Build the authentic sofrito.

Reduce the heat to medium-low. Add the olive oil if the meats did not render enough fat, followed by the onion, green bell pepper, and ají cachucha. Sauté slowly for 5 to 8 minutes until the onions are translucent. Clear a small space in the center, add the mashed garlic paste, cumin, oregano, and smoked paprika, and stir continuously for 1 minute until highly aromatic.

2. Deglaze the pot and combine the flavors.

Stir in the tomato sauce and cook for 2 minutes to cook out the raw tomato flavor. Pour in the vino seco to deglaze the pot, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom. Let the wine reduce by half.

3. Simmer the stew.

Return the browned chorizo and bacon to the pot. Add the rinsed chickpeas, cubed potato, squash, bay leaf, Sazón, and chicken broth. Bring the mixture to a gentle boil, then reduce the heat to low. Cover and let it simmer for 20 to 25 minutes, or until the potatoes and squash are completely fork-tender.

4. Thicken the broth with the traditional cuajar technique.

Turn off the heat. Using a ladle, scoop out about 1 cup of the solids (ensuring a good mix of chickpeas, potatoes, and squash) along with a little broth. Transfer this to a bowl and mash it vigorously with a fork to create a smooth, starchy paste. Stir this paste back into the main pot.

5. Apply the final polish.

Turn the heat back to medium-low and let the potaje simmer uncovered for another 5 minutes. The starches will activate, transforming the thin liquid into a thick, velvety stew. Taste and adjust for salt and pepper, remove the bay leaf, and serve hot over white rice.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The strict rule of Spanish chorizo.**

You must use Spanish-style, semi-cured or fully cured chorizo (like Cantimpalo) found near the deli section. Raw, squishy Mexican chorizo will disintegrate, release chili oils, and completely ruin the authentic flavor profile of this dish.

- **Replicating the ají cachucha.**

Ají cachucha provides a distinct floral aroma without blistering heat. If unavailable at a Latin grocer, substitute three mini sweet peppers and a microscopic sliver of habanero to mimic the fragrance without blowing out your palate.

- **Weekend traditionalists and the Instant Pot.**

If you want to honor the traditional dry-bean method, soak 1 pound of dried chickpeas overnight. Cook them in an electric pressure cooker with 5 cups of water and the meats on high pressure for 25 minutes. Make the sofrito separately on the stove, then combine and simmer the potatoes on the Sauté function until tender.



Huevos Habaneros

If there is a single dish that dismantles the American misconception that all Latin food is fiery, it is Huevos Habaneros. The name translates simply to "Havana-style," requiring exactly zero blistering chili peppers to achieve its profound, comforting depth. It relies entirely on the slow, methodical alchemy of a traditional sofrito—onions, bell peppers, and garlic sweated down until sweet, then simmered with crushed tomatoes and a sharp splash of dry sherry. Slipped into this rich sauce, the eggs are baked with a finishing drizzle of melted butter, a grandmother-approved secret that enriches the whites. It is an elemental, deeply restorative meal born out of pantry staples, proving that true culinary magic takes patience, not heat.

INGREDIENTS

3 tbsp	extra virgin olive oil	4 oz	jarred pimientos <i>diced and drained</i>
1 small	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	1/2 tsp	ground cumin
1/2 med	green bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	1/2 tsp	kosher salt
1/2 med	red bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	1/4 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
3 med	garlic cloves <i>finely minced</i>	8 large	eggs
8 oz	tomato sauce	4 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>melted</i>
3 tbsp	dry sherry	1 tbsp	fresh parsley <i>chopped</i>
		1 tsp	sweet Spanish paprika

PREPARATION

- **Dice the aromatics consistently.**

Take the time to finely and uniformly dice the onion and bell peppers before you begin; large, chunky vegetables will disrupt the smooth, cohesive texture of a proper sofrito.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven and prepare your baking vessels.**

Heat the oven to 350°F and lightly grease four individual oven-proof ramekins, or plan to bypass them entirely and bake the dish straight in your wide, oven-safe cooking skillet.

- 2. Build the foundational sofrito.**

Warm the olive oil in a medium skillet over medium-low heat, then add the diced onion and both bell peppers. Sauté slowly for 5 to 7 minutes until the onions are soft and translucent, deliberately avoiding high heat so the natural sweetness of the vegetables can develop.

1. Bloom the garlic.

Stir the minced garlic into the softened vegetables and cook for exactly 1 minute more, just until it releases its raw, pungent aroma without scorching.

2. Simmer and thicken the sauce.

Pour in the tomato sauce, dry sherry, drained pimientos, cumin, kosher salt, and black pepper. Bring the mixture to a gentle simmer and let it cook undisturbed for 10 minutes, allowing the sauce to reduce and thicken enough to confidently support the weight of a raw egg.

3. Divide the sauce.

If plating traditionally, spoon the thickened sofrito evenly among the four prepared ramekins, filling each about halfway to the rim.

4. Position the eggs carefully over the sauce.

Crack two eggs into a small cup first to ensure no broken yolks or stray shells, then gently slide them onto the surface of the sofrito in one of the ramekins, repeating this process for all servings.

5. Apply the golden secret.

Spoon one tablespoon of melted butter directly over the raw eggs in each ramekin, a crucial technique that bastes the whites as they cook and provides a deeply comforting richness.

6. Bake to your preferred doneness.

Place the ramekins on a baking sheet and bake for 12 to 15 minutes if you prefer set whites with a runny yolk. If you want to eat exactly like a Cuban grandmother, leave them in for 20 to 25 minutes until the yolks are fully hard-cooked.

7. Garnish and serve immediately.

Carefully remove the bubbling ramekins from the oven, scatter the fresh parsley and sweet paprika over the top, and serve alongside pressed, buttered Cuban bread or a bed of white rice.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The habanero fallacy.**

Remember that this dish contains absolutely zero spicy peppers; "habanero" simply refers to the residents of Havana, relying entirely on sweet bell peppers and slow-cooked aromatics for its identity.

- **Standardizing the wine.**

Authentic Cuban cooking utilizes 'vino seco', which is standard in Miami markets. In a standard American kitchen, regular dry sherry from the vinegar aisle or a splash of leftover dry white wine works flawlessly.

- **The weeknight skillet shortcut.**

If washing four individual ramekins on a Tuesday night sounds terrible, simply crack all eight eggs directly into the thickened sofrito in your oven-safe skillet and bake the entire meal family-style.



Albóndigas a la Cubana

ahl-BOHN-dee-gahs ah lah koo-BAH-nah

In the diaspora kitchen, the smell of onion, garlic, and bell pepper hitting hot oil isn't just cooking; it is the smell of home. These are not Italian meatballs meant to simmer all Sunday, nor are they the rice-bound Mexican albóndigas floating in broth. These are unapologetically Cuban—massive, tender, and braised in a rich sofrito sauce. The secret to that melt-in-the-mouth texture is skipping breadcrumbs entirely in favor of milk-soaked saltines, a trick lifted straight from the 1950s Havana pantry. A light dusting of flour gives them a protective crust and naturally thickens the sauce as they

simmer. Serve them over a mountain of white rice, let the dry cooking wine do the heavy lifting, and taste exactly what a Tuesday night at grandmother's house was supposed to be.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	ground beef <i>80/20 chuck</i>	1/2 cup	all-purpose flour
1 cup	saltine crackers <i>crushed</i>	3 tbsp	olive oil
1/4 cup	whole milk	1 med	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>
2 large	eggs <i>lightly beaten</i>	1/2 med	green bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>
1/4 cup	yellow onion <i>grated to a paste</i>	4 med	garlic cloves <i>minced</i>
1/4 cup	green bell pepper <i>grated to a paste</i>	1/2 cup	vino seco <i>or dry white wine mixed with a pinch of salt</i>
2 med	garlic cloves <i>minced</i>	15 oz	Spanish-style tomato sauce
1 tsp	ground cumin	1 cup	water <i>or low-sodium beef broth</i>
1 tsp	dried oregano	2 tbsp	ketchup
1 tsp	yellow mustard	1 tsp	sugar
1 1/2 tsp	kosher salt	1 med	bay leaf
1/2 tsp	black pepper	1/2 cup	sweet peas <i>thawed if frozen</i>

PREPARATION

- **Bring the ground beef to room temperature.**

Pull the beef from the refrigerator twenty minutes before mixing so it incorporates evenly with the aromatics without overworking the proteins.

- **Grate the aromatics for the meatballs.**

Take the time to grate the onion and bell pepper into a fine paste rather than dicing them; this ensures they melt seamlessly into the beef without creating chunky textural interruptions.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Hydrate the cracker meal to form the binder.**

In a large bowl, toss the crushed saltines with the milk and let it sit for two minutes until it forms a soft paste, ensuring a delicately tender meatball.

- 2. Mix the meat and aromatics with a light hand.**

Add the ground beef, beaten eggs, grated onion, grated bell pepper, minced garlic, cumin, oregano, mustard, salt, and pepper to the cracker paste, folding gently just until combined so the proteins stay tender.

- 3. Shape the meatballs and dust them in flour.**

Roll the mixture into golf ball-sized rounds, then toss them lightly in a shallow dish of all-purpose flour, tapping off the excess to create a barrier that protects them in the pan and thickens the sauce later.

- 4. Sear the meatballs to build a golden crust.**

Heat the olive oil in a wide Dutch oven over medium-high heat and brown the meatballs in batches for two to three minutes per side, then transfer them to a plate while leaving the flavorful fat in the pot.

- 5. Build the sofrito base in the same pot.**

Lower the heat to medium, add the diced onion and bell pepper, and sauté for five minutes until softened, scraping up the browned beef bits from the bottom before stirring in the garlic for one minute.

- 6. Deglaze the pan with vino seco and build the sauce.**

Pour in the dry cooking wine and let it bubble rapidly for one minute to cook off the alcohol, then stir in the tomato sauce, water, ketchup, sugar, and bay leaf, bringing the liquid to a gentle boil.

1. Braise the meatballs slowly in the tomato sauce.

Nestle the seared meatballs back into the bubbling sauce, cover with a tight-fitting lid, and reduce the heat to low, simmering for 25 to 30 minutes until they are cooked through and remarkably tender.

2. Stir in the sweet peas to finish the dish.

Remove the lid, discard the bay leaf, and gently fold in the sweet peas, letting them warm through for two minutes before serving immediately over long-grain white rice.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The secret to the texture is cracker meal.**

Avoid Italian breadcrumbs or panko; traditional galleta molida or crushed saltines yield a starchier matrix that dissolves into the meat, retaining moisture without creating dense air pockets.

● **Do not fear the ketchup and mustard.**

While they might sound like Americanized shortcuts, yellow mustard in the meat and ketchup in the sauce were canonical pantry staples in pre-revolution Havana, providing crucial emulsification and balanced acidity.

● **Sourcing vino seco.**

Vino seco is a salted, sherry-like Cuban cooking wine available at most Latin grocers, but if you cannot find it, substituting a standard dry white wine like Pinot Grigio with a pinch of salt works perfectly.



La Ventanita at Home (Mornings & Miami Rhythms)

Recreating the iconic Cuban walk-up coffee and pastry windows for the home kitchen.

For the diaspora, the ventanita isn't just a takeout window; it's the chaotic, caffeine-fueled altar of the morning. It's the hiss of the espresso machine, the rapid-fire neighborhood gossip, and the unapologetic hit of sugar and grease that makes waking up bearable.

You don't need a sidewalk window in Hialeah to capture that rhythm. These are the lifeblood rituals stripped down for the home kitchen, where store-bought puff pastry is a pragmatic virtue, not a culinary sin, and whipping a proper espumita is a basic survival skill. Warm the milk, press the toast, and let a quick croqueta do its holy work.



01. FRONT

02. 3/4 LEFT

03. SIDE

04. BACK

05. CLOSE UP





El Cafecito Perfecto y La Tostada Cubana

Before the global chains sanitized our mornings, there was *la ventanita*—the little walk-up window at the local Cuban bakery. The hiss of buttery bread hitting a hot *plancha* and the rhythmic clatter of tiny plastic cups are the sensory heartbeats of the diaspora. You don't need a commercial machine to replicate this ritual at home. Armed with a cheap stovetop Moka pot, a brick of dark roast from the Latin aisle, and the grandmotherly trick of violently whipping the first concentrated drops of coffee with sugar, you create a flawless *espumita*. Dunk a butter-soaked, flattened strip of toast into that dark, sweet brew, and you have the undisputed taste of home.

INGREDIENTS

1 cup	filtered water <i>cool</i>	1 large loaf	Pan Cubano or soft French bread <i>cut into 6-inch sections and sliced lengthwise</i>
1 cup	Cuban-style dark roast espresso grounds	4 tbsp	salted butter <i>softened to room temperature</i>
4 tbsp	white granulated sugar		

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Fill the bottom chamber of a Moka pot with water and the filter basket with espresso grounds.**
Level the coffee off with your finger, but do not pack or press it down; packing blocks the steam and extracts a bitter brew.
- 2. Place the sugar into a small pitcher or measuring cup.**
- 3. Heat the Moka pot over medium heat with the lid open to catch the first drops of espresso.**
The moment the coffee begins to brew, quickly pour about one teaspoon of the thick, dark liquid into the sugar, then close the lid and leave the pot on the heat to finish.
- 4. Vigorously whip the sugar and coffee drops together to create the espumita.**
Beat it hard with a spoon for about a minute. It will start looking like dark wet sand and transform into a thick, pale, caramel-colored paste.
- 5. Remove the Moka pot from the heat as soon as it gurgles and pour the brewed coffee over the sugar paste.**
Stir gently, and the thick caramel foam will magically rise to the top, crowning your cafecito.
- 6. Generously butter both the inside crumb and the outside crusts of your sliced bread.**
The exterior butter is crucial for achieving that shattered, golden crunch when it hits the hot pan.

- 1. Toast the bread in a large cast-iron skillet over medium heat, using a second heavy pan to weigh it down.**

Press the sandwich flat. Let it toast for 2 to 3 minutes until golden, then flip, replace your heavy top pan, and crisp the other side.

- 2. Slice the flattened tostada diagonally into strips and serve alongside the hot espresso.**

The ritual is non-negotiable: dunk the buttery, crispy bread directly into the sweet coffee and eat immediately.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Vacuum-sealed diaspora staples like Cafe Bustelo, Pilon, or La Llave are the authentic choices here.**

They offer the bold, robust flavor profile necessary to cut through the intense sweetness of the sugar.

- **If using a supermarket French loaf, avoid chewy artisan baguettes.**

You want a soft, airy middle with a thin crust to best mimic the lard-based Pan Cubano.



Pastelitos de Guayaba y Queso

pah-steh-lee-tos de gwah-yah-bah ee keh-so

If you grew up near a Cuban enclave, your weekend mornings smelled exactly like this. The pastelito is the undisputed king of the Miami bakery window—a brilliant, unpretentious masterclass in contrasts where shatteringly crisp dough gives way to molten, hyper-sweet guava, only to be abruptly cut by the cold lactic tang of pure cream cheese. Grandmothers across the diaspora figured out how to recreate this magic using standard American supermarkets without losing the soul of the dish. They embraced commercial puff pastry, refused to sugar the cheese, and finished the bake with a sticky sugar syrup that demands you lick your fingers. It's a perfect reproduction of the ventanita experience, engineered for a Tuesday night.

INGREDIENTS

1 pkg	frozen puff pastry sheets <i>thawed</i>	1 large	large egg <i>beaten</i>
10 oz	guava paste <i>cut into 1/4-inch thick slices</i>	1 tbsp	water
8 oz	full-fat cream cheese <i>kept cold and cut into 9 equal slices</i>	1/4 cup	granulated white sugar
		1/4 cup	water

PREPARATION

- **Thaw the puff pastry.**

Leave the frozen sheets at room temperature for 40 minutes, or wrap in a damp paper towel and microwave on defrost in 15-second bursts just until pliable enough to unfold without snapping. Do not let the butter melt.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 400°F.**

High heat is mandatory; it is what shocks the commercial puff pastry into rising into hundreds of flaky layers. Line a large rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper.

- 2. Section the base dough.**

Unfold the first sheet of thawed puff pastry directly onto your parchment-lined baking sheet and cut it into a 3x3 grid to create nine equal squares.

- 3. Layer the cheese and guava.**

Place one slice of cold cream cheese in the dead center of each pastry square, then top it with a slice of guava paste, making sure to leave a distinct, empty border around the dough edges.

1. Seal the pastry pockets.

Brush the exposed borders with a mixture of the beaten egg and one tablespoon of water. Place a matching, pre-cut square of puff pastry on top of each base, and press the edges down firmly with your fingertips to seal.

2. Vent the top crusts.

Using a sharp paring knife, cut two to three small slits directly in the top center of each pastelito. Do not skip this, or the steam from the filling will rupture the sides of the pastry.

3. Apply the egg wash and bake.

Brush the entire surface of the pastries generously with the remaining egg wash, then transfer to the middle rack of the oven. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes until deeply puffed and a rich, dark golden brown.

4. Boil the bakery glaze.

While the pastries are in their final 5 minutes of baking, combine the sugar and 1/4 cup of water in a small saucepan. Bring to a rapid boil over medium-high heat for 3 to 4 minutes until the sugar dissolves into a light syrup.

5. Glaze the hot pastries.

Immediately brush the hot syrup generously over the pastelitos the second they emerge from the oven to create that iconic, sticky shine. Let them cool for at least 15 minutes before serving so the molten guava does not burn your mouth.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Do not buy guava jelly or jam.**

You must buy the firm block of guava paste, usually found wrapped in plastic or in a tin in the international aisle. Jelly possesses too much free water and will violently boil out of the pastry.

● **Leave the cream cheese alone.**

Do not whip the cheese or add sugar or vanilla to it. The traditional profile relies entirely on the unsweetened tang of the cheese cutting through the extreme sweetness of the guava paste.

- **Skip the glaze if you are short on time.**

If you want to skip boiling the simple syrup, simply sprinkle two tablespoons of turbinado or granulated sugar over the egg-washed pastries right before baking.



Croquetas de Jamón

To bite into a perfect Cuban croqueta is to taste the soul of Miami's walk-up ventanitas. This isn't a fussy Spanish tapa; it's a Caribbean survival mechanism that evolved into an iconic daily ritual. We're skipping the notoriously difficult liquid centers of the motherland for the grandmother-approved, deeply savory masa that belongs in a paper bag alongside a scorching cafecito. The secret isn't complicated, but the rules are strict: pulverize the ham into submission, rely on the indispensable trinity of nutmeg, vino seco, and saltine crackers, and chill the dough with extreme prejudice so they don't blow up in your fryer.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	thick-cut deli ham <i>cut into chunks</i>	1/8 tsp	nutmeg <i>freshly grated</i>
4 tbsp	unsalted butter	1/4 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
2 tbsp	canola oil	1 cup	all-purpose flour
1/2 cup	shallots <i>finely minced</i>	3 large	large eggs <i>beaten thoroughly with 1 tbsp water</i>
1 cup	all-purpose flour	2 cup	saltine crackers <i>pulverized to fine sand</i>
1 cup	whole milk <i>warmed slightly</i>	1 qt	canola oil <i>for frying</i>
1 tbsp	vino seco or dry white wine		

PREPARATION

- **Make the masa on a Sunday.**

The dough demands a serious chill to roll properly. Make the paste on the weekend, keep it in the fridge for up to 3 days, and you can bread and fry them in under 15 minutes on a busy Wednesday.

- **Process the crackers first.**

Run the saltines through your food processor before the ham to avoid washing the bowl twice. You want the crackers reduced to a fine, sandy dust.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Pulverize the ham into a fine paste.**

Pulse the ham chunks in a food processor until they become a homogenous paste resembling coarse sand rather than diced cubes.

- 2. Build the aromatic base.**

In a large skillet over medium heat, melt the butter with the 2 tablespoons of canola oil and sauté the shallots until translucent and soft, about 4 to 5 minutes.

1. Cook out the raw flour.

Stir in the pulverized ham, then evenly sprinkle 1 cup of the flour over the mixture, stirring vigorously for 2 minutes to cook off the raw cereal flavor of the starch.

2. Hydrate and flavor the masa.

Lower the heat slightly and slowly pour in the warmed milk, stirring constantly to prevent lumps, followed by the vino seco, nutmeg, and black pepper.

3. Work the dough until it surrenders.

Continue stirring vigorously until the mixture transforms from a thick sauce into a cohesive ball that pulls away completely clean from the sides and bottom of the pan.

4. Enforce the mandatory chill.

Transfer the dough to a shallow dish, press plastic wrap directly onto the surface to prevent a skin from forming, and refrigerate for at least 2 hours.

5. Roll the cylinders.

Lightly oil your hands and roll 2-tablespoon scoops of the cold dough into smooth, cork-shaped cylinders about two and a half inches long.

6. Seal the crust.

Dredge each cylinder lightly in the remaining 1 cup of flour, dip thoroughly into the beaten eggs, and roll in the pulverized saltines until uniformly coated.

7. Fry to a deep golden brown.

Heat 2 inches of oil to 350°F in a deep skillet and fry the croquetas closely side-by-side for 3 to 4 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack to drain.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Prevent an explosion in your fryer.**

If your croquetas are bursting open in the hot oil, the center is turning to steam before the crust sets. Place the breaded croquetas in the freezer for 15 minutes right before frying to guarantee their survival.

- **Ditch the panko.**

Japanese breadcrumbs have no business here. Panko creates a jagged exterior that absorbs too much oil, whereas ground soda crackers yield the canonical fine, snap-heavy crust of a true Cuban croqueta.

- **Chef Pepín's crowding trick.**

Unlike most fried foods where you want plenty of space, drop these closely side-by-side in the hot oil. The physical proximity stops them from rolling aggressively and bursting during the initial shock of the fry.



Pan con Tortilla

pahn kohn tor-tee-yah

The pressed Cuban sandwich gets the Hollywood treatment, but the humble pan con tortilla is the true engine of Miami's walk-up windows. Born out of island scarcity and transformed by diaspora abundance, this soft, savory omelet sandwich is the ultimate equalizer. Stuffed with sweet ham, melting Swiss, and the crucial crunch of canned potato sticks, it requires no heavy plancha or special equipment. Just find the softest loaf in your supermarket, respect the residual heat, and you've got a masterpiece that tastes exactly like home.

INGREDIENTS

1 med	soft French loaf <i>cut into two 6-inch sections and sliced horizontally</i>	1/8 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly cracked</i>
2 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>softened</i>	1 tbsp	olive oil
2 tbsp	mayonnaise	1/4 cup	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>
4 large	eggs	4 slice	deli sweet ham
1 tbsp	whole milk	4 slice	Swiss cheese
1/4 tsp	kosher salt	1/2 cup	canned shoestring potato sticks

PREPARATION

- **Have your fillings ready to go.**

The eggs cook in a matter of seconds. Have your cheese, ham, and papitas within arm's reach before the eggs hit the hot pan.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Toast the bread and prepare the base.**

Lightly butter the inside halves of the bread and toast cut-side down in a skillet over medium heat until just warm and golden, then swipe the bottom halves with mayonnaise.

- 2. Sauté the aromatics.**

In an 8-inch non-stick skillet, heat the olive oil over medium heat, add the diced onions, and cook for 3 to 4 minutes until deeply translucent and sweet.

- 3. Whisk and pour the eggs.**

Vigorously whisk the eggs, milk, salt, and pepper until slightly frothy, then pour them directly over the sizzling onions.

1. Execute the omelet fold.

When the edges begin to set after about 20 seconds, use a rubber spatula to gently push them inward, tilting the pan so the raw egg runs out to the hot edges.

2. Layer the meat and cheese.

While the egg is mostly set but still slightly wet on top, lay the Swiss cheese evenly across the center of the egg, followed by the ham.

3. Fold and steam to melt.

Carefully fold the omelet in half over the fillings, drop the heat to low, and cover the pan with a lid for 30 seconds to trap the heat without turning the eggs to rubber.

4. Assemble and deliver the crunch.

Slide the hot omelet directly onto the mayo-slathered bread, crown generously with the potato sticks, press the top bun on very lightly, and slice diagonally.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Sourcing the bread is your biggest hurdle.**

Authentic pan cubano uses lard for a flaky, delicate crumb. If you aren't near a Cuban bakery, buy the absolute squishiest, softest French or Italian loaf in the supermarket; hard, crusty artisanal baguettes will ruin the texture and squeeze the eggs out when you bite.

● **Do not skip the papitas.**

Canned shoestring potatoes provide the essential textural crunch that elevates this from a standard breakfast item to a true Miami ventanita experience.

● **Do not press this sandwich.**

Unlike a traditional Cubano, the pan con tortilla should remain soft and pillowy to match the delicate texture of the egg.



Batido de Mamey

If there is a defining flavor of the Cuban tropics, it is mamey. It is a gorgeous, salmon-pink fruit that tastes like a miraculous hybrid of sweet potato, cherry, and toasted almond. In the diaspora, a true batido is not some Americanized milkshake bloated with vanilla ice cream. The secret lies in the island's pantry: a heavy pour of sweetened condensed milk, a tiny pinch of salt to make the flavor explode, and the absolute mandate to drink it immediately before the fruit's natural enzymes turn bitter. It is a nostalgic lifeline to the homeland, poured straight into a frosted glass.

INGREDIENTS

14 oz

frozen mamey pulp
slightly thawed and broken into chunks

1 1/2 cup

whole milk
very cold

1/4 cup	sweetened condensed milk	1 pinch	kosher salt
1 tbsp	white granulated sugar	1/2 tsp	pure vanilla extract
1 cup	crushed ice		

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Combine the ingredients in a high-speed blender.**

Drop the broken chunks of mamey pulp into the pitcher along with the cold whole milk, sweetened condensed milk, sugar, crushed ice, kosher salt, and vanilla extract.

2. **Blend until perfectly emulsified.**

Start the blender on low to break up the ice and frozen fruit, then increase the speed to high. Blend for a full one to two minutes until the mixture is incredibly smooth, frothy, and a vibrant coral-pink color.

3. **Taste and adjust the balance.**

Pause the blender and taste. If the mamey is slightly tart, add another spoonful of condensed milk or sugar. If the batido is too thick, thin it with a splash of whole milk.

4. **Pour and serve immediately.**

Divide into tall, frosted glasses and drink right away. Do not let the shake sit in the fridge for later, or the fruit's natural enzymes will quickly develop a bitter aftertaste.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Using fresh mamey sapote.**

If you have access to a Latin grocer that sells fresh mamey sapote, look for one that yields slightly when pressed, exactly like a ripe avocado. Slice it in half lengthwise, remove the large pit, and scoop out the flesh. Use about 1 1/2 to 2 cups of fresh flesh, and double the amount of ice since you are no longer using frozen fruit.



Sándwich "El Preparado"

sahn-weech el preh-pah-rah-doh

In Miami's diaspora, the classic Cuban sandwich wasn't enough to satisfy the frantic pace and emotional hunger of exile. At the legendary *ventanitas*—the walk-up coffee windows that fuel the city—locals stuffed it with deep-fried ham croquettes, birthing a masterful textural dichotomy of sharp yellow mustard cutting through rich pork, melted Swiss, and the molten béchamel of a golden croqueta. For a weeknight, bypass the multi-day from-scratch croqueta project; grab a box of good frozen ones, fire up the *plancha*, and smash it all together. It is an unapologetic caloric monolith and the ultimate homage to working-class ingenuity.

INGREDIENTS

1 large	Pan Cubano or soft Italian loaf <i>cut into two 8-inch sections and sliced horizontally</i>	2 tbsp	mayonnaise
6 med	frozen croquetas de jamón <i>fried or baked according to package instructions until hot and crispy</i>	4 oz	Swiss cheese <i>sliced</i>
4 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>softened to room temp</i>	8 oz	sweet or smoked deli ham <i>thinly sliced</i>
2 tbsp	yellow mustard	1/2 cup	leftover roast pork
		8 med	dill pickles <i>thinly sliced</i>

PREPARATION

- **Build the authentic béchamel base.**

If making croquetas from scratch: sweat a minced yellow onion and 2 cloves of minced garlic in 4 tablespoons of butter until soft. Whisk in 1/3 cup plus 2 tablespoons of flour and cook for 2 minutes, then aggressively whisk in 1 cup of warm whole milk until an incredibly thick paste forms.

- **Flavor and chill the croqueta paste.**

Stir in 1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg, 1 tablespoon dry cooking wine, salt, white pepper, and 1 pound of finely ground ham. Press plastic wrap directly onto the surface of the paste and refrigerate for at least 4 hours, or overnight, until completely firm.

- **Shape and bread the croquetas.**

Roll tablespoon-sized portions into 2-inch logs. Dredge in flour, dip in beaten eggs, and coat firmly in seasoned breadcrumbs. Freeze the logs for 15 minutes before frying to prevent them from bursting.

- **Fry to golden perfection.**

Deep-fry the chilled croquetas in 365°F oil for 3 to 4 minutes until deeply browned. The exterior will crisp instantly while the interior liquefies back into a creamy, savory sauce.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Prepare the bread.

Spread the yellow mustard generously on the interior of the top half of the bread and the mayonnaise on the bottom half.

2. Build the meat and cheese foundation.

Layer half of the Swiss cheese on the bottom bun, acting as a moisture barrier, followed by an even layer of the ham and roast pork.

3. Position the croquetas.

Lay the hot, freshly cooked croquetas lengthwise across the bed of meat.

4. Apply the acid and the glue.

Top the croquetas with the sliced pickles and the remaining Swiss cheese, which will melt and fuse the massive sandwich together.

5. Smash the sandwich.

Place the top bun over the fillings and press down firmly with the palm of your hand until you hear a slight crunch. The croquetas must flatten slightly to mingle with the mustard and meats; if they remain perfectly cylindrical, the massive sandwich will fall apart in your hands.

6. Butter the exterior.

Generously slather the softened butter completely across the top and bottom exterior crusts of the bread to ensure a deeply golden fry.

7. Press and toast.

Toast in a preheated panini press, or in a large skillet weighed down by a foil-wrapped brick or heavy cast-iron pan. Cook for 3 to 4 minutes per side until the highly compressed bread sounds hollow and crispy when tapped and the Swiss cheese cascades over the edges.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Sourcing the bread.**

Authentic Cuban bread contains lard and yields a distinct, papery crust. If unavailable, a wide, soft Italian or French loaf is your best substitute. Avoid crusty artisan baguettes, which are far too tough and will shatter the croquettes when pressed.

- **The weeknight croqueta shortcut.**

True Cuban croquetas are bound by an incredibly thick, nutmeg-scented béchamel sauce, not potatoes. While a weekend project of making croquetas from scratch is noble, sourcing a high-quality frozen brand from a Latin grocer saves hours and perfectly hits the authentic ventanita profile.



El Sándwich Elena Ruz

eh-LEH-nah ROOS

Long before secret menus were a thing, there was Elena Ruz. In 1930s Havana, this young socialite would roll into El Carmelo after a night out and demand a very specific, off-menu creation: sweet midnight bread loaded with roasted turkey, cream cheese, and strawberry jam. It was so bizarre, and so undeniably good, that they eventually put her name in neon lights in the window and charged a quarter for it. For the Cuban diaspora, this is the ultimate sweet-and-savory comfort food and the undisputed king of Thanksgiving leftovers. The secret to making it taste exactly like it does back home? Don't smash it in a plancha. Toast the sweet bread by itself so it stays pillowy, then pile on the cool, rich ingredients.

INGREDIENTS

2 large	brioche buns <i>sliced in half horizontally</i>	4 tbsp	plain cream cheese <i>softened to room temperature</i>
2 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>softened</i>	3 tbsp	strawberry preserves
		8 oz	roasted turkey breast <i>thickly sliced</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Butter the inside of the sweet rolls.**
Spread a thin, even layer of softened butter exclusively on the cut sides of the bread.
- 2. Toast the bread halves by themselves in a skillet.**
Do not use a panini press. Heat a large skillet over medium heat and place the bread butter-side down, toasting gently until the edges are golden brown and the crumb is warm and slightly crispy.
- 3. Spread the cream cheese and jam while the bread is still warm.**
Slather the softened cream cheese generously on the bottom halves of the rolls, and spread the strawberry preserves on the top halves.
- 4. Layer the turkey and serve immediately.**
Fold the roasted turkey slices over the cream cheese, close the sandwiches, and slice them in half diagonally to experience the magical contrast of warm, crispy sweet bread against cool cream cheese and savory meat.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The Miami diaspora twist.**
While Elena explicitly demanded strawberry jam, many modern Cuban-Americans swear by guava preserves for a nostalgic, tropical flair—swap it in if you have a jar sitting in the fridge.

- **Embrace the deli counter.**

If you don't have fresh leftover turkey on a busy weeknight, ask your local deli to slice their best oven-roasted turkey breast on the thicker side because ultra-thin shaved turkey gets lost against the dense cream cheese.



Empanadas de Pollo al Horno

The ventanita is a lifeline, dispensing cafecitos and hot pastries to the Miami faithful. But when you live a thousand miles away in the American suburbs, you have to build that lifeline yourself. This is the authentic, grandmother-approved architecture of the Cuban empanada—savory chicken, the briny hit of Spanish olives, and the indispensable dry, salty tang of vino seco. We skip the deep-fryer for the oven, making it a realistic weeknight endeavor, especially when leaning on store-bought pastry discs. Keep the filling bone-dry, seal the edges tight, and you will conjure the genuine taste of home without breaking a sweat.

INGREDIENTS

2 tbsp	olive oil	1/2 tsp	dried oregano
1/2 med	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	1/4 cup	manzanilla olives stuffed with pimientos <i>sliced</i>
1/2 med	green bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	3 cup	cooked chicken <i>shredded (preferably from a rotisserie chicken)</i>
4 med	garlic cloves <i>minced</i>	10 med	empanada dough discs for baking <i>thawed if frozen</i>
1/4 cup	vino seco or dry cooking wine	1 large	egg <i>beaten with 1 tsp water</i>
1/2 cup	tomato sauce		
1/2 tsp	ground cumin		

PREPARATION

- **Shred a store-bought rotisserie chicken.**

To save time on a weeknight without sacrificing flavor, pull the dark and white meat from a cooked rotisserie bird and discard the skin and bones.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Build the foundational sofrito.**

Heat the olive oil in a skillet over medium heat, then sauté the onion and green bell pepper until soft, about 5 minutes, adding the garlic for the final minute of cooking.

- 2. Deglaze and simmer the aromatic base.**

Pour in the vino seco, tomato sauce, cumin, oregano, and olives, letting the mixture bubble and reduce slightly.

- 3. Incorporate the chicken and eliminate all moisture.**

Fold in the shredded chicken and cook until the liquid has completely evaporated, as the filling must be absolutely dry to prevent soggy empanadas in the oven.

1. Chill the filling completely.

Remove the skillet from the heat and let the chicken mixture cool down, preferably in the refrigerator, to ensure the pastry fat remains solid during assembly.

2. Assemble and seal the empanadas.

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Place two tablespoons of the cooled filling onto each dough disc, fold the dough into a half-moon, press the air out, and crimp the edges firmly with the tines of a fork.

3. Glaze and bake to a golden brown.

Transfer the empanadas to a parchment-lined baking sheet, brush the exteriors generously with the egg wash, and bake for 20 to 25 minutes until deeply golden.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Seek out vino seco.**

It is an oxidized, salted cooking wine that gives Cuban food its distinct character, but if you must use standard dry white wine, add a generous pinch of salt to mimic the profile.

● **Buy the right dough.**

Be certain to buy empanada discs labeled specifically for baking (*para hornear*), as the frying varieties lack the fat structure needed to turn flaky in the ambient heat of an oven.



Pan con Bistec de Ventanita

If you want to understand the heartbeat of the Cuban diaspora, you don't look to high-end dining; you walk up to a ventanita. These little takeout windows attached to Miami cafes are where the community gathers for gossip, espresso, and the greatest working-class hero of a sandwich ever conceived: the Pan con Bistec. It's a beautifully unpretentious thing—a thin, garlic-soaked steak flash-fried in minutes, crowned with onions that have soaked up all the pan drippings, and stuffed into toasted bread. The absolute non-negotiable secret to this glorious mess? A fistful of papitas finitas (crispy potato sticks) right inside the sandwich for crucial textural contrast. You don't need to live in Little Havana to make it; you just need a hot skillet and a love for serious, unapologetic flavor.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	top round steak <i>pounded 1/4-inch thin and cut into 4 portions</i>	2 tbsp	olive oil
6 med	garlic cloves <i>minced to a paste</i>	1 tbsp	neutral oil
1 tsp	kosher salt	1 large	yellow onion <i>thinly sliced</i>
1 tsp	dried oregano	4 large	soft hoagie rolls <i>halved horizontally</i>
1/2 tsp	ground cumin	1/4 cup	mayonnaise
1/2 tsp	black pepper	4 large	iceberg lettuce leaves
1/4 cup	fresh sweet orange juice	1 med	tomato <i>thinly sliced</i>
2 tbsp	fresh lime juice	1 cup	canned potato sticks
		1 tbsp	unsalted butter

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Build the grandmother's marinade.

In a mixing bowl, combine the garlic paste, kosher salt, dried oregano, ground cumin, and black pepper. Stir in the sweet orange juice, lime juice, and olive oil. Add the pounded steak portions, tossing them to ensure they are completely coated. Let the meat sit on the counter for 20 minutes while you prep the vegetables—a weeknight concession that still delivers immense flavor.

2. Flash-fry the steaks.

Heat the neutral oil in a large, heavy-bottomed skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Shake the excess marinade off the steaks, reserving the leftover liquid in the bowl, and drop the meat into the screaming hot pan. Sear hard and fast for only 1 to 2 minutes per side so they brown but remain tender, then immediately transfer the steaks to a cutting board.

1. **Deglaze with the onions.**

Do not wash the skillet. Lower the heat to medium and throw the sliced onions directly into the residual beef fat and browned bits. Pour in the reserved marinade and sauté for 3 to 5 minutes. The onions will scrape up all that incredible fond and drink in the meat juices until they are softened, translucent, and deeply savory.

2. **Assemble with structural integrity.**

Smear the cut sides of the hoagie rolls generously with mayonnaise to create a barrier against the meat juices. Lay down the hot steak, then spoon the savory, juicy onions directly over the meat. Top with the lettuce leaves and sliced tomato. Finally, pile a heavy handful of crispy potato sticks over the top before capping with the top half of the bread.

3. **Apply pressure and heat.**

In a clean skillet over medium-low heat, melt the unsalted butter. Place the assembled sandwiches in the pan and press down firmly with a heavy pot, a second skillet, or a sturdy spatula. Toast for 1 to 2 minutes per side until the bread is flattened, warmed through, and the crust yields with a satisfying crunch. Serve immediately.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Demystify the acid.**

Authentic Cuban mojo relies on naranja agria, or sour orange. Since it's nearly impossible to find fresh outside of Florida or the Caribbean, the universally accepted diaspora trick is mixing sweet orange juice with lime. It perfectly mimics the required pH and floral tartness to tenderize the meat without stress.

- **Respect the crunch.**

Canned potato sticks are not a cheap American shortcut; they are a culturally canonized ingredient of the true Miami ventanita experience. They provide the necessary textural contrast to the soft bread and tender meat. Whatever you do, do not skip them.



Almuerzo y La Merienda (The Midday Fuel & The 3 PM Pick-Me-Up)

Portable lunches, satisfying sandwiches, and nostalgic late-afternoon snacks to bridge the gap between lunch and dinner.

In the quiet, heavy stretch between noon and dusk, a specific kind of hunger sets in. It isn't the roaring appetite reserved for a Sunday lechón, but a persistent craving that requires immediate triage. This is the domain of almuerzo and la

merienda. It is a crust of Cuban bread shattered under the weight of a hot cast-iron skillet, oozing roast pork and sharp mustard. It is the sticky, glorious wedge of guava paste slapped against salty white cheese in a quick pan con timba.

These aren't the polished plates trotted out for company. They are the lifeblood of the afternoon—the foil-wrapped medianoche grabbed between shifts, or the dry galletas submerged into searing hot chocolate at three in the afternoon when the spirit requires a jolt of unapologetic sugar. These are the fixes. The unpretentious, middle-of-the-day rituals that instantly pull a first-generation kid right back to their grandmother's Formica table.





El Sándwich Cubano

If you grew up in a Cuban-American household, the smell of garlic, citrus, and roasting pork is the smell of home. You've seen the Hollywood approximations, and you've definitely suffered through menus offering "Cuban Sandwiches" slathered in mayonnaise and stuffed with lettuce. We aren't making that. This is the canonical, Miami-style Cuban. The secret to pulling this off on a busy Tuesday night is leaning on leftover mojo pork from Sunday dinner, or letting your slow cooker do the heavy lifting while you're at work. It's all about the architecture: stack it right, press it flat, and listen for the crunch. It tastes exactly like Miami, and exactly like Havana.

INGREDIENTS

4 lb	pork shoulder	1 tsp	black pepper
1 large	garlic <i>peeled and smashed</i>	1 large	soft French or Italian loaf <i>sliced horizontally, leaving a hinge if possible</i>
3/4 cup	sweet orange juice	1/2 lb	sweet deli ham <i>thinly sliced</i>
1/4 cup	lime juice	1/2 lb	Swiss cheese <i>thinly sliced</i>
1/2 cup	olive oil	1 cup	dill pickles <i>thinly sliced</i>
1 tbsp	dried oregano	1/4 cup	yellow mustard
1 tbsp	ground cumin	4 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>softened to room temp</i>
1 tbsp	kosher salt		

PREPARATION

- **Smash the garlic, oregano, cumin, salt, and pepper into a heavy paste.**
Use a blender or a traditional mortero to break down the garlic completely, then whisk in the orange juice, lime juice, and olive oil to form your mojo marinade.
- **Slow cook the pork shoulder in the mojo for eight hours.**
Place the pork in a slow cooker, pour the marinade over the top, and cook on low until the meat falls apart effortlessly.
- **Shred the meat and store it for your weeknight assembly.**
Pull the pork apart with two forks, tossing it back into its own garlicky juices. Keep it in the fridge; you'll need about one pound of it warmed up to build these sandwiches.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Spread a generous layer of yellow mustard on the inside of the top half of the bread.**

Keep it simple and traditional; mayonnaise is an unforgivable offense here.

- 1. Lay the sliced ham on the bottom half of the bread to act as a moisture barrier.**
This prevents the bottom crust from turning into a soggy mess when it meets the wet pork.
- 2. Pile a heavy layer of the warmed mojo pork directly over the ham.**
- 3. Top the hot pork with the Swiss cheese and an even layer of dill pickles.**
The residual heat from the pork will start melting the cheese immediately, giving the pickles a soft bed to sink into.
- 4. Close the sandwich and generously smear the outside crusts with softened butter.**
Do not skip the butter; this fat is essential for achieving a shattering, glass-like crunch on the bread when pressed.
- 5. Press the sandwich violently in a preheated cast-iron skillet over medium heat.**
Place the sandwich in the pan and immediately weigh it down with a second heavy skillet or a foil-wrapped brick, smashing it to one-third of its original thickness.
- 6. Cook until the crust is deeply golden and the cheese is oozing, flipping once.**
Give it 3 to 5 minutes per side. Once pressed and toasted, move it to a cutting board, slice diagonally, and eat immediately.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Recreate the flavor of true sour orange with a simple mathematical substitute.**
Authentic mojo relies on Naranja Agria, which is hard to find in American supermarkets. The blend of three parts sweet orange juice to one part lime juice mimics that specific acidic profile perfectly, tenderizing the pork without making it excessively tart.



El Sándwich Medianoche

Back in 1950s Havana, when the jazz clubs finally emptied out into the sultry pre-dawn air, this was the sandwich that absorbed the rum and kept the city alive. Unlike the working-class Sándwich Cubano, the Medianoche is built on a soft, slightly sweet egg bread that compresses on a hot plancha into a dense, butter-crisped, molten masterpiece. If you don't have a commercial press in your Midwestern kitchen, two cast-iron skillets will do the job perfectly. Just promise your abuela one thing: keep the lettuce, tomato, and mayonnaise far, far away from it.

INGREDIENTS

2 large soft brioche or challah
sandwich buns
halved horizontally

2 tbsp unsalted butter
softened at room temperature

1/4 lb deli Swiss cheese
thinly sliced

1/4 lb mojo-roasted pork
thinly sliced and brought to room temperature

1/4 lb sweet deli ham
thinly sliced

8 large dill pickle slices
patted completely dry with paper towels

2 tbsp yellow mustard

PREPARATION

- **The Weeknight Pork Pivot.**

If you don't have leftover Sunday mojo pork, buy thick-cut deli roast pork and toss it in a hot pan for two minutes with a splash of orange juice, a squeeze of lime, garlic powder, and cumin to fake a long marinade.

- **Manage your moisture.**

Sogginess is the enemy of a pressed sandwich. Patting the pickles dry and ensuring the meat is at room temperature ensures the cheese melts before the sweet bread burns.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Butter the exterior of the buns.**

Generously spread the softened butter on the outside (top and bottom) of both rolls, which is the absolute secret to achieving a golden, crispy shell on the griddle.

- 2. Build the moisture barrier from the bottom up.**

Lay the bottom buns butter-side down on your board and cover them with the Swiss cheese to protect the soft bread from becoming soggy.

- 3. Stack the meats and layer the pickles.**

Pile on the room-temperature roasted pork, followed by folded slices of the sweet ham and an even, flat layer of your dried dill pickles.

- 4. Apply the mustard and cap the sandwich.**

Spread the yellow mustard generously on the inside of the top buns and place them onto the sandwiches, butter-side up.

1. Press the sandwiches in a heavy skillet over medium heat.

Place the sandwiches into a large cast-iron skillet, then set a second heavy skillet or pot directly on top to compress them firmly.

2. Sear until golden, then flip and repeat.

Let them cook for 3 to 4 minutes until the bottom crust is deeply browned, then carefully flip with a spatula, replace the weight, and cook another 3 minutes until the cheese oozes.

3. Slice diagonally and serve immediately.

A true Medianoche is always cut from corner to corner, exposing those perfect, compressed layers of hot meat and melted cheese.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **No fresh produce allowed.**

Do not attempt to add lettuce, tomato, or onions; the hot press will turn them into a watery, wilted mess and fundamentally ruin the texture of the sandwich.

- **Seek out the right bread.**

The traditional pan de medianoche is a sweet egg dough. If you can't find it at a Latin grocer, look for soft brioche, challah, or Hawaiian sweet rolls—never crusty baguettes.



Pan con Timba

pahn kohn teem-bah

If you want to know what a Cuban childhood tastes like, look no further than this working-class masterpiece. In 1874, laborers building the island's first railway noticed their dark, homemade slabs of guava paste resembled the tar-coated 'timber' ties they laid all day. The English engineers jokingly called it bread with timber; the locals phoneticized it to 'timba,' and the name stuck. Grandmothers eventually added a thick slice of cheese whenever the family had a few extra pesos. You can eat it cold as you run out the door, but the real magic happens on a hot griddle. Butter, salt, and a heavy press

transform these humble ingredients into a shatteringly crisp, molten, sweet-savory revelation. It takes five minutes, uses basic supermarket staples, and tastes exactly like coming home.

INGREDIENTS

1 small	soft French loaf or hero rolls <i>sliced lengthwise, hinge kept intact</i>	4 oz	Swiss cheese or queso blanco <i>sliced thick</i>
4 oz	guava paste <i>cut into 1/4-inch slices</i>	2 tbsp	salted butter <i>softened to room temp</i>

PREPARATION

- **Slicing the Guava**

Guava paste is notoriously sticky. If you are struggling to slice it cleanly, run your knife under hot water and wipe it dry before cutting.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Layer the cheese slices onto the bottom half of the bread.**

Laying the cheese down first creates a barrier that protects the bread from getting soggy once the hot guava begins to melt.

- 2. Top the cheese with the sliced guava paste and press the sandwich closed.**

- 3. Generously spread the softened butter over the entire top and bottom exterior crusts.**

The salt in the butter isn't just for achieving a golden crust; it is absolutely essential to balance out the intense, floral sweetness of the guava inside.

- 4. Place the sandwich in a skillet over medium heat and weigh it down.**

If you don't own a panini press or a traditional plancha, simply lay a heavy cast-iron skillet or a foil-wrapped brick directly on top of the sandwich to press it flat.

- 1. Toast for 3 to 4 minutes until deeply golden brown, then carefully flip and repeat.**

You are looking for a shatteringly crisp exterior and a molten interior where the cheese oozes directly into the warm, jammy guava.

- 2. Remove from the heat, slice in half on a sharp diagonal, and serve immediately.**

A hot cup of café con leche or an ice-cold glass of milk is mandatory here.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The Bread Workaround**

If you live miles from a Cuban bakery, don't stress over finding authentic Pan Cubano. A soft supermarket French loaf or even sweet Hawaiian rolls (to mimic Pan Medianoche) will press beautifully and hit the exact nostalgic notes you want.

- **Guava Paste vs. Jelly**

Make sure you buy 'dulce de guayaba en barra'—the dense, sliceable block sold in tins or plastic wrap in the Hispanic aisle. Guava jelly or jam will melt into a disastrous liquid mess under the heat of the press.



La Merienda Clásica

lah meh-ryen-dah clah-see-cah

If you grew up in a Cuban-American household, three in the afternoon meant one thing: La Merienda. It's the essential, life-giving bridge between a meager morning coffee and a late, heavy dinner. While the neighbors were eating peanut butter and jelly, Cuban abuelas were pressing dense, sweet blocks of guava paste and salty cheese inside buttered bread until it became a molten, crispy masterpiece known as Pan con Timba—a name born in the 1800s when British railway engineers mistook the dark guava blocks for creosote-soaked timber. Paired with Pasta de Bocado, a savory, creamy deviled ham spread that remains the undisputed VIP of every Cuban childhood birthday party, this is unpretentious, resource-driven food at its absolute finest.

INGREDIENTS

1 small loaf	soft French or Italian bread <i>sliced horizontally</i>	4 oz	cream cheese <i>softened</i>
4 oz	guava paste block <i>cut into 1/4-inch thick slices</i>	2 tbsp	mayonnaise
4 oz	Swiss cheese or cream cheese <i>softened if using cream cheese</i>	1/4 cup	jarred roasted red peppers <i>drained</i>
2 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>softened</i>	3	small dill pickles <i>roughly chopped</i>
1/2 lb	deli ham <i>roughly chopped</i>	1 tsp	pickle juice
		1/2 tsp	yellow mustard
		1 sleeve	saltine crackers

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. For the Pasta de Bocadito, combine the ham, four ounces of cream cheese, mayonnaise, roasted peppers, pickles, pickle juice, and mustard in a food processor.**

Pulse until it transforms into a relatively smooth, cohesive paste with just a few tiny specks of ham and pepper remaining, then refrigerate for thirty minutes to let the flavors meld.

- 2. Assemble the Pan con Timba by layering the cheese and guava paste inside the sliced bread.**

Spread the remaining four ounces of cream cheese or lay the Swiss cheese on the bottom half, arrange the sticky guava slices evenly over the top, and close the sandwich.

- 3. Smear the softened butter generously over the top and bottom crusts of the bread.**

This is non-negotiable; the butter and heavy compression are what create the shatteringly crisp texture that mimics authentic lard-baked Pan Cubano.

1. Press and cook the sandwich in a hot skillet over medium-low heat.

Use a cast-iron bacon press or a heavy spatula to press down firmly, cooking for three to four minutes per side until the bread is flattened and golden and the cheese melts into the warm, magma-like guava paste.

2. Slice the sandwich diagonally and serve alongside the chilled ham spread smeared over saltine crackers.

Give the molten guava sixty seconds to cool before taking a bite to save the roof of your mouth.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The bread matters.**

If you can't find authentic Pan Cubano baked with lard, a supermarket loaf with a squishy interior and thin crust is your best bet. Avoid hard, crusty baguettes which won't compress properly and will destroy the roof of your mouth.

● **Do not skip the roasted red peppers.**

They are the grandmother-approved secret that gives the Pasta de Bocadito its authentic peach-pink color and distinct flavor.



La Frita Cubana

lah FREE-tah koo-BAH-nah

Before the golden arches conquered the globe, the streets of 1930s Havana belonged to the *fritero*. Standing behind propane-fueled carts, these vendors served up La Frita Cubana—a smoky, aggressively spiced street burger that leaves standard American diner patties in the dust. The historical secret wasn't actually ground chorizo, but rather the paprika-stained lard scooped from the bottom of imported Spanish sausage tins. To recreate that mind-blowing flavor on a Tuesday night, we blend ground beef with cured Spanish chorizo and a heavy dose of smoked paprika. Skip the fussy deep-frying and embrace high-quality

canned shoestring potatoes to deliver the mandatory, explosive crunch. It's messy, it's vibrant, and it is the absolute undisputed truth of a Cuban afternoon.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	ground beef chuck	1/4 tsp	black pepper
3 oz	cured Spanish chorizo <i>casings removed and finely minced</i>	1/2 cup	ketchup
1/2 med	yellow onion <i>grated into pulp with juices reserved</i>	1 tbsp	white vinegar
2 med	cloves garlic <i>mashed to a paste</i>	1 tbsp	yellow mustard
2 1/2 tsp	sweet smoked Spanish paprika	1 tbsp	Worcestershire sauce
1 tsp	ground cumin	1 tbsp	neutral oil
1 tsp	dried oregano	4 med	soft unseeded hamburger buns
1 tsp	kosher salt	2 cup	canned shoestring potatoes
		1/2 cup	white onion <i>finely diced</i>

PREPARATION

- **The meat mixture can be kneaded and formed into meatballs up to 12 hours in advance.**

Keep them covered in the refrigerator; resting the meat actually improves flavor distribution and allows the fats to solidify, yielding a better sear on a busy weeknight.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Combine the ground beef, minced chorizo, grated onion pulp, garlic, paprika, cumin, oregano, salt, and pepper in a large mixing bowl.**

Aggressively knead the mixture with your hands for 1 to 2 minutes to bind the proteins, creating a denser, sausage-like bite rather than a loose diner burger, then form into 4 equal-sized meatballs.
- 2. Whisk together the ketchup, white vinegar, yellow mustard, Worcestershire sauce, and neutral oil in a small bowl until completely smooth.**

Set this tangy sauce aside; you will need it close at hand when the meat hits the hot pan.
- 3. Heat a large, dry cast-iron skillet or griddle over medium-high heat.**

Do not add oil; the beef and chorizo will render plenty of fat. Place the meatballs onto the hot skillet and firmly smash each one flat to about 1/4-inch thick with a heavy spatula.
- 4. Cook undisturbed for 2 to 3 minutes until a dark, caramelized crust forms, then flip the patties.**

Immediately spoon a generous tablespoon of the prepared sauce directly onto the cooked side of each patty, letting the underside cook for another 1 to 2 minutes as the heat slightly caramelizes the sugars in the sauce.
- 5. Place the sauced patty on the bottom bun and immediately top with raw diced onions and a massive handful of shoestring potatoes before closing the bun.**

Serve immediately while the contrasting textures of the juicy meat, the sharp raw alliums, and the brittle, exploding potato sticks are at their absolute peak.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **If cured Spanish chorizo is unavailable, mimic the authentic flavor by blooming an extra tablespoon of smoked Spanish paprika in a tablespoon of melted bacon fat.**

Knead this highly seasoned fat directly into the beef to replicate the manteca de chorizo used by the original Havana street vendors.

- **Resist the urge to add milk and breadcrumbs to the meat mixture.**

While popular on food blogs, this turns the patty into meatloaf. The true street food frita demands a dense, vigorously kneaded matrix unadulterated by fillers.



Macarrones con Picadillo

mah-kah-ROH-nēs kon pee-kah-DEE-yo

This is the ultimate Cuban-American mashup, a testament to the quiet, unpretentious genius of the home kitchen. It is what happens when you take the island's canonical picadillo—a deeply savory, cumin-laced ground beef stew defined by the salty-sweet tug-of-war between green olives and raisins—and stretch it over humble tubular pasta. You do not need an all-day simmer or imported San Marzano tomatoes; the magic here is unapologetically pragmatic. Relying on standard supermarket staples and a splash of olive brine, it delivers a nostalgic, wildly comforting weeknight dinner that tastes undeniably, profoundly of home.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	elbow macaroni	1/2 tsp	black pepper
1 tbsp	olive oil	2 med	dried bay leaves
1 lb	80/20 ground beef	1/4 cup	dry white wine
1 med	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	15 oz	tomato sauce
1 med	green bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	1 tbsp	tomato paste
4 med	garlic cloves <i>minced</i>	1/3 cup	pimento-stuffed green olives <i>halved</i>
1 1/2 tsp	ground cumin	1 tbsp	olive jar brine
1 tsp	dried oregano	1/3 cup	seedless raisins
1 tsp	kosher salt	1 cup	Gouda cheese <i>shredded</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Cook the macaroni in a large pot of salted boiling water until just al dente.**
Drain the pasta and set it aside, making sure to reserve half a cup of the starchy pasta water.
- 2. Heat the olive oil in a large Dutch oven or skillet over medium-high heat, then brown the ground beef.**
Break the meat apart with a wooden spoon and cook for 6 to 8 minutes until heavily browned, draining the excess fat but leaving about 2 tablespoons in the pan.
- 3. Lower the heat to medium and sauté the diced onion and bell pepper in the residual beef fat until translucent.**
This should take about 5 minutes; stir in the minced garlic at the very end and cook for one more minute until fragrant.

- 1. Sprinkle the cumin, oregano, salt, and pepper over the mixture to toast briefly before deglazing with the white wine.**

Stir for 30 seconds to bloom the spices, then pour in the wine, scraping the bottom of the pan to release any browned bits as the liquid reduces for a minute or two.

- 2. Stir in the tomato sauce, tomato paste, olives, olive brine, raisins, and bay leaves, then cover and simmer on low for 15 minutes.**

Do not rush this step; this is where the raisins plump up, the harsh acidity of the canned tomatoes mellows out, and the distinct Cuban flavor profile truly develops.

- 3. Remove the bay leaves, fold the cooked macaroni directly into the simmering picadillo, and melt the cheese over the top.**

Add a splash of the reserved pasta water if the sauce needs loosening, then remove from the heat, top heavily with the shredded cheese, and cover the pan for 2 minutes until bubbling and melted.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The secret is in the brine.**

The grandmother's trick to elevating standard tomato sauce to authentic Cuban picadillo is the one-two punch of cumin and a tablespoon of liquid straight from the olive jar.

- **Embrace the raisins.**

While raisins in pasta might raise eyebrows for the uninitiated, their bursts of sweetness are historically essential to counter the salty, briny notes of the olives; try it the authentic way before deciding to omit them.



Pasta de Bocadito

pahs-tah deh boh-kah-dee-toh

If you grew up going to Cuban birthday parties, you know the magic of the cajita—a little cardboard box handed to every guest holding a slice of cake, a croqueta, and the undisputed star: a soft roll overflowing with Pasta de Bocadito. Born of 1960s diaspora ingenuity, when immigrant grandmothers combined their beloved island flavor profiles with the unfamiliar canned hams and cream cheeses found in American supermarkets, this spread is the ultimate taste of home. It hits every necessary note: savory, sweet, tangy, and unapologetically rich. This recipe skips the complicated steps, utilizing standard supermarket ingredients to deliver that exact, nostalgic punch of flavor on a busy weeknight.

INGREDIENTS

12 oz	cooked ham <i>roughly chopped</i>	1/2 cup	jarred roasted red peppers <i>thoroughly drained, 1 tbsp liquid reserved</i>
8 oz	full-fat cream cheese <i>softened to room temp</i>	4 tbsp	sweet pickle relish <i>thoroughly drained</i>
1/4 cup	mayonnaise	1 tsp	yellow mustard
		12 small	Hawaiian sweet rolls

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Pulse the ham in a food processor until finely ground.**

Add the roughly chopped ham and pulse five to six times until it breaks down into very fine, granular pieces. Breaking the meat down first ensures you don't over-whip the dairy later.

2. **Build the emulsion.**

Add the softened cream cheese, mayonnaise, drained roasted red peppers, drained sweet pickle relish, and mustard. Blend on high until the mixture is completely smooth and cohesive, stopping to scrape down the sides of the bowl with a rubber spatula at least once.

3. **Adjust the consistency if necessary.**

The paste should look like a thick, spreadable cake batter. If it is too stiff, add the reserved liquid from the roasted red peppers, one teaspoon at a time, pulsing until it reaches the correct texture.

4. **Chill the spread for at least one hour.**

Do not skip this step. The friction from the food processor heats the cream cheese; chilling allows the fats to re-solidify and the flavors to beautifully meld together.

5. **Assemble the sandwiches with a gentle hand.**

Slice the sweet rolls in half and spread a generous two to three tablespoons of the chilled paste onto the bottom halves. Place the tops back on gently—never press down on the bread, or the filling will ooze out and ruin the pillowy texture.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Embrace the grandmother shortcut.**

To push the nostalgic flavor profile even further, substitute a four-ounce can of deviled ham for a portion of the cooked ham.

- **Mix in olives for extra brine.**

Many regional variations fold a quarter cup of finely chopped pimento-stuffed green olives into the finished paste before chilling.



Frituras de Malanga

free-TOO-rahs deh mah-LAHN-gah

Malanga is to the Cuban diaspora what the potato is to Middle America—only earthier, creamier, and infinitely more comforting. These quintessential afternoon fritters rely entirely on the root's natural starches to bind the batter. No flour, no baking powder, no shortcuts. The secret, passed down from grandmothers across the island, is a strategic splash of white vinegar. That touch of acid halts the root's rapid oxidation and effectively repels fat during the fry. The result is a deeply savory, unadulterated taste of home with a violently crunchy exterior and a dense, steaming center.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	malanga blanca	1 tsp	white vinegar
4 small	garlic cloves <i>peeled</i>	1 tsp	kosher salt
1 large	egg <i>lightly beaten</i>	1/4 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
2 tbsp	fresh parsley <i>finely minced</i>	2 cup	neutral oil

PREPARATION

- **Peel the malanga with caution.**

The root exudes a highly slippery sap once peeled, so use a paper towel to grip it firmly while removing the hairy brown skin with a sharp knife or peeler.

- **Grate the root manually.**

Run the peeled malanga down the fine side of a box grater until it becomes a thick, sticky, snow-white paste.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Mash the garlic into a fine paste.**

Mince the garlic, add a pinch of the salt, and use the flat side of your chef's knife to scrape and mash it into a smooth paste that will melt seamlessly into the batter.

- 2. Build the fritter batter.**

In a large bowl, vigorously mix the grated malanga, garlic paste, beaten egg, minced parsley, white vinegar, salt, and black pepper until it forms a cohesive, sticky mass.

- 3. Heat the frying oil.**

Bring about an inch of neutral oil to 350°F in a deep, heavy-bottomed skillet over medium-high heat.

1. Fry the batter in batches.

Scoop standard tablespoons of batter and drop them carefully into the hot oil, leaving the edges naturally jagged for maximum crunch.

2. Cook until deeply golden.

Fry for 2 to 3 minutes per side, then transfer the fritters to a wire rack or a paper towel-lined plate.

3. Season and serve immediately.

Hit the hot fritters with a final light dusting of salt and eat them straight away.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Employ the weeknight food processor hack if necessary.**

While traditionalists insist on bleeding knuckles over a box grater, a busy Tuesday night demands pragmatism; cut the peeled root into 1-inch cubes and pulse it repeatedly until it forms couscous-sized granules, stopping well before it turns into a watery slurry.

● **Do not substitute standard potatoes.**

American baking potatoes lack the sticky, glue-like mucilage required to hold this batter together without the crutch of added flour.



Tortilla de Plátano Maduro

For first-generation Cuban-Americans, the scent of plantains frying in hot oil is the ultimate beacon of home. This isn't a delicate French omelet; it is a rustic, sweet-and-savory wedge of island survival, born of necessity and perfected by grandmothers who knew that true culinary magic requires no embellishment. The absolute, non-negotiable secret here is patience: wait until the plantain is almost entirely black and yielding to the touch. It is a humble masterpiece of caramelized sugars and salty egg, demanding nothing more than twenty minutes and a confident flip of the wrist.

INGREDIENTS

1 large	extremely ripe plantain <i>peeled and sliced diagonally into 1/2-inch pieces</i>	1/4 tsp	kosher salt
3 large	eggs	3 tbsp	neutral frying oil
		1 tbsp	unsalted butter

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Fry the plantain slices until deeply caramelized.

Heat the oil in an 8-inch non-stick skillet over medium-high heat, add the plantain slices in a single layer, and fry for 2 to 3 minutes per side until they achieve a dark amber color with nearly black, crispy edges.

2. Drain the plantains and prepare the skillet.

Transfer the fried plantains to a paper towel-lined plate to drain, then carefully wipe the excess oil from the skillet so only a thin, glossy coating remains.

3. Build the egg matrix.

In a medium bowl, beat the eggs and kosher salt with a fork just until the yolks and whites combine, then gently fold the fried plantain slices directly into the eggs.

4. Cook the tortilla low and slow.

Return the skillet to medium-low heat, melt the butter, and pour in the egg mixture, letting it sit undisturbed until the edges begin to set and pull away from the pan.

5. Execute the flip.

When the bottom is golden but the top is still slightly wet, place a flat plate upside down over the skillet, hold it firmly in place, and in one quick, confident motion, invert the pan so the tortilla drops onto the plate.

1. Finish the egg and serve.

Slide the tortilla back into the skillet, raw-side down, cooking for another 1 to 2 minutes until fully set before transferring to a cutting board to slice into thick wedges.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The secret is in the rot.**

Do not attempt this with a yellow plantain. Buy your plantains days in advance and leave them on the counter until the skin is entirely black and soft to the touch; this ensures the starches have converted to the essential, caramelizing sugars.

● **Commit to the flip.**

Using a non-stick skillet drastically reduces the anxiety of the "virar la tortilla" maneuver. When it comes time to invert the pan onto the plate, do it swiftly and without hesitation.



Arroz a la Cubana

ah-ROHS ah lah koo-BAH-nah

If you grew up in a Cuban-American household, this is the ultimate Tuesday afternoon comfort food. Despite the fancy Spanish colonial name, in Havana this is a humble, everyday domestic staple simply called Arroz con Huevo Frito. It relies on three perfectly executed components: loose garlic-scented white rice, an egg fried until the edges are crispy but the yolk remains liquid gold, and sticky, caramelized black plantains. We skip the heavy restaurant-style tomato purees in favor of a quick homemade version of Cuba's iconic Vita Nuova sauce. Keep it simple, don't rush the rice, and let the runny yolk do the heavy lifting.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 cup	long-grain white rice <i>rinsed until the water runs clear</i>	1 tsp	granulated sugar
1 tbsp	neutral oil	1/2 tsp	dried oregano
1 large clove	garlic <i>smashed but kept whole</i>	1/2 tsp	dried basil
1 tsp	kosher salt	1/4 tsp	ground cumin
2 1/4 cup	water	1 tsp	white vinegar
8 oz	canned tomato sauce	2 large	plantains <i>peeled and cut on a bias into 3/4-inch slices</i>
1 small clove	garlic <i>minced fine</i>	1/4 cup	neutral cooking oil
		4 large	eggs

PREPARATION

- **Buy your plantains well in advance.**

For proper maduros, the plantain skin must be almost entirely black and soft to the touch. Yellow won't cut it. Buy them early and let them sit on your counter until they look like they belong in the garbage.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Toast the rinsed rice in hot oil with a smashed garlic clove before adding water.**

This is the Cuban nacarado method. Heat 1 tablespoon of oil over medium heat, sizzle the garlic for a minute, then stir in the rice for 2 minutes. This coats the grains in fat, guaranteeing the loose, fluffy texture essential to Caribbean rice.

- 2. Simmer the rice undisturbed.**

Add the water and salt, bring to a boil, then drop the heat to your lowest setting. Cover tightly and cook for 18 minutes. Remove from heat and rest for 5 minutes, then discard the garlic clove and fluff with a fork.

- 1. Simmer the tomato sauce with the minced garlic, sugar, spices, and vinegar to create a quick Vita Nuova sauce.**

Combine these ingredients in a small saucepan and bubble gently over low heat for 5 to 7 minutes to mellow the raw garlic, then set aside.

- 2. Fry the plantain slices until deeply caramelized.**

Heat a quarter cup of oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Fry the plantains for 2 to 3 minutes per side until dark golden brown, then drain on paper towels.

- 3. Fry the eggs in the remaining oil, basting the whites to protect the liquid yolks.**

Leave about 2 tablespoons of oil in the skillet and increase heat to medium-high. Crack the eggs in, tilt the pan, and spoon hot oil over the whites. You want blistered, crispy edges (la puntilla) but a completely runny yolk to act as your sauce.

- 4. Serve immediately by breaking the egg yolk over a mound of hot rice.**

Pack the rice into a cup and invert it onto a plate for the classic dome shape. Nestle the plantains alongside, place the egg on top, and drizzle with the Vita Nuova sauce.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The meat upgrade.**

If you have leftover picadillo (Cuban ground beef hash) in the fridge, slide a scoop next to the rice to turn this weeknight staple into a weekend feast known as eating it 'a caballo'.

- **Rinse the rice.**

Always wash the long-grain rice in a fine-mesh strainer until the water runs clear. This removes surface starch and prevents a gummy final texture.



El Caldero (Weeknight Arroz y Frijoles)

Tackling the undeniable protagonists of the Cuban table: rice and beans. Deep, slow-cooked flavors adapted for busy weeknights.

The true heartbeat of a Cuban home doesn't pulse from an elaborate weekend roast. It thumps from the bottom of a heavy caldero on a random Tuesday night. Rice and beans are the undeniable, heavyweight champions of this table—the kind of dark, earthy, soul-affirming sustenance that anchors a family after a bruising day. Traditionally, extracting that profound, murky depth from frijoles negros or a proper potaje required the slow, unforgiving timeline of a grandmother's kitchen.

But hunger doesn't wait for tradition. By leaning on Dutch ovens and electric pressure cookers, these recipes drag those ancient, slow-simmered flavors kicking and screaming into the modern weeknight. From deeply savory Instant Pot black beans to an unapologetically rich, one-pot arroz con pollo, this is how the real work gets done. It's how you feed the bloodline without losing your mind.





Moros y Cristianos

MOH-rohs ee krees-TYAH-nohs

If there is a smell that instantly teleports a Cuban kid back to their grandmother's kitchen, it is the smoky, earthy aroma of Moros y Cristianos. Forget the performative flourishes; true diaspora cooking is about preserving the soul of a dish while making it work on a Tuesday night. We swap the two-day dried bean ritual for high-quality canned black beans, keeping every drop of that inky, starchy liquid to properly dye the rice. Built on a strict sofrito fried in bacon fat and finished with a sharp, necessary splash of vinegar, this is the real deal. No apologies, just perfect rice.

INGREDIENTS

3 slice	thick-cut bacon <i>chopped into small pieces</i>	1 cup	long-grain white rice <i>unrinsed</i>
1 small	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	15 oz	black beans <i>undrained</i>
1/2 med	green bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	1 cup	water
4 clove	fresh garlic <i>minced</i>	1 large	bay leaf
1 tsp	ground cumin	1 1/2 tsp	kosher salt
1 tsp	dried oregano	1/4 tsp	black pepper
		1 tbsp	white vinegar
		1 tbsp	extra virgin olive oil

PREPARATION

- **Chop the aromatics in advance.**

Once the bacon fat is hot, the sofrito comes together quickly. Have your onion, bell pepper, and garlic prepped and ready by the stove.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Render the bacon in a heavy-bottomed Dutch oven over medium heat until crispy.**

Do not drain the pot; this smoky pork base is the irreplaceable soul of the dish.

- 2. Toss the diced onion and green bell pepper directly into the hot bacon fat and sauté until soft.**

Add the minced garlic, cumin, and oregano, stirring constantly for about one minute until fragrant. Keep things moving so the garlic doesn't burn and turn bitter.

- 3. Pour in the dry, unrinsed white rice and stir constantly for two minutes.**

Coating every single grain in the aromatic pork fat is the secret to ensuring your rice turns out fluffy and separate, rather than a mushy clump.

- 1. Pour in the entire can of black beans, including their dark liquid, along with the water, bay leaf, salt, and pepper.**

Bring the liquid to a rolling boil, then immediately drop the heat to the lowest possible simmer and secure a tight-fitting lid.

- 2. Cook completely undisturbed for 25 to 30 minutes.**

Walk away. Do not lift the lid to check, and do not stir it. You need the trapped steam to gelatinize the starches and absorb that dark bean broth.

- 3. Remove from heat, rest covered for 10 minutes, then fold in the vinegar and olive oil.**

Take out the bay leaf, pour the vinegar and oil over the top, and gently fluff with a fork. That hit of acid magically cuts the heavy richness of the pork and brightens the entire pot.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Never drain or rinse the canned beans.**

The starchy, inky liquid inside the can is liquid gold. It is mandatory for dyeing the rice its signature dark color and providing that deep, earthy flavor.

- **Congrí versus Moros y Cristianos.**

In traditional Cuban cooking, Congrí is made with red beans. Moros y Cristianos is exclusively made with black beans. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.



Arroz con Pollo a la Chorrera

ah-ROSS kon POY-yoh ah lah cho-REH-rah

Most Cuban-Americans grew up on standard arroz con pollo, but a la chorrera is the unapologetic Sunday version—wet, profoundly savory, glowing radioactive yellow with *bijol*, and smelling faintly of beer. Born near a Havana fortress, it looks like paella but acts like risotto. The secret to pulling this off on a busy Tuesday in Ohio? Swap the elusive Valencia grain for standard Arborio, and use bone-in thighs to get the lip-smacking collagen of a whole bird in a fraction of the time. It is supposed to be soupy, so do not panic when you see the liquid.

INGREDIENTS

2 1/2 lb	bone-in skin-on chicken thighs and drumsticks	1 tsp	ground cumin
		1/2 tsp	dried oregano
2 tbsp	olive oil	1 med	bay leaf
1 tbsp	fresh lime juice	1/2 tsp	bijol powder or sazón with achiote
2 tsp	kosher salt		
1 tsp	black pepper	2 cup	Arborio rice
1 large	yellow onion <i>finely chopped</i>	4 cup	low-sodium chicken broth
1 med	green bell pepper <i>finely chopped</i>	1/2 cup	dry white wine
1/2 med	red bell pepper <i>finely chopped</i>	1 cup	light lager beer <i>divided</i>
5 med	cloves garlic <i>minced</i>	1/2 cup	frozen sweet peas <i>thawed</i>
1/2 cup	tomato sauce	1/2 cup	jarred roasted red peppers <i>sliced into thin strips</i>

PREPARATION

- **Gather and measure everything before you start.**

The sofrito comes together quickly, so having your aromatics chopped and liquids measured is critical to building the flavors without burning the garlic.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Season the chicken generously with salt, pepper, and lime juice, then sear skin-side down in hot olive oil until golden.**

Use a large heavy-bottomed Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Sear in batches if necessary to avoid crowding. Transfer the chicken to a plate, but leave every drop of that rendered fat in the pot—it is liquid gold and the soul of your sofrito.

- 1. Lower the heat and cook the onions and bell peppers in the chicken fat until soft.**

Scrape up the browned bits from the bottom. After about 5 minutes, add the garlic, cumin, oregano, and bijol, cooking for 1 minute until fragrant. Stir in the tomato sauce and let it concentrate into a jam-like consistency.

- 2. Return the chicken to the pot along with the broth, wine, bay leaf, and half of the beer.**

Bring the liquid to a rapid simmer, then reduce the heat to low. Cover and let it cook for 15 minutes to enrich the broth and begin tenderizing the meat.

- 3. Stir in the Arborio rice, cover, and gently simmer for 20 to 25 minutes.**

The liquid-to-rice ratio will look alarmingly high—trust the process. Give it an occasional gentle stir so the short-grain rice doesn't scorch on the bottom, but do not agitate it constantly like an Italian risotto.

- 4. Turn off the heat, stir in the remaining beer and sweet peas, then garnish with roasted red pepper strips.**

This is the most critical step. Covering the pot and letting it sit off the heat for 5 to 10 minutes allows the starches to set into a perfect, creamy meloso glaze without overcooking the grain.



Tamal en Cazuela Rápido

tah-MAHL en cah-SWEH-lah RAH-pee-doh

If you ask a purist in Havana, they will tell you true tamal en cazuela demands hand-grating dozens of ears of starchy field corn. They aren't wrong. But when Cuban grandmothers arrived in the American Midwest and found nothing but watery sweet corn at the supermarket, they didn't stop cooking. They innovated. By blending canned cream-style corn with fine yellow cornmeal, they engineered the exact starchy, milky consistency of home in a fraction of the time. This isn't a compromise; it is a living diaspora tradition. It takes thirty minutes of active time instead of three hours, and the taste is uncompromisingly, unapologetically Cuban.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	boneless pork shoulder <i>cut into 1/2-inch cubes</i>	1/2 med	green bell pepper <i>finely diced, seeds and ribs removed</i>
3 med clove	garlic <i>mashed into a paste</i>	3 med clove	garlic <i>finely minced</i>
1/4 cup	bitter orange juice <i>or 2 tbsp orange juice mixed with 1 tbsp lime juice and 1 tbsp white vinegar</i>	1/4 cup	plain tomato sauce
1/2 tsp	ground cumin	1/4 cup	vino seco <i>or dry white wine mixed with a pinch of salt</i>
1/2 tsp	dried oregano	28 oz	cream-style sweet corn <i>from two 14-oz cans</i>
1 tsp	kosher salt	1 cup	fine yellow cornmeal <i>strictly fine, do not use coarse grits</i>
1/2 tsp	black pepper	3 cup	low-sodium chicken broth <i>divided</i>
2 tbsp	extra-virgin olive oil <i>or pork lard</i>	1 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>or olive oil</i>
1 small	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>		

PREPARATION

- **Marinate the pork.**

In a medium bowl, toss the pork cubes with the mashed garlic, bitter orange juice, cumin, oregano, salt, and pepper. Cover tightly and let it marinate in the refrigerator for at least 30 minutes, or ideally overnight so the acid breaks down the meat.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Sear the pork in batches.**

Place a large, heavy-bottomed Dutch oven over medium-high heat and add the olive oil. Remove the pork from the marinade and pat the cubes dry with a paper towel. Add the pork to the pot in a single layer without crowding the pan. Let it sear undisturbed for 3 to 4 minutes until a deep, golden-brown crust forms, then flip and brown the other sides for about 8 minutes total. Remove the pork with a slotted spoon and set aside.

2. **Build the sofrito.**

Lower the heat to medium. Into the rendered pork fat, add the diced onion and green bell pepper. Sauté for about 5 minutes, scraping up the browned bits of pork stuck to the bottom of the pot, until the onions turn soft and translucent. Add the minced garlic and cook for exactly 60 seconds until fragrant, taking care not to let it brown.

3. **Deglaze and deepen the flavors.**

Pour the vino seco and the tomato sauce into the pot. Stir vigorously as it bubbles, lifting any remaining flavor from the bottom of the pot. Let the alcohol cook off for 2 to 3 minutes until the sauce slightly thickens and reduces, then return the browned pork chunks to the pot and stir to coat.

4. **Blend the corn matrix.**

While the sofrito reduces, combine the cream-style corn, the fine yellow cornmeal, and 1 cup of the chicken broth in a blender or food processor. Pulse until it forms a thick, relatively smooth slurry.

5. **Combine and simmer.**

Pour the blended corn mixture into the pot with the pork and sofrito. Add the remaining 2 cups of chicken broth and stir everything together until completely homogeneous. Bring the mixture to a gentle bubble, then immediately reduce the heat to the lowest possible setting and cover the pot.

1. Stir frequently to prevent scorching.

Let the stew cook low and slow for 30 to 35 minutes. Every 5 to 7 minutes, remove the lid and drag a wooden spoon firmly across the bottom of the pot to prevent the cornmeal from sinking, scorching, and forming lumps.

2. Test for doneness and finish.

The dish is done when the raw cornmeal taste is completely gone, the pork is fork-tender, and the texture resembles a thick, rich polenta. Plunge your wooden spoon straight down into the center of the pot; if the stew is thick enough to hold the spoon standing straight up, it is perfect. Turn off the heat and stir in the butter for a glossy finish.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The Vino Seco reality.**

You will see a bottle of Edmundo or Goya Vino Seco in the pantry of every Cuban household in America. It is a heavily salted, dry cooking wine. If your local grocery store doesn't carry it in the Latin aisle, do not buy generic supermarket 'cooking wine.' Just buy a cheap, dry white wine like Pinot Grigio, and add a splash of white vinegar and a pinch of salt to your pot to mimic the sharp, briny acidity.

● **Don't fear the stir.**

The only way to ruin this dish is to walk away from it. Cornmeal loves to sink to the bottom of the pot and burn. Treat this like an Italian risotto or a delicate gravy by keeping the heat ultra-low and scraping the bottom with a wooden spoon every five minutes to keep it smooth and lump-free.



Potaje de Frijoles Colorados

poh-TAH-heh deh free-HOH-less coh-loh-RAH-dohs

This is the real deal—the deeply comforting, rich, smoky red bean stew that anchors weeknight dinners from Havana to Miami. The secret to a true potaje isn't some artificial thickening powder; it's the magical way sweet squash melts into a pork-fortified broth. If you think you don't have time for dried beans on a Tuesday, think again. Your abuela used her trusty stovetop olla de presión to get this on the table fast, and we're using a modern pressure cooker to achieve that exact same slow-simmered, grandmother-approved flavor in a fraction of the time. The smell of cumin, garlic, and chorizo hitting the pan will instantly transport you home.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	dried red kidney beans <i>picked over and rinsed</i>	1 tsp	ground cumin
1 lb	smoked ham hock	1 tsp	dried Mexican oregano
2 med	dried bay leaves	1/2 tsp	smoked paprika
6 cup	water	1 lb	Cuban calabaza or butternut squash <i>peeled, seeded, and cut into 1-inch chunks</i>
4 oz	thick-cut bacon <i>diced</i>	1 large	Russet potato <i>peeled and cut into 1-inch chunks</i>
4 oz	semi-cured Spanish chorizo <i>sliced into thin rounds</i>	2 tbsp	dry white wine or dry sherry
1 med	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	1 tbsp	white vinegar
1 med	green bell pepper <i>cored, seeded, and finely diced</i>	to taste	salt and freshly ground black pepper
6 med	garlic cloves <i>minced or crushed</i>	to taste	olive oil <i>for drizzling</i>
3 tbsp	tomato puree		

PREPARATION

- **Soak the beans overnight.**

Place the dried beans in a large bowl and cover them with cold water by a few inches, leaving them to soak for 8 to 12 hours. Drain and discard this soaking water before cooking to ensure a cleaner tasting broth.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Soften the beans and pork under pressure.**

Add the soaked beans, ham hock, bay leaves, and 6 cups of fresh water to a pressure cooker. Secure the lid, cook on high pressure for 25 minutes, then let the pressure release naturally for 10 minutes before venting the rest.

1. Render the fat from the bacon and chorizo.

While the beans cook, place a large skillet over medium heat. Toss in the bacon and chorizo, cooking until the fat renders and the meats turn crisp and browned, about 5 to 7 minutes.

2. Build the authentic sofrito.

Drop the onion and bell pepper directly into that rendered pork fat, sautéing until soft and translucent. Stir in the garlic for a brief minute, then add the cumin, oregano, and smoked paprika to let the spices bloom before cooking out the raw tomato puree.

3. Combine the meats, beans, and starches.

When the beans are ready, open the pot and pull the ham hock out to chop the meat, discarding the bones and fat. Return the meat to the pot, scrape in every last drop of the sofrito and seasoned fat, and toss in the chunks of squash and potato.

4. Simmer uncovered and apply the grandmother's thickening trick.

Simmer the stew uncovered on medium heat (or the sauté function) for 20 to 25 minutes until the squash and potatoes are fork-tender. To get that signature velvety texture, use the back of your spoon to smash a few pieces of squash and a handful of beans directly against the side of the pot, stirring the starches back into the broth.

5. Finish with a hit of acid and adjust the seasoning.

Pull the pot off the heat and stir in the dry white wine and white vinegar to cut through the richness. Taste the broth before adding salt and black pepper, letting the stew rest for 10 minutes to thicken up even further before serving.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Cheat the system with canned beans for a pantry shortcut.**

If you forgot to soak the beans, skip the ham hock and simply sauté your bacon, chorizo, and sofrito in a large Dutch oven. Dump in three 15.5-ounce cans of undrained red kidney beans, 2 cups of chicken broth, the squash, and potatoes, then simmer uncovered for 30 minutes, mashing to thicken as usual.



Potaje de Lentejas a la Criolla

poh-TAH-heh deh len-TEH-has ah lah kree-OH-yah

The lentil is the unsung hero of the Cuban weeknight. While black beans demand the foresight of overnight soaking and hours on the stove, lentils surrender their deep, smoky comfort in under an hour. The secret to making this stew taste exactly like a grandmother's kitchen in Havana lies in three uncompromising moves: rendering the paprika-laced fat from dry-cured Spanish chorizo, melting chunks of sweet squash into the broth, and hitting the pot with a final, bracing splash of salty vino seco. It is a rich, heavy, starch-thickened meal built to be eaten over a mountain of white rice, keeping the true flavors of the homeland alive on a busy Tuesday.

INGREDIENTS

1 cup	brown or green lentils <i>rinsed and picked over</i>	4 clove	garlic <i>minced</i>
4 cup	low-sodium chicken broth	2 tbsp	tomato paste
1 tbsp	olive oil	1 tsp	ground cumin
2 oz	thick-cut smoked bacon <i>chopped</i>	1 tsp	dried oregano
4 oz	dry-cured Spanish chorizo <i>cut into 1/4-inch rounds</i>	1 large	bay leaf
1 small	smoked ham hock	1/2 tsp	black pepper
1 med	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	1 med	Russet or Yukon Gold potato <i>peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes</i>
1/2 large	green bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	1 cup	butternut squash <i>peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes</i>
		3 tbsp	vino seco or dry Sherry

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Render the meats to build the foundational fat.

Place a large Dutch oven over medium heat with the olive oil and bacon. Cook for 3 to 4 minutes until the fat begins to render, then add the sliced Spanish chorizo. Sauté for another 2 to 3 minutes until the chorizo releases its vibrant, paprika-infused oil, capturing the smoky essence of the stew.

2. Build the sofrito directly in the rendered pork fat.

Drop the diced onion and green bell pepper into the pot, cooking for 4 to 5 minutes until soft and translucent. Stir in the minced garlic for 30 seconds until fragrant, followed by the tomato paste, cumin, oregano, and black pepper. Let the tomato paste darken slightly for about a minute.

1. Boil the lentils and simmer the stew.

Add the rinsed lentils, chicken broth, bay leaf, and smoked ham hock to the pot, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom. Bring to a rolling boil over high heat, then immediately drop the heat to medium-low, cover tightly, and simmer for 15 minutes.

2. Add the starchy root vegetables.

Uncover the pot and stir in the cubed potatoes and butternut squash. Cover again and continue to simmer for another 20 minutes until the lentils and vegetables are completely tender.

3. Thicken the broth and finish with acidity.

Remove the bay leaf and ham hock, shredding any good meat back into the pot. Using the back of a wooden spoon, mash a few pieces of the potato and squash against the side of the pot to naturally thicken the liquid. Stir in the vino seco and let the stew bubble uncovered for 3 to 5 minutes to burn off the harsh alcohol.

Taste and adjust for salt only now, as the cured meats and cooking wine will have already seasoned the broth.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Never use raw Mexican chorizo for this dish.**

Spanish chorizo, such as Cantimpalo, is a hard, dry-cured sausage that renders flavored oil without disintegrating. Raw Mexican chorizo will ruin the texture and flavor profile of the stew entirely.

- **Hold off on salting until the very end.**

Between the bacon, ham hock, dry-cured chorizo, and the added salt in commercial vino seco, the sodium levels climb quickly. Only season with additional salt after everything has simmered and married together.



Arroz Congrí Oriental

While the rest of the island might debate whether to use black beans or red, in the eastern provinces of Cuba, Congrí is strictly a red bean affair with deep Afro-Haitian roots. The traditional method takes all day, rendering pork fat and simmering dried beans to yield their dark, earthy broth. For a busy weeknight in the diaspora, we capture that exact, grandmother-approved depth using thick-cut bacon and the starchy liquid from high-quality canned beans. The secret to keeping the rice fluffy—what Cubans call *desgranado*—is toasting the grains in that rendered bacon fat before the liquids ever hit the pot. Keep it simple, trust the process, and let the *caldero* do the work.

INGREDIENTS

8 oz	thick-cut smoked bacon <i>chopped</i>	1 large	bay leaf
1 large	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	1 1/2 tsp	kosher salt
1 med	green bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	2 cup	long-grain white rice <i>rinsed until water runs clear and drained very well</i>
5 large	garlic cloves <i>minced</i>	30 oz	small red beans <i>undrained, retaining all starchy canning liquid</i>
1 tsp	ground cumin	2 cup	low-sodium chicken broth
1 tsp	dried oregano		

PREPARATION

- **Wash the rice relentlessly.**

Rinsing the long-grain white rice until the water runs completely clear is non-negotiable; it strips away the surface starch that would otherwise turn the final dish into a gummy, unappetizing mush.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Render the pork fat to build your savory foundation.**

Place a heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven over medium heat, adding the chopped bacon and cooking slowly for about 8 to 10 minutes until the fat is fully rendered and the bits are deeply browned. Use a slotted spoon to remove the crispy bacon to a paper towel-lined plate, leaving all that liquid gold in the pot.

- 2. Sauté the sofrito until soft and intensely fragrant.**

Add the diced onion and green bell pepper to the hot bacon fat, cooking for about 5 minutes until soft and translucent while scraping up any browned bits from the bottom. Stir in the minced garlic, cumin, and oregano, cooking for exactly one minute until wildly fragrant.

1. Toast the rice in the rendered bacon fat to guarantee a fluffy texture.

Pour the thoroughly drained long-grain white rice into the sofrito, stirring constantly for about 2 minutes. You want every individual grain coated in the spiced bacon fat and slightly toasted, which creates a protective lipid barrier around the starch so your final dish remains perfectly separated.

2. Hydrate the grains and bring the pot to a rolling boil.

Pour in the entire contents of the canned red beans, including their essential starchy liquid, along with the chicken broth, bay leaf, and salt. Stir gently to ensure no rice is sticking to the bottom, then bring the mixture to a vigorous boil over medium-high heat.

3. Cover the pot tightly and let the caldero trap the steam.

Once the liquid reduces enough that it barely skims the top of the rice and crater-like holes form on the surface, immediately drop the heat to the absolute lowest setting. Cover the pot with a tight-fitting lid and let it steam completely undisturbed for 20 to 25 minutes.

4. Fluff the rice and fold in the crispy bacon bits before serving.

Remove the pot from the heat and let it rest, still covered, for 5 minutes so the starches can set. Remove the lid, discard the bay leaf, gently fluff the dark, tender rice with a fork, and fold in the reserved bacon before serving immediately.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Seek out the proper peppers if you can find them.**

If you have access to a good Latin grocer, swap the green bell pepper for four ají cachucha peppers. This mild, sweet chili provides the authentic aromatic backbone of the dish without adding any heat.



Comida (Grandma's Mains for Busy Tuesdays)

Reframing labor-intensive traditional evening stews and meats into manageable weeknight triumphs.

The traditional Cuban supper, the comida, is an act of endurance—a slow-simmered, garlic-soaked testament to the sheer will of the matriarchs who stood over bubbling pots until the meat surrendered. But the modern Tuesday night is a ruthless master, leaving little room for nostalgia and even less for an all-day braise.

This is how you cheat time without cheating your grandmother. By leaning into smart technique, the pressure cooker, and a properly aggressive sofrito, the unapologetic soul of a Havana kitchen survives the American workweek. From a punchy, olive-studded picadillo to a weeknight pernil that still crackles with mojo, these are the heavy hitters, streamlined but stripped of absolutely nothing.





Ropa Vieja en Olla de Presión

roh-pah vee-eh-hah en oh-yah deh preh-syohn

Translated to "old clothes," this dish is a nod to the shredded, tattered beef and peppers that anchor the Cuban family table. In the diaspora, this classic has often been gentrified with capers, golden raisins, and sweet wines—fussy additions any self-respecting Cuban grandmother would politely push aside. The real magic requires nothing more than a cheap cut of beef, the holy trinity of a slow-cooked sofrito, a heavy splash of salty *Vino Seco*, and the unapologetic modern miracle of the electric pressure cooker. It's deeply comforting, wildly savory, and exactly what a Tuesday night demands.

INGREDIENTS

2 lb	beef flank steak or chuck roast <i>cut into 3-inch chunks</i>	1/2 large	green bell pepper <i>sliced into thin strips</i>
1/2 large	white onion <i>left intact</i>	1/2 large	red bell pepper <i>sliced into thin strips</i>
4 med	garlic cloves <i>smashed</i>	6 med	garlic cloves <i>finely minced</i>
2 med	dried bay leaves	1 tsp	ground cumin
1 tsp	kosher salt	1 tsp	dried oregano
4 cup	water	1/2 tsp	sweet paprika
2 tbsp	olive oil	1 cup	plain tomato sauce
1 large	white onion <i>sliced into thin strips</i>	2 tbsp	tomato paste
		1/2 cup	Vino Seco or dry white wine
		1/2 cup	pimento-stuffed green olives <i>halved</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Tenderize the beef in the pressure cooker.

Add the beef chunks, the intact onion half, smashed garlic, bay leaves, salt, and water to an electric pressure cooker. Secure the lid, set the valve to sealing, and cook on high pressure for 35 minutes (or 45 minutes if using a thicker chuck roast).

2. Shred the meat and reserve the cooking liquid.

Quick-release the pressure, transfer the beef to a cutting board, and let it cool slightly before shredding it along the grain into long, thin strands with two forks. Strain the leftover liquid in the pot, reserving exactly 1 cup of this highly flavored beef broth for your sauce, and discard the boiled vegetables.

1. Build the sofrito base.

Wipe the pressure cooker insert dry, return it to the machine, and set it to sauté. Heat the olive oil until shimmering, then add the sliced onions and bell peppers, cooking for 5 to 7 minutes until softened, followed by the minced garlic for 1 minute more.

2. Toast the spices and deglaze.

Stir in the cumin, oregano, and paprika for 30 seconds until fragrant, then pour in the Vino Seco to deglaze the pot, scraping up any browned bits. Let the wine reduce for a minute before stirring in the tomato sauce, tomato paste, and the reserved cup of beef broth.

3. Simmer the stew to marry the flavors.

Fold the shredded beef and halved olives into the bubbling sauce, ensuring every strand is coated. Let it simmer uncovered on the sauté setting for 10 minutes until the sauce reduces into a thick, clingy gravy, then taste and adjust the salt and pepper before serving over white rice.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The secret of Vino Seco.**

Authentic Cuban Vino Seco is heavily salted. If you can't find it and opt to use a standard dry white wine like Pinot Grigio with a splash of white vinegar, you will likely need to add an extra pinch of salt at the end to properly balance the dish.

● **Make it ahead.**

Like all great stews, Ropa Vieja is arguably better the next day after the flavors have mingled in the fridge. You can boil and shred the meat on a Sunday, store it in a container with its own broth, and whip up the sofrito on a busy Tuesday night in under twenty minutes.



Fricasé de Pollo Rápido

free-kah-SEH deh POH-yoh RAH-pee-doh

This is the ultimate expression of 'hoy cocinó abuela'—today, grandmother cooked. Born from delicate French haute cuisine, the dish was quickly stripped of its cream and butter, dragged into the Caribbean sun, and rebuilt with sharp garlic, acidic tomatoes, and the briny punch of Spanish olives. Traditional versions demand chopping a whole bird through the bone and simmering it for hours. For a busy Tuesday in America, bone-in thighs and a sharp marinade of fresh lime and sweet orange—a perfect replica of the island's elusive 'naranja agria'—do the heavy lifting. It is gritty, deeply comforting, and undeniably Cuban.

INGREDIENTS

2 lb	bone-in skin-on chicken thighs	1 med	green bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>
4 med	garlic cloves <i>mashed into a paste</i>	4 med	garlic cloves <i>minced</i>
1 med	sweet orange <i>juiced</i>	2 tbsp	tomato paste
1 med	lime <i>juiced</i>	1/2 cup	Vino Seco
1 tsp	ground cumin	8 oz	tomato sauce
1 tsp	dried oregano	1/2 cup	chicken broth
1 1/2 tsp	kosher salt	1 small	Sazón with Culantro and Achiote packet
1/2 tsp	black pepper	1 med	dried bay leaf
2 tbsp	olive oil	1/3 cup	Alcaparrado
1 large	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	2 med	Russet potatoes <i>peeled and cut into 1-inch chunks</i>
		1/2 cup	frozen petite peas

PREPARATION

- **Combine the quick adobo.**

In a large bowl, whisk together the mashed garlic, cumin, oregano, salt, pepper, sweet orange juice, and lime juice.

- **Marinate the chicken.**

Toss the chicken thighs in the adobo to coat thoroughly. Let sit at room temperature for 20 to 30 minutes while you prep the vegetables.

- **Dry the skin.**

Remove the chicken from the marinade, pat the skin completely dry with paper towels to ensure a proper sear, and set aside. Crucially, reserve the leftover marinade in the bowl.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Sear the chicken to render the fat.**

Heat the olive oil in a large Dutch oven or heavy-bottomed pot over medium-high heat. Place the chicken thighs skin-side down and sear undisturbed for 6 to 8 minutes until deeply golden. Flip, cook for 2 more minutes, and remove to a plate. Do not wipe out the pot; the rendered fat is liquid gold.

2. **Build the aromatic sofrito.**

Lower the heat to medium. Add the diced yellow onion and green bell pepper to the hot chicken fat, sautéing for 5 minutes until soft and translucent. Stir in the minced garlic and tomato paste, cooking for 1 minute until the paste darkens slightly.

3. **Deglaze the pot with Vino Seco.**

Pour in the cooking wine. It will hiss and bubble aggressively. Use a wooden spoon to scrape every browned bit off the bottom of the pot, then let the wine reduce for 2 minutes to cook off the harsh alcohol.

4. **Assemble the stewing liquid and simmer.**

Stir in the tomato sauce, chicken broth, Sazón packet, bay leaf, Alcaparrado, and the reserved marinade juices. Nestle the chicken thighs back into the pot, skin-side up. Bring to a gentle boil, reduce the heat to medium-low, cover tightly, and simmer for 15 minutes.

5. **Introduce the potatoes to thicken the sauce.**

Uncover and gently tuck the potato chunks into the liquid around the chicken. Cover again and simmer for another 20 to 25 minutes. The dish is ready when the potatoes are fork-tender and the chicken nearly falls off the bone. The starch from the potatoes will have magically thickened the sauce into a rich gravy.

6. **Finish with peas and serve.**

Turn off the heat and discard the bay leaf. Stir in the frozen peas; the residual heat will cook them instantly while keeping them bright green. Serve immediately over a generous mound of white rice.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Sourcing Vino Seco.**

Look for Cuban dry cooking wine (preferably Edmundo brand) in the Latin aisle of your supermarket. If unavailable, substitute a half cup of dry white wine, like Pinot Grigio, mixed with a teaspoon of white vinegar to replicate its sharp profile.

- **The sour orange hack.**

Authentic Cuban cooking relies on 'naranja agria'. Mixing equal parts standard sweet orange juice and fresh lime juice perfectly mimics its acidic bite and floral aroma without a frustrating hunt through specialty stores.

- **Swapping the Alcaparrado.**

If you cannot find a jar of pre-mixed Alcaparrado, simply use a quarter cup of pimiento-stuffed green Manzanilla olives and a tablespoon of capers.



Scaled-Down Weeknight Pernil

pehr-NEEL en OH-yah deh preh-SYOHN

It is a fundamental truth of Cuban cooking that pernil—the majestic, garlic-studded roast pork of Nochebuena—demands respect and an entire day of slow, low heat. But on a Tuesday night, the diaspora turns to a brilliant, historically entrenched equalizer: the pressure cooker. By aggressively mashing a fiercely authentic mojo criollo of fresh citrus and garlic, searing the meat for a deep crust, and letting superheated steam do the heavy lifting, the home cook achieves fall-apart, soul-satisfying perfection in an hour. The skin is pulled away to blister under the broiler, ensuring you never miss out on the sacred, crackling cuerito.

INGREDIENTS

1/2 cup	sweet orange juice <i>freshly squeezed</i>	1 tsp	coarse black pepper
1/4 cup	lime juice <i>freshly squeezed</i>	2 tbsp	olive oil
10 large cloves	garlic <i>peeled</i>	3 lb	boneless pork shoulder <i>cut into 3-inch chunks with any thick pieces of skin removed and reserved</i>
1 tbsp	dried oregano	1 med	yellow onion <i>thickly sliced</i>
1 1/2 tsp	ground cumin	1/2 cup	chicken broth
1 1/2 tbsp	kosher salt	1 tbsp	coarse salt <i>reserved for the skin</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Mash the mojo aromatics into a paste.

Place the garlic, kosher salt, cumin, oregano, and black pepper into a mortar and pestle, aggressively mashing them until they form a thick, pungent paste, then stir in the olive oil and fresh citrus juices.

2. Marinate the pork chunks.

Toss the meat in the mojo until every crevice is coated, letting it sit at room temperature for the 15 minutes it takes to prep the rest of the meal, or leave it in the fridge all day while you are at work.

3. Sear the pork to build a foundational flavor.

Set an electric pressure cooker to the sauté function, remove the pork from the marinade while reserving the liquid, and deeply brown the chunks in batches until a dark crust forms on all sides.

4. Pressure cook the meat.

Turn off the sauté function, lay the sliced onion at the bottom of the pot, return the meat, and pour over the reserved marinade and chicken broth before sealing and cooking on manual high pressure for 45 minutes.

1. Broil the cuerito while the meat cooks.

If your pork came with skin, pat it entirely dry, rub it generously with coarse salt, and blast it under a low oven broiler on a foil-lined tray for 15 to 20 minutes until glassy and shattering.

2. Shred the meat and dress it with the pan juices.

Let the pressure release naturally for 10 minutes, manually vent the rest, then shred the impossibly tender pork with two forks, making sure to toss it heavily with the reduced, citrusy onion juices left in the pot.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Sourcing the citrus.**

True Cuban mojo relies on naranja agria, or sour orange. Bottled versions taste artificial and dead. The canonical weeknight supermarket substitute is a mix of fresh sweet orange and lime juice, which perfectly mimics the bright, acidic bite of the homeland.

● **Respect the cuerito.**

Never put acidic mojo marinade on the pork skin. The 100 percent humidity of a pressure cooker will turn it to rubber. Keep it entirely separate, dry it meticulously, and use coarse salt to draw out the moisture before applying direct, dry broiler heat.



Bistec Empanizado

bee-STEK em-pah-nee-ZAH-doh

If you want to know what a Cuban grandmother's house smells like at six o'clock on a Tuesday, this is it. It's an island staple that demands very little of your time but delivers pure Havana comfort. The secret isn't a heavy batter, but thin cuts of beef subjected to a sharp, garlicky citrus mojo and a crust made exclusively from crushed crackers. Let the meat sit in the fridge while you're at work, and you're less than fifteen minutes away from the kind of crispy, golden, profoundly savory meal that defines home.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb top sirloin steak
thinly sliced

4 med cloves fresh garlic
finely minced or mashed into a paste

1/4 cup	fresh orange juice	1/2 tsp	black pepper
2 tbsp	fresh lime juice	4 oz	saltine crackers <i>pulverized into a fine powder</i>
2 tbsp	fresh lemon juice	1/2 cup	all-purpose flour
1/2 med	yellow onion <i>thinly sliced into rings</i>	2 large	eggs
1 tsp	dried oregano	1 tbsp	milk
1/2 tsp	ground cumin	1 cup	neutral oil
1 1/2 tsp	kosher salt	1 med	lime <i>cut into wedges</i>

PREPARATION

- **Pound the beef thin.**

Even if your butcher sliced the meat thin, lay the steaks on a cutting board, cover with plastic wrap, and gently pound them with a meat mallet until they are about 1/8-inch to 1/4-inch thick to guarantee a fast cooking time.

- **Make the fake sour orange juice.**

If you don't have access to bottled naranja agria at a Latin grocer, blending the fresh orange, lime, and lemon juice perfectly replicates the exact acidity and bitterness of the canonical Cuban citrus.

- **Crush the crackers.**

True Cuban Bistec Empanizado requires galleta molida (cracker meal), never panko or breadcrumbs. Run standard saltines through a food processor or smash them in a zip-top bag with a rolling pin until reduced to dust.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Marinate the pounded meat.**

In a large bowl or zip-top bag, combine the garlic, orange juice, lime juice, lemon juice, oregano, cumin, salt, and pepper. Toss the pounded steaks in the marinade, layering the sliced onions between the meat, then seal and refrigerate for at least 1 hour or up to 24 hours.

1. Set up the breading station.

Remove the meat from the fridge and discard the onion slices. Set up three wide, shallow bowls: one with the flour and a tiny pinch of salt, one with the eggs beaten vigorously with the milk, and one with the pulverized cracker crumbs.

2. Bread the steaks.

Shake excess marinade off a steak, dredge it lightly in the flour, then dip it completely into the beaten egg. Lay it in the cracker crumbs, using your hands to press the crumbs firmly into the meat on both sides so the crust adheres tightly, then set on a clean plate.

3. Flash fry the steaks in hot oil.

Pour about 1/2 inch of neutral oil into a large, heavy skillet and heat over medium-high until it shimmers. Carefully lay one or two steaks in the oil, frying until deeply golden brown and crisp, only 2 to 3 minutes per side.

4. Drain and serve immediately.

Transfer the cooked steaks to a paper towel-lined plate to drain and hit them with a tiny pinch of salt while the oil is still hot. Serve immediately with a squeeze of fresh lime juice over the crust.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Plan ahead for an effortless weeknight.**

The beauty of this recipe is that the meat wants to sit in the fridge all day while you are at work. Prep the marinade in the morning, and the active cooking time drops to just a few minutes of breading and frying when you get home.

● **Complete the table.**

To serve it exactly like they do in Havana, plate the hot steaks alongside white rice, black beans, and sweet fried plantains.



Vaca Frita de Pollo

There is a distinct, working-class genius to Vaca Frita. Originally designed to beat tough cuts of beef into glorious, crispy submission, Cuban home cooks applied the same twice-cooked, heavy-skillet magic to poultry. The dish is everything right about food: deeply comforting, fiercely flavored with a garlic and citrus mojo, and incredibly cheap to make. To achieve that signature shatteringly crisp crust on a busy Tuesday night, you only need one thing: the patience to press the meat into a searing hot pan and leave it entirely alone while the heat does its holy work.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	boneless skinless chicken breast	2 tbsp	fresh sweet orange juice
		1 tsp	dried oregano
1/2 med	yellow onion <i>halved</i>	1 tsp	ground cumin
3 med	garlic clove <i>smashed</i>	1 tsp	kosher salt
2 med	bay leaf	1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
1 tsp	kosher salt	3 tbsp	neutral oil or pork lard
4 cup	low-sodium chicken broth	1 large	white onion <i>sliced very thin</i>
6 med	garlic clove <i>finely grated or mashed into a paste</i>	1 med	lime <i>cut into wedges</i>
2 tbsp	fresh lime juice		

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Simmer the chicken and aromatics.

Place the chicken, yellow onion half, smashed garlic cloves, bay leaves, and 1 teaspoon of kosher salt in a pot. Cover entirely with the chicken broth and simmer gently over medium-low heat for about 25 minutes, until the meat is completely fork-tender.

2. Shred the meat into fine strands.

Transfer the cooked chicken to a cutting board and let it cool slightly. Using two forks or your fingers, pull the meat into the finest, longest threads you can manage; the finer the shred, the more spectacular the final crust.

3. Build the mojo and marinate the chicken.

In a large bowl, aggressively toss the shredded chicken with the grated garlic, lime juice, orange juice, oregano, cumin, the remaining 1 teaspoon of salt, and black pepper. Let it sit for 10 minutes so the meat absorbs the acidic punch.

1. Sizzle the onions and press the chicken into the pan.

Heat the oil or lard in a heavy cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering and nearly smoking. Soften the sliced white onion for a minute, then spread the marinated chicken into the pan in an even layer, pressing it down firmly with a wide spatula.

2. Leave it entirely alone to crisp.

This is the non-negotiable secret of the dish: do not touch the pan for three to four minutes. Let the bottom develop a deep, caramelized crust before scraping, flipping, and tossing everything together for a final sear. Serve immediately with a squeeze of fresh lime.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The Rotisserie Shortcut.**

If you are staring down the barrel of a busy Tuesday, skip the poaching process entirely. Shred four cups of a plain, store-bought rotisserie chicken, drench it in the fresh mojo marinade, and go straight to the hot skillet. You cut the cooking time in half without sacrificing the soul of the dish.



Masitas de Puerco en Air Fryer

mah-SEE-tas deh PWER-koh

If Cuban food had a greatest hits album, this would be track one. Traditionally, country grandmothers boiled fatty pork shoulder in lard until the water vanished, leaving the meat to violently crisp in its own rendered fat. It is a beautiful, labor-intensive ritual that simply doesn't fit a busy Tuesday in Ohio. The air fryer steps in here not as a compromise, but as a pragmatic leap. To make it work, you need a highly marbled cut, a rigorous pat-down before cooking, and an absolute understanding that a true Cuban marinating adobo requires sour orange, cumin, and oregano.

INGREDIENTS

2 lb	pork shoulder <i>cut into 1.5-inch chunks with fat left intact</i>	1 tsp	dried oregano
1/2 cup	sour orange juice <i>or substitute 1/3 cup fresh orange juice mixed with 3 tbsp fresh lime juice</i>	1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
6 large cloves	garlic <i>peeled</i>	1 tbsp	olive oil <i>or melted lard</i>
1 1/2 tsp	kosher salt	1 large	white onion <i>thinly sliced</i>
1 tsp	ground cumin	1 med	lime <i>cut into wedges</i>

PREPARATION

- **Mash the garlic and salt.**

In a heavy mortar and pestle, grind the garlic cloves with the kosher salt into a rough paste. The salt acts as an abrasive to keep the garlic from jumping out.

- **Build the adobo marinade.**

Transfer the garlic paste to a bowl and whisk in the sour orange juice, cumin, oregano, and black pepper.

- **Marinate the pork.**

Pour the marinade over the pork chunks, massaging it aggressively into the meat so every crevice is coated. Cover and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes, or overnight if you have the foresight.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the air fryer.**

Set your air fryer to 400°F and let it heat up fully.

1. Thoroughly dry the meat.

Remove the pork from the marinade, discarding the leftover liquid, and pat the chunks completely dry with paper towels. If the meat goes in wet, it steams instead of fries, entirely ruining the crust.

2. Coat the pork in fat.

Toss the dried pork chunks with the olive oil or melted lard to encourage blistering in the high-convection heat.

3. Air fry in a single layer.

Place the pork chunks into the air fryer basket without overcrowding them, working in two batches if necessary. Cook for 10 minutes.

4. Flip the meat.

Open the basket and use tongs to turn each piece of pork, ensuring it browns evenly, then continue frying for another 8 to 12 minutes.

5. Wilt the onions.

In the final 3 minutes of cooking, scatter the thinly sliced white onions directly over the top of the pork. The heat will wilt them perfectly into the rendering pork fat.

6. Rest and serve.

Transfer the pork and onions to a platter and let them rest for 3 minutes so the crust sets. Give it a final squeeze of fresh lime juice before serving.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Fat is non-negotiable.**

Do not attempt this with pork loin or tenderloin. The air fryer relies entirely on the intrinsic fat of a shoulder or butt to crisp the meat. Lean cuts will turn to leather.

- **Respect the mojo dichotomy.**

Traditional Cuban methodology strictly dictates that cumin and oregano belong in the marinating adobo, never in a finishing sauce. By leaving those spices in the marinade and relying only on the wilted onions and fresh lime juice at the end, you preserve the authentic flavor profile of the island.



Chuletas Ahumadas con Piña

Forget the Hollywood illusion of Cuban cooking—every dish does not require a twenty-four-hour mojo marinade. In the real kitchens of the diaspora, survival and flavor rely on the brilliant pragmatism of the working grandmother. Here, salt-cured, hickory-smoked pork chops meet the unapologetic utility of canned pineapple juice to create an instant sweet-and-savory pan sauce. Anchored by the warm, aromatic depth of whole cloves and a splash of dry wine, it is an irrefutable masterpiece of weeknight utility that tastes exactly like home.

INGREDIENTS

4 med bone-in smoked pork chops **20 oz** canned pineapple slices in
patted dry juice
drained, juice reserved

1 large	yellow onion <i>sliced into half-moons</i>	1/4 cup	dry white wine or dry vermouth
3 small	fresh garlic <i>minced</i>	1 tsp	Dijon mustard
1 tbsp	butter or neutral oil	3 small	whole cloves
		1/4 tsp	black pepper

PREPARATION

- **Prepare the aromatics.**

Slice the yellow onion into half-moons and mince the garlic cloves.

- **Separate the pineapple and juice.**

Drain the canned pineapple slices, making sure to reserve all the juice for the pan sauce.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sear the smoked pork chops.**

Heat the butter or oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat, browning the chops for two to three minutes per side to wake up the fat and build a crust, then remove them to a plate.

- 2. Sauté the aromatics in the pork fat.**

Lower the heat to medium and toss the sliced onions directly into the residual drippings, cooking until softened and lightly browned, before stirring in the minced garlic for thirty seconds.

- 3. Caramelize the pineapple rings.**

Push the onions to the edge of the skillet and lay the pineapple slices in the center, letting them pick up color for about two minutes per side.

- 4. Build the sweet and savory glaze.**

Pour in the reserved pineapple juice, dry white wine, mustard, and whole cloves, stirring gently to scrape up any browned fond from the bottom of the pan.

1. Reduce the sauce into a lacquer.

Let the liquid bubble and aggressively reduce for five to seven minutes until it transforms into a thick, glossy syrup, finishing with a few cracks of black pepper.

2. Reintegrate the pork chops.

Return the pork and any resting juices to the skillet, nestling them into the sauce for two minutes to heat through completely before serving.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Watch out for the whole cloves.**

The cloves are essential for that traditional, warming Caribbean background note, but warn your diners not to bite into them directly. Never substitute ground cloves, which will overpower the dish and turn the sauce gritty.

● **Serve with white rice.**

This dish demands a bed of long-grain white rice to soak up the glossy, sweet-and-sour pan sauce.

● **Understanding smoked chops.**

Smoked pork chops are fully cooked and salt-cured, usually found in the refrigerated section near the ham or bacon. Because they are highly seasoned, no additional salt is needed in the pan.



Viandas & Sides (The Supporting Cast)

The essential starchy root vegetables and refreshing sides that complete the Cuban plate.

In the Cuban culinary cosmology, the pork might get the glory, but the viandas do the heavy lifting. These dense, starchy roots and unapologetic plantains anchor the plate. They are the sponges for runaway mojo, the sweet

counterpunch to salted meat, and the crispy vessels for everything else. Without them, a meal is just a piece of protein looking for a purpose.

There is no substituting the sharp, garlic-heavy bite of perfectly boiled yuca, or the blistering, caramelized edges of a proper maduro. These aren't afterthoughts tossed on the side of the plate; they are the essential supporting cast, the true, unvarnished taste of home. Here is how you get them right.





Yuca con Mojo Clásico

yoo-kah kohn mo-ho klah-see-koh

Potatoes are fine, but in Cuba, yuca is king. It is a dense, earthy root that demands respect, and it isn't truly alive until baptized in Mojo Criollo—a loud, punchy, garlic-heavy sauce that seeps into every crack. The smell of sizzling garlic hitting sour orange is a direct ticket back to the homeland. For a weeknight kitchen in the States, there are two golden grandmother secrets you need: skip the wax-covered fresh yuca and buy it frozen, and always "scare" the boiling root with ice water. It is a ruthless thermal shock that guarantees a meltingly tender interior without the whole thing disintegrating into mush.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	frozen yuca chunks	1/3 cup	extra-virgin olive oil
1 tbsp	kosher salt	1 small	red onion <i>sliced into paper-thin half-moons</i>
1 cup	ice water	1/4 cup	sweet orange juice <i>freshly squeezed</i>
8 large	garlic <i>peeled</i>	1/4 cup	lime juice <i>freshly squeezed</i>
1/2 tsp	coarse kosher salt		

PREPARATION

- **Blend the citrus to recreate the sour orange.**

Mixing equal parts sweet orange and lime juice perfectly mimics the complex, sharp acidity of a true Cuban naranja agria.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Submerge the frozen yuca chunks in a large pot with two inches of cold water and bring to a rapid boil.**
Do not bother thawing them first; the freezer aisle does the heavy lifting here.
- 2. After fifteen minutes, when the yuca begins to swell and crack, violently shock the boiling pot with the cup of ice water.**
This old-school trick, 'asustar la yuca', stops the exterior from turning to mush while the dense core finishes softening. Add the tablespoon of kosher salt only after scaring the yuca to avoid toughening the starch.
- 3. Return the water to a gentle simmer and cook until a fork pierces the root with zero resistance, about twenty more minutes.**
You are looking for a translucent, meltingly soft texture akin to a perfectly boiled potato.

- 1. While the yuca simmers, pound the garlic cloves and coarse salt in a mortar and pestle until they form a smooth, wet paste.**

The coarse salt acts as a crucial abrasive, crushing the cell walls to release maximum pungency while keeping the cloves from flying out of the bowl.

- 2. Heat the olive oil in a small skillet over medium-low heat, gently sweating the red onions for two minutes before stirring in the garlic paste.**

Stir constantly for sixty seconds. Do not let the garlic brown, or the whole operation turns bitter.

- 3. Remove the skillet entirely from the heat and carefully pour in the sweet orange and lime juices.**

The violent hiss and sizzle—the 'borboteo'—takes the raw bite out of the garlic while preserving the bright acidity of the citrus. Let it rest in the warm pan.

- 4. Drain the hot yuca, split each chunk with a fork, and pull out the tough, stringy core running down the center.**

Move fast. Transfer the cleaned, steaming yuca to a platter and drown it in the warm mojo immediately so the starchy root absorbs every drop.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Never throw away cold leftover yuca.**

Slicing the chilled, mojo-soaked root into thick batons and shallow-frying them the next day creates the ultimate crispy yuca fry.



Fufú de Plátano con Chicharrones

foo-foo deh plah-tah-no kohn chee-chah-ro-nehs

If you want to know what a Cuban grandmother's kitchen smells like on a Tuesday evening, this is it. Fufú de plátano is the ultimate Cuban comfort food, a masterful, deeply savory collision of starchy Caribbean plantains and rich, rendered pork fat that traces its roots straight back to West Africa. The secret—the trick the abuelas know—is the ratio: mostly rigid green plantains for structure, cut with a single semi-ripe one for a whisper of sweetness. By swapping the traditional, time-consuming raw pork belly for thick-cut bacon, you get the exact same

crispy, salty crunch and smoky fat required to build the garlic-citrus mojo in a fraction of the time. It's approachable, wildly flavorful, and exactly what home tastes like.

INGREDIENTS

3 large	green plantain <i>unpeeled</i>	5 med	garlic clove <i>mashed into a paste</i>
1 large	semi-ripe plantain <i>unpeeled</i>	1 large	lime <i>juiced</i>
8 oz	thick-cut bacon <i>chopped into 1/2-inch pieces</i>	1 tsp	kosher salt
1/2 med	red onion <i>finely chopped</i>	1/2 tsp	black pepper

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Score and boil the plantains with their skins on to skip the frustration of peeling them raw.

Cut the ends off all four plantains and make two shallow slits down the length of each, cutting just through the skin. Cut them into 2-inch chunks, place in a large pot covered with salted water, and simmer until fork-tender, about 30 minutes.

2. Slowly render the bacon to extract maximum fat and crispy bits.

Place the chopped bacon in a large skillet over medium-low heat. Cook for 10 to 12 minutes until crispy, then remove the meat with a slotted spoon and drain on a paper towel, leaving all the beautiful rendered fat in the pan.

3. Build the warm mojo directly in the residual pork fat.

Return the skillet to medium heat, add the red onion, and sauté until translucent. Add the mashed garlic for 60 seconds until deeply fragrant, turn off the heat entirely, and stir in the fresh lime juice.

4. Reserve the starchy boiling water before draining and peeling the plantains.

Scoop out about half a cup of the boiling liquid. Drain the plantains, and once they are just cool enough to handle, slide the softened skins off and discard them.

1. Mash the plantains into a coarse, rustic texture.

Transfer the hot plantains to a large bowl and mash with a heavy fork or potato masher. Slowly pour in the reserved starchy water a few tablespoons at a time until the mash is moist but holds its shape—do not aim for smooth mashed potatoes.

2. Fold the warm mojo and crispy pork into the mash.

Pour the warm garlic, onion, and lime fat over the plantains. Add the salt, black pepper, and half the bacon bits, stirring vigorously so the plantains absorb all the flavor.

3. Garnish with the remaining bacon and serve immediately.

Transfer the fufú to a serving dish and top with the rest of the crispy pork to serve alongside a simple protein or rich stew.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Sourcing the perfect semi-ripe plantain.**

If you cannot find a 'pintón' (yellow peel with black spots) at the market, buy a green one and leave it on the counter for 3 to 5 days until it begins to turn yellow.

● **Substituting for green plantains entirely.**

If you are in a rush and only have rock-hard green plantains, the recipe still works beautifully; it will simply be slightly denser and more savory. Ensure you use the starchy boiling water to keep the mash from drying out.



Boniato Frito

boh-nee-ah-toh free-toh

If you try to fry a regular American yam, you'll end up with a soggy, charred tragedy. To get that true, fluffy, chestnut-like Cuban side dish, you need the right tuber and a grandmother's secret. We're bypassing the orange sweet potatoes entirely—if you can't find a Caribbean boniato, buy the Japanese Murasaki variety. To cook them, we break all the rules of deep frying by dropping them straight into cold lard. As the fat heats, the potato poaches to a fluffy cloud inside before the exterior crisps into a golden shell. It feels wrong, but trust the ancestors. It works every time.

INGREDIENTS

2 large	Caribbean boniatos or Japanese sweet potatoes <i>peeled and cut into 3/4-inch thick batons</i>	1 tbsp	lemon or lime juice
1 tsp	kosher salt	2 cup	lard or neutral frying oil
		1 tbsp	kosher salt <i>reserved for finishing</i>

PREPARATION

- **Soak the cut tubers in cold, acidulated water.**

Place the cut boniato in a large bowl filled with cold water, the citrus juice, and 1 teaspoon of salt. Let them soak for 30 minutes to pull out surface starch and prevent the flesh from oxidizing.

- **Drain but do not rinse.**

Drain the boniatos thoroughly in a colander, leaving that faint trace of salt and acid clinging to the potato. Pat them obsessively dry with paper towels to prevent the oil from splattering later.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Start the boniatos in cold fat.**

Place a large, deep skillet or Dutch oven on the stove and add your lard or oil before you turn on the heat. Add the dried boniato pieces straight into the cold fat in a single, even layer.

- 2. Slowly fry until perfectly golden.**

Turn the heat to medium-high and leave them alone as the fat begins to melt and bubble. Once the oil is actively boiling and the edges look golden, about 10 to 12 minutes, use tongs to gently turn them and continue frying until deeply browned and crisp.

1. Drain and season immediately.

Transfer the hot boniatos to a wire rack or paper towels to drain excess fat.

Immediately hit them generously with finishing salt while the surface is still glistening so it sticks.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Find the right sweet potato.**

Standard American orange sweet potatoes will burn and turn to mush. If your local Latin grocer doesn't have white-fleshed boniatos, Japanese sweet potatoes (with dark purple skin and pale flesh) are an exact botanical substitute.

● **Add a touch of sugar.**

For a hyper-regional rustic touch, dust the hot boniatos with a literal pinch of granulated sugar alongside the salt to make the savory and sweet flavors pop.



Plátanos Maduros Fritos

plah-tah-nohs mah-doo-rohs free-tohs

If there is one absolute, non-negotiable rule in a Cuban kitchen, it is this: you do not throw away black plantains. To the uninitiated, a plantain with a skin as black as coal looks like it belongs in the compost, but to a Cuban grandmother, that blackened peel is a promise. These sticky-sweet fried plantains are the essential supporting actor of the Cuban table, providing a perfect counterpoint to salty, garlicky mains without the need for batters or added sugar. It is the unadulterated taste of a Havana weeknight, demanding nothing but hot oil and a little patience.

INGREDIENTS

3 large	plantains <i>overripe with entirely black skins, ends trimmed and peeled</i>	1/2 cup	neutral cooking oil
		1 pinch	flaky sea salt

PREPARATION

- **Let the plantains turn completely black.**

Do not rush the ripening process; leave them on the counter for a week or more until the skins turn entirely black and yield gently to the touch.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Slice the peeled plantains on a steep diagonal bias into pieces about three-quarters of an inch thick.**

This canonical Cuban cut maximizes the surface area that hits the hot oil, ensuring a deeply caramelized crust while keeping the interior custardy.

- 2. Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat until a test piece of plantain immediately sizzles.**

You want about half an inch of oil to shallow-fry the plantains.

- 3. Lay the plantain slices into the hot oil without overcrowding the pan.**

Fry for two to three minutes on the first side, watching them like a hawk as the natural sugars can go from perfectly caramelized to completely burned in seconds.

- 4. Carefully flip each slice and fry for another two minutes.**

They should emerge a deep, rich golden brown with dark, sticky edges.

- 5. Transfer the fried plantains to a paper towel-lined plate to drain excess oil.**

- 6. Sprinkle with a tiny pinch of flaky sea salt and serve immediately.**

They are best eaten straight away while the center is practically melting.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Patience is your primary ingredient.**

A yellow plantain will yield a starchy, rigid bite instead of the intended sweet melt. Let the fruit do the hard work.

- **Embrace the lard.**

While neutral oil is the weeknight standard, frying these in pork lard adds an unbelievable savory backbone to the sweet fruit that honors the old-school ancestral table.



Tostones Crujientes

tos-TOH-nēs croo-HYEN-tes

If you grew up in a Cuban home, the brutal sizzle of green plantains hitting hot oil meant comfort was imminent. These aren't the dry, heavy pucks served at lazy tourist traps; they are true chatinos, shattered and twice-fried into rugged golden coins. The secret that elevates them from a snack to a masterpiece is a fleeting plunge into garlic-infused salt water just before the final fry. The water turns to steam, puffing the starchy interior into a fluffy cloud while the exterior crystallizes into glass. It crackles, it pops, and it is exactly how a grandmother does it.

INGREDIENTS

2 cup	water <i>room temperature</i>	1/2 cup	olive oil
1 1/2 tbsp	fine sea salt	6 med cloves	garlic <i>finely minced</i>
4 large cloves	garlic <i>smashed with the side of a knife</i>	1/4 cup	fresh orange juice
3 large	green plantains <i>peeled and cut into 1 1/2-inch thick rounds</i>	2 tbsp	fresh lime juice
2 cup	neutral frying oil	2 tbsp	fresh lemon juice
1 tbsp	coarse sea salt	1/2 tsp	ground cumin
		1/2 tsp	salt

PREPARATION

- **Whisk the water, fine sea salt, and smashed garlic in a medium bowl.**
Set this aside so the garlic infuses the water for the essential dip.
- **To make the Mojo, heat the olive oil in a small saucepan over medium-low heat.**
Add the minced garlic and cook for 30 seconds until fragrant, taking care not to brown it. Remove from heat and whisk in the orange juice, lime juice, lemon juice, cumin, and salt.
- **Peel the plantains by scoring the rigid skin lengthwise.**
Cut off the ends, score the skin in three places, and wedge your thumb under the peel to pry it off. If it resists, soak the whole unpeeled plantain in warm water for a minute.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Heat a half-inch of neutral oil in a heavy-bottomed skillet to 350°F.**
Working in batches so you don't crowd the pan, fry the plantain rounds for 3 to 4 minutes per side until they turn pale yellow and yield easily to a fork.

- 1. Transfer the softened plantains to a paper towel-lined board and smash them flat.**

While they are still warm, place a piece of parchment paper over each round and use the flat bottom of a heavy coffee mug to press it into a sturdy coin about a third of an inch thick.

- 2. Increase the oil heat to 375°F and prepare for the second fry.**

- 3. Dunk each smashed tostón into the garlic-salt water for three seconds.**

Pull it out, shake off the excess water, and dab it quickly on a paper towel so it isn't dripping wet, which prevents aggressive oil popping.

- 4. Slide the hydrated plantains back into the hot oil and fry for 2 to 3 minutes per side.**

Stand back as the water meets the oil. Pull them when they are deeply golden, rigid, and audibly crisp.

- 5. Drain on a wire rack and immediately shower with coarse sea salt.**

The residual surface oil will catch the salt. Serve immediately alongside the Mojo for dipping.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Plantains must be rock-hard and vibrantly green.**

If the peel yields to a squeeze or shows yellow spots, the starches have converted to sugar and the tostones will burn rather than crisp.

- **The process can be paused to suit a busy schedule.**

You can execute the first fry and smash up to two hours in advance. Leave the flattened discs on a cutting board, then dip and fry them right as dinner is hitting the table.



Boniato Hervido con Mojo

boh-NYAH-toh air-VEE-doh kohn MOH-hoh

If you grew up in a Cuban household, the smell of garlic hitting hot oil means dinner is imminent. But here is the secret that separates authentic island cooking from generic internet recipes: mojo is not a monolith. The sauce you pour over a starchy, earthy boniato isn't the cumin-heavy sour orange marinade you use for roast pork. It is a completely different beast—pure lime, oceans of garlic, and thinly sliced onions lightly softened in hot oil. It is a sharply acidic, deeply savory hit meant to cut right through the dense comfort of the boiled root. Track down the real white-fleshed tuber, treat the garlic with respect, and let the sizzle do the talking.

INGREDIENTS

2 lb	boniatos <i>peeled and cut into 1 1/2-inch chunks</i>	8 med cloves	garlic <i>peeled and finely minced</i>
1 tbsp	kosher salt	1 med	yellow onion <i>thinly sliced into half-moons</i>
1 tsp	granulated sugar	1/3 cup	fresh lime juice
1 tsp	fresh lime juice	1 tsp	kosher salt
1/3 cup	extra-virgin olive oil		

PREPARATION

- **Protect the boniato from oxidation.**

Boniatos turn gray very quickly when exposed to air. Have a large bowl of cold water ready; as you peel and chop the tubers, drop the chunks immediately into the water to keep them perfectly white until you are ready to boil.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Prepare the boiling water.**

Fill a large pot with enough water to cover the boniatos by at least an inch. Add the tablespoon of salt, the sugar, and the teaspoon of lime juice—a grandmother's trick to keep the potatoes stark white and enhance their earthy flavor—and bring to a rolling boil.

- 2. Boil the boniato.**

Drain your submerged sweet potato chunks and carefully drop them into the boiling water. Reduce the heat slightly to maintain a vigorous simmer, cooking for 15 to 20 minutes until they are easily pierced with a fork but still holding their shape.

1. Tame the alliums.

About five minutes before the boniato is done, heat the olive oil in a small skillet over medium-low heat. Add the minced garlic and watch it closely; you want it to sizzle gently to a pale gold. If it turns dark brown, it will be hopelessly bitter, so throw it out and start over.

2. Soften the onions.

Once the garlic is light gold, toss in the thinly sliced onions. Cook for just one to two minutes, stirring constantly. You aren't trying to caramelize them, just soften them slightly—a technique called *amortiguar*—to remove their raw bite while keeping a bit of crunch.

3. Create the sizzle.

Pull the skillet completely off the heat and immediately pour in the third-cup of lime juice and the remaining teaspoon of salt. It will vigorously spit and bubble, creating a fleeting emulsion that releases an incredible aroma into your kitchen.

4. Dress and serve immediately.

Thoroughly drain the tender boniatos and transfer them to a platter while they are still steaming hot. Pour the hot mojo over the top, tossing gently so the starchy potatoes absorb the rich, acidic oil.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Finding the right sweet potato.**

Do not use the bright orange sweet potatoes typical of American Thanksgiving casseroles. You want a Cuban boniato, which has purplish-tan skin and stark white flesh, possessing a much starchier, chestnut-like texture. If you can't find one, a Japanese sweet potato is your best substitute.

● **The diaspora fallacy.**

Many generic recipes treat mojo as a monolith, prescribing the cumin-heavy sour orange marinade meant for pork to root vegetables. Authentic vianda mojo relies purely on fresh lime juice, zero spices, and hot oil.

- **Breakfast leftovers.**

If you have leftover boniato the next day, smash the chunks slightly and pan-fry them in hot oil until deeply golden and crispy. Serve alongside fried eggs.



Ensalada Cubana Clásica

In a culinary landscape built on the glorious, heavy foundations of slow-roasted pork and dense, comforting starches, this salad is the mandatory, bright counterpoint. It isn't meant to steal the show, nor should it be complicated with extraneous chickpeas or performative herbs. It is a palate cleanser, pure and simple, relying entirely on the ice-cold crispness of the vegetable trinity and the unapologetically aggressive, garlic-heavy bite of the aliño criollo. This is the unsung hero of the Cuban table, a grandmother-approved masterclass in functional simplicity, ready to cut through the richness of a busy weeknight dinner or a sprawling Nochebuena feast alike.

INGREDIENTS

1 med	Iceberg or Romaine lettuce <i>washed, thoroughly dried, and torn by hand into bite-sized pieces</i>	1/3 cup	extra-virgin olive oil
2 large	ripe tomatoes <i>cut into thick wedges</i>	1/4 cup	white vinegar or fresh lime juice
1/2 large	white or red onion <i>sliced into paper-thin half-moons</i>	3 large	garlic cloves <i>peeled</i>
5 med	red radishes <i>ends trimmed and sliced into thin coins</i>	1/2 tsp	coarse kosher salt
		1/4 tsp	freshly ground black pepper

PREPARATION

- **Soak the onions to mellow their bite.**

For those who find raw onions overly pungent, slice them thinly and let them sit in the measured vinegar or lime juice for ten minutes before mixing the rest of the dressing.

- **Tear the lettuce by hand instead of using a knife.**

Slicing delicate greens with a steel blade can cause premature browning and bruising. Hand-tearing preserves the crisp texture necessary for the salad.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Chill the torn lettuce, tomato wedges, sliced onions, and radishes in a large serving bowl.**

Do not add the dressing yet. Place the bowl in the refrigerator to keep the vegetables ice-cold and crisp while you finish your main dishes.

- 2. Aggressively mash the peeled garlic cloves and coarse salt together in a mortar and pestle until they form a smooth, wet paste.**

The salt acts as an abrasive to break down the cell walls, ensuring the garlic flavor permeates the dressing without leaving harsh, raw chunks. If you don't have a mortar and pestle, mince the garlic finely, sprinkle the salt over it on your cutting board, and use the flat side of your knife to scrape it into a paste.

1. **Transfer the garlic-salt paste to a small jar and vigorously shake it with the black pepper, vinegar, and olive oil.**

Shake until the dressing is fully combined and slightly cloudy. Notice the unapologetically high acid ratio here; it is essential for the dressing to cut through the heavy fats of the main meal.

2. **Gradually pour the dressing over the chilled vegetables immediately before serving.**

Toss gently with large salad forks until coated but not drowning. The high acid will begin to wilt the lettuce immediately, so timing is everything. Serve at once.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Double the aliño criollo for easy weeknight access.**

The dressing keeps perfectly in the refrigerator for a week. Just shake it vigorously in a mason jar to re-emulsify on a busy Wednesday night.

- **Add sliced avocado with care.**

If avocados are in season, they are a beloved addition to the Cuban table. Lay the slices gently on top of the salad after tossing so they don't turn into mush.



Maíz Tierno Salteado

mah-EES TYER-no sahl-teh-AH-doh

In the canon of Cuban viandas—the starchy staples that anchor a meal—corn is sacred. But when first-generation cooks try to recreate their grandmother’s sauté in the States, they hit a wall: American supermarket corn is essentially candy, lacking the hearty, savory starch of Cuban field corn. The grandmother-approved secret to bridging the gap is twofold. First, sweat the aromatics low and slow in butter to build a deeply savory foundation without color. Second, hit it at the end with a splash of fresh lemon juice. That instant surge of acid cuts the sugary syrup of the corn, pulling the flavor profile straight back to the unpretentious, comforting tastes of the island. It takes ten minutes, and it tastes exactly like home.

INGREDIENTS

4 med	fresh yellow sweet corn <i>shucked</i>	1 tsp	kosher salt
4 tbsp	unsalted butter	1/4 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
1/2 med	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	2 tbsp	flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i>
1/2 med	green bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	1 tbsp	lemon juice <i>freshly squeezed</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Slice the kernels and milk the cobs.

Stand the corn ears upright in a large, shallow bowl and slice off the kernels.

Using the back of your knife, firmly scrape the bare cobs to release all the starchy, sweet corn milk into the bowl, then discard the cobs.

2. Sweat the aromatics low and slow.

In a large skillet, melt the butter over medium-low heat to ensure it doesn't brown.

Add the diced onion and green pepper, sautéing gently for 4 to 5 minutes until soft, translucent, and wilted, making sure they take on absolutely no color.

3. Sauté the corn until glazed.

Turn the heat up to medium. Add the corn kernels, the reserved corn milk, salt, and black pepper. Toss well to envelop the corn in the butter mixture, cooking for another 4 to 5 minutes until tender and the natural starches thicken the butter into a light glaze.

4. Finish with acid and fresh herbs.

Remove the skillet from the heat. Stir in the chopped parsley and the lemon juice.

Taste for seasoning; the lemon should perfectly mask the excessive sweetness of the corn, leaving you with a rich, bright, and savory side dish.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Never skip the corn milk.**

Scraping the cobs with the back of your knife is the defining technique of this dish. The starchy liquid that is released binds naturally with the melted butter, creating a luxurious, creamy texture without the need for heavy cream or cheese.

- **The right pepper for the job.**

Traditional Cuban recipes use ají cachucha, a small, uniquely flavorful sweet pepper. A standard green bell pepper or a Cubanelle pepper is an excellent, accessible substitute that maintains the requisite vegetal bite needed to offset the sweet corn.



Un Dulcito (Simple Sweet Endings)

Straightforward, foolproof recipes for classic Cuban indulgences.

There is a moment after a heavy, garlic-laden meal when the noise of the table settles, the espresso starts brewing, and someone inevitably demands un dulcito. A little sweet thing. This isn't the time for towering, over-engineered pastry. It's the hour for a cold slice of flan quivering in its pool of burnt sugar, a bowl of rice pudding steeped in cinnamon, or a cake unapologetically drowned in three kinds of milk.

These are the desserts abuela pulled from the fridge like magic—straightforward, deeply comforting, and now completely foolproof for your own kitchen. No pretense. Just the quiet, sugary grace notes that mean the night is winding down, but no one is going home just yet.





Flan de Caramelo

Forget the pristine, pastoral vision of farm-fresh dairy; the soul of authentic Cuban flan was born from necessity and a sweltering climate. Grandmothers didn't slave over a hot oven for hours—they relied on the dense, caramelized genius of canned milks and the ruthless efficiency of a stovetop pressure cooker. This modern adaptation uses an electric pressure cooker to recreate that exact, hyper-dense, fudgy miracle in a fraction of the time. The result is a profoundly comforting, silky custard cloaked in a deeply roasted, bitter-edged caramel that cuts right through the sweetness and tastes exactly like home.

INGREDIENTS

1 cup granulated white sugar **1/4 cup** water

14 oz	sweetened condensed milk	1 tbsp	pure vanilla extract
12 oz	evaporated milk	1 pinch	kosher salt
5 large	large eggs <i>at room temperature</i>		

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Melt the sugar for the caramel without stirring.**

Combine the sugar and water in a heavy-bottomed saucepan over medium heat. Do not let a spoon touch it—swirl the pan gently until the sugar transforms into a dark, golden-amber liquid that smells dangerously close to burnt.

2. **Coat the inside of the mold.**

Immediately pour the molten caramel into your flanera or a standard 8-inch round cake pan. Using oven mitts, carefully tilt and swirl the pan to coat the bottom and halfway up the sides, then set it aside to cool and harden into glass.

3. **Gently blend the custard base.**

Combine the condensed milk, evaporated milk, eggs, vanilla, and salt in a blender. Pulse just until homogenous—about ten to fifteen seconds. Do not over-blend; whipped-in air bubbles are the enemy of a silky, dense flan.

4. **Strain the mixture and seal the mold.**

Pour the custard base through a fine-mesh strainer directly into the caramel-lined mold to catch any stray egg whites. Cover the mold tightly with its latching lid or a firmly crimped sheet of heavy-duty aluminum foil to keep the steam out.

5. **Pressure cook to a silky perfection.**

Place a trivet in your electric pressure cooker and pour in enough water to reach halfway up the mold's sides. Lower the sealed mold in, secure the lid, and cook on high pressure for 35 minutes, followed by a 15-minute natural pressure release.

6. **Chill completely before serving.**

Remove the flan, let it cool to room temperature on a wire rack, and refrigerate for at least four hours—preferably overnight—to let the flavors mature and the custard firmly set.

1. **Invert and unveil the flan.**

Run a thin knife around the edge to break the vacuum seal. Place a deep platter with a lip over the mold, hold them tightly together, and flip in one swift motion. The flan will slide out, crowned in a cascade of dark caramel.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The Canned Milk Phenomenon**

Do not substitute fresh dairy here. Canned milks are heavily reduced and carry caramelized milk sugars that give this flan its authentic, roasted density. Using fresh milk turns this into a French Crème Caramel—delicious, but absolutely not Cuban.

- **The Traditional Oven Alternative**

If you don't have a pressure cooker, place the sealed mold in a large roasting pan, fill the pan halfway with boiling water, and bake at 350°F for 60 to 75 minutes until the edges are set but the center still slightly jiggles.

- **Invest in a Flanera**

If you plan on making this often, source a traditional 'flanera'—an inexpensive, latching stainless steel tin found at any Latin grocer. It is a brilliant, life-changing piece of hardware specifically engineered for this water-bath job.



Pastel de Tres Leches

Pastel de Tres Leches is the undisputed king of the Cuban dessert table. The secret to its greatness isn't some heavy butter cake, but the panetela—an airy, fat-free sponge that drinks up an unbelievable amount of sweet milk without turning to mush. For a busy home cook, this is the ultimate make-ahead dessert: bake the sponge and drown it on a Sunday night, then leave it in the fridge to cure. When Tuesday rolls around, you reap the rewards of a perfectly saturated, ice-cold cake that tastes exactly like a celebration in Havana.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/4 cup all-purpose flour

1/2 tsp kosher salt

1 1/2 tsp baking powder

5 large	eggs <i>separated into yolks and whites, at room temperature</i>	1 dash	ground cinnamon <i>for dusting</i>
1 cup	granulated sugar <i>divided (3/4 cup for the yolks, 1/4 cup for the whites)</i>	2 cup	heavy whipping cream <i>for the weeknight shortcut topping</i>
1/3 cup	whole milk	3 tbsp	powdered sugar <i>for the weeknight shortcut topping</i>
1 tsp	pure vanilla extract	3 large	egg whites <i>for the authentic meringue</i>
14 oz	sweetened condensed milk	1 cup	granulated sugar <i>for the authentic meringue</i>
12 oz	evaporated milk	1/4 cup	water <i>for the authentic meringue</i>
1/2 cup	heavy cream	1/2 tsp	cream of tartar <i>for the authentic meringue</i>
1 tbsp	dark rum <i>optional</i>		

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 350°F and lightly grease a 9x13-inch baking dish.**
Avoid using dark non-stick pans if possible, as the edges will cook too quickly.
- 2. Whisk together the flour, baking powder, and salt in a medium bowl.**
- 3. Beat the egg yolks with three-quarters of a cup of the granulated sugar on high speed for four to five minutes.**
Don't rush this step. The yolks must transform from dark orange to a very pale, thick, ribbony yellow to incorporate the air necessary to hold the milks later. Once pale, blend in the whole milk and vanilla extract.
- 4. In a separate, meticulously clean bowl, beat the 5 egg whites on medium-high speed until a soft foam forms, then add the remaining quarter cup of sugar.**
Continue beating until they form stiff, glossy peaks.
- 5. Gently fold the dry flour mixture into the pale egg yolks using a rubber spatula.**

- 1. Sacrifice a third of the whipped egg whites by folding them into the batter to loosen it up, then gently fold in the remaining whites with broad, sweeping motions.**

Do not over-mix, or you will deflate the air you just worked so hard to whip into the eggs.

- 2. Pour the airy batter into the prepared pan, smooth the top, and bake for 25 to 30 minutes.**

The panetela is ready when golden brown and a toothpick inserted into the center comes out perfectly clean. Remove from the oven and let it cool in the pan for 20 minutes.

- 3. Whisk the sweetened condensed milk, evaporated milk, heavy cream, and rum together in a large pitcher until completely combined.**

- 4. Mercilessly poke holes all over the cooled panetela with a fork or a wooden skewer.**

Do not be shy; poke deep into the corners to create capillary channels for the liquid to travel.

- 5. Slowly pour the three-milk mixture over the entire cake.**

It will look like a flooded mess, and you may think there is too much liquid, but trust the panetela. Cover the pan with plastic wrap and place it in the refrigerator for at least 4 hours, or ideally overnight.

- 6. Spread your topping of choice over the chilled, fully soaked cake and dust generously with ground cinnamon.**

Use the back of a spoon to create rustic peaks and swirls. Cut generous squares and serve cold.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The Weeknight Shortcut**

While a glossy Italian meringue is canonical, creating a boiling sugar syrup on a Tuesday night is highly prohibitive. Even native Cuban grandmothers occasionally bypass the meringue in favor of whipping 2 cups of heavy cream with 3 tablespoons of powdered sugar, or simply using a tub of commercial whipped topping.

- **The Authentic Merengue Cubano**

For the traditional weekend project: Whip 3 room-temperature egg whites with a pinch of salt and 1/2 teaspoon of cream of tartar until soft peaks form. Meanwhile, boil 1 cup of sugar and 1/4 cup of water in a saucepan without stirring until it reaches 240°F (soft-ball stage). With the mixer running, slowly pour the boiling syrup into the whites, then whip on high for 8 to 10 minutes until stiff, glossy, and cool to the touch.



Arroz con Leche Rápido

ah-ROHS kohn LEH-cheh RAH-pee-doh

If there is a scent that mainlines you straight back to an Ohio suburb standing in your mother's kitchen, it's the heavy, intoxicating cloud of cinnamon and lemon peel hitting hot water. Real Cuban arroz con leche isn't some fussy, egg-yolk-thickened European custard. It's an unapologetic, working-class masterpiece born of heat, necessity, and canned milks. The grandmothers of Havana weren't standing over a stove for an hour stirring; they used a pressure cooker to get dessert on the table fast. We're doing the exact same thing with an electric multi-cooker. Hit the switch, let the rice absorb the aromatics, fold in the holy

trinity of evaporated, condensed, and whole milk, and for the love of God, take it off the heat before it looks done. It tightens up as it cools into the exact, velvety memory of home.

INGREDIENTS

1 cup	medium-grain white rice <i>rinsed well</i>	1/4 tsp	fine sea salt
2 cup	water	12 oz	evaporated milk
1 large	cinnamon stick	14 oz	sweetened condensed milk
1 strip	lemon peel <i>peeled to yield a single 2-inch strip with no white pith</i>	1/2 cup	whole milk
		1 tsp	pure vanilla extract
		1 tbsp	ground cinnamon

PREPARATION

- **Wash the rice thoroughly.**

Place the rice in a fine-mesh strainer and rinse it under cold water until the water runs mostly clear. This removes excess surface starch that turns the dish into a gummy paste instead of a creamy pudding.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Combine the rinsed rice, water, cinnamon stick, lemon peel, and salt in an electric pressure cooker.**

Lock the lid, set the valve to sealing, and cook on High Pressure for 10 minutes.

- 2. Quick release the pressure and open the pot.**

The rice should be plump and have absorbed almost all the infused liquid. Fish out and discard the cinnamon stick and lemon peel; they have done their job and leaving them in will hijack the dish.

1. Switch the cooker to the lowest sauté or keep-warm setting and stir in the three milks.

Pour in the evaporated, condensed, and whole milk. Stir gently and constantly for 5 to 8 minutes just to heat the milks through and coax out the starches. Do not let the mixture boil.

2. Kill the heat while the pudding still looks loose and soupy.

This is where rookies fail. It needs to look a little too fluid. If it looks like thick oatmeal in the pot, it will turn into a brick in the fridge. The sugar and starch will firm up dramatically as it cools.

3. Remove the insert from the cooker, stir in the vanilla extract, and let it rest.

Let it sit at room temperature for 20 minutes to bloom before ladling into bowls and dusting heavily with ground cinnamon.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The stovetop workaround.**

No pressure cooker? Soak the rinsed rice in the 2 cups of water for two hours. Boil the rice, aromatics, and soaking water in a heavy pot until absorbed, about 12 minutes. Add the milks and simmer gently for 20 to 30 minutes until creamy.

● **Respect the bottom of the pot.**

Condensed milk is packed with sugar and loves to scorch. If you feel your spoon catching on the bottom, do not scrape it, or you will pull bitter burnt sugar into your pristine pudding. Lower the heat and stir only the top.

● **The fake Hollywood trap.**

Do not try to elevate this with fresh cream or raw cane syrup. The authentic, iconic flavor of mid-century Cuba relies entirely on industrialized canned milk. Buying a cheap can of condensed milk at the supermarket is exactly what your abuela did.



Natilla Cubana Clásica

nah-TEE-yah koo-BAH-nah KLAH-see-kah

In a Cuban household, the scent of cinnamon and lime zest warming in milk is the universal tell that something good is coming. Forget the heavy, modern shortcuts relying on cans of condensed milk; the true island flavor demands fresh whole milk, a gentle infusion of aromatics, and the simple discipline of constant stirring. It requires a mindful ten minutes at the stove to temper the eggs and coax out a silky, lump-free custard. The reward is a sublime, humble dessert that tastes exactly like home.

INGREDIENTS

3 1/2 cup whole milk

1 med cinnamon stick

1 med	lime peel <i>cut into a 2 to 3-inch strip, green zest only without the bitter white pith</i>	3/4 cup	granulated white sugar
1 pinch	kosher salt	4 tbsp	cornstarch
1/2 cup	whole milk <i>kept cold</i>	1 tsp	pure vanilla extract
4 large	egg yolks	6 med	Maria cookies
		1 tsp	ground cinnamon <i>for dusting</i>

PREPARATION

- **Avoid the pith at all costs.**

When peeling your lime, use a sharp vegetable peeler with a light touch to extract only the green oils. The spongy white pith underneath is intensely bitter and will ruin the milk infusion.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Warm the larger portion of milk, cinnamon stick, lime peel, and salt over medium-low heat until steaming.**

Do not let it boil. Once hot to the touch, remove the pot from the heat, cover, and let the aromatics steep for 10 minutes to build the foundational flavor of the custard.

- 2. Whisk the cold milk and cornstarch in a medium bowl until completely smooth.**

Once the slurry is lump-free, add the egg yolks and granulated sugar, whisking vigorously until the mixture is pale and fully combined.

- 3. Temper the egg mixture by slowly whisking in a cup of the hot, infused milk.**

Remove and discard the cinnamon stick and lime peel from the saucepan first.

Pouring the hot milk into the eggs in a thin, slow stream raises their temperature gently and prevents the yolks from scrambling.

- 1. Return the combined mixture to the saucepan and stir constantly over medium-low heat.**

This is where the real work happens. Use a silicone spatula or wooden spoon to scrape the bottom and corners of the pot continuously, cooking for 7 to 10 minutes so nothing sticks.

- 2. Pull the pot off the heat as soon as the custard heavily coats the back of your spoon.**

Run a finger through the custard on the spoon; if it leaves a distinct, clean line that holds its shape, it is fully thickened and ready.

- 3. Stir in the vanilla extract, portion into ramekins, and top each with a Maria cookie.**

Adding vanilla off the heat preserves its volatile oils. Let the ramekins cool on the counter for 30 minutes, then refrigerate for at least 3 hours. Dust with ground cinnamon just before serving.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The Miami-style holiday variation.**

If you want to replicate the richer, heavier version popularized by the Cuban-American diaspora in Miami, substitute one 12-ounce can of evaporated milk for 1 1/2 cups of the whole milk.



Majarete Express

mah-hah-REH-teh

The smell of sweet corn and cinnamon simmering on a stovetop is the universal scent of a Cuban grandmother's love. Historically, Majarete required hours of shucking, grating, and milking field corn to extract its natural starches. But for the diaspora trying to coax out those same memories on a Tuesday night in an American suburb, the "Majarete Express" was born. This isn't a shortcut; it's a testament to immigrant ingenuity, using canned corn and a touch of cornstarch to perfectly replicate that silky, comforting custard texture without the arduous labor. No coconut milk, no complicated chef-y flourishes—just the unadulterated, deeply comforting taste of home.

INGREDIENTS

15 oz	canned sweet whole kernel corn <i>thoroughly drained</i>	1 large	cinnamon stick
2 1/2 cup	whole milk <i>divided</i>	1 wide strip	lemon or orange peel <i>bitter white pith avoided</i>
3 tbsp	cornstarch	1 pinch	kosher salt
1/2 cup	granulated white sugar	1 tsp	pure vanilla extract
		1 tbsp	ground cinnamon

PREPARATION

- **Use the right dairy.**

Whole milk is non-negotiable here; skim or 2 percent milk simply lacks the fat content required to achieve a grandmother-approved mouthfeel.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Blend the corn base.**

In a standard blender, combine the drained canned corn and 1 1/2 cups of the whole milk, blending on high speed for one to two minutes until completely homogenized.

- 2. Strain the mixture aggressively.**

Pass the blended liquid through a fine-mesh sieve into a bowl, pressing hard with a spatula to extract all the sweet, starchy corn milk while leaving the fibrous husks behind.

- 3. Create a cold slurry.**

In a small bowl, whisk the cornstarch with the remaining 1 cup of cold whole milk until completely dissolved to ensure a lump-free pudding.

1. Combine and heat.

In a medium, heavy-bottomed pot over medium heat, combine the strained corn milk, the cold cornstarch slurry, sugar, cinnamon stick, citrus peel, and a pinch of salt.

2. Stir continuously until thickened.

Do not walk away; as the heat activates the starches, stir constantly for 10 to 15 minutes, scraping the bottom and corners of the pot to prevent scorching until the mixture heavily coats the back of a spoon.

3. Flavor and portion.

Remove the pot from the heat, carefully fish out and discard the cinnamon stick and citrus peel, and stir in the vanilla extract to preserve its volatile aromatics.

4. Dust, chill, and set.

Pour the hot pudding into individual ramekins, dust generously with ground cinnamon, and refrigerate for at least one to two hours until fully set into a spoonable, sliceable custard.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Embrace the constant agitation.**

The absolute golden rule of Majarete is never leaving the pot unattended; keep that spoon moving to avoid a burnt bottom or lumpy custard.

● **Save the corn pulp.**

Don't throw away the fibrous husks left in your sieve; fold them into a simple batter for a quick batch of weeknight corn fritters.



Torrejas en Almíbar

toh-RREH-has en ahl-MEE-bar

Forget the cream-cheese-stuffed monstrosities parading as Cuban French toast at trendy brunch spots. The real thing is a masterclass in peasant thrift—an *aprovechamiento* dessert born of stale bread, a hot pan, and a grandmother's pantry. The secret isn't tropical fruit; it's a salted cooking wine called *vino seco*. Splashed into the milk soak and the spiced sugar syrup, it acts as a sharp, acidic counterpunch to the profound sweetness, balancing the cinnamon and anise in a way that haunts you. This is the authentic, make-do magic of a Havana kitchen, engineered to save Tuesday night's bread and serve it back to you cold, dense, and dripping with syrup.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 cup	water	1 1/2 cup	whole milk
1 1/2 cup	granulated white sugar	2 tbsp	granulated white sugar
1 large	cinnamon stick	1 tsp	vanilla extract
2 whole	star anise	1 tbsp	vino seco
1 wide strip	lemon peel <i>pith removed</i>	1 pinch	fine sea salt
1 tsp	fresh lemon juice	3 large	eggs
2 tbsp	vino seco	1 tsp	milk
1 loaf	Cuban bread or French baguette <i>staled and cut into 1-inch thick slices</i>	1 cup	neutral oil <i>for frying</i>
		1 tsp	ground cinnamon <i>for dusting</i>

PREPARATION

- **Force-stale your fresh bread if you didn't plan ahead.**

Cuban grandmothers rely on three-day-old pan de flauta. If you're working with a fresh supermarket loaf on a Tuesday night, slice it and dry the pieces in a 275°F oven for 15 minutes while the syrup simmers.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Simmer the spiced syrup.**

In a medium saucepan, combine the water, 1 1/2 cups of sugar, cinnamon stick, star anise, lemon peel, and lemon juice over medium heat. Bring to a gentle boil, then reduce the heat and simmer uncovered for 15 to 20 minutes until it slightly thickens into a light glaze. Remove from heat, stir in 2 tablespoons of vino seco, and let it steep.

1. Prepare the milk infusion.

In a shallow dish, vigorously whisk 1 1/2 cups of whole milk, 2 tablespoons of sugar, vanilla extract, 1 tablespoon of vino seco, and a pinch of salt until the sugar dissolves.

2. Thin the egg wash.

Crack the eggs into a separate shallow bowl, add exactly 1 teaspoon of milk, and beat with a fork until perfectly homogenous. This tiny splash of milk is the trick to a delicate, crispy crust rather than a rubbery omelet shell.

3. Heat the frying oil.

Add about 1/4-inch of neutral oil to a large skillet over medium-high heat, bringing it to roughly 350°F.

4. Execute the dip and fry.

Working in small batches, submerge a slice of stale bread in the milk for just 3 to 4 seconds per side to hydrate the crumb without destroying its structure.

Immediately transfer it to the egg wash, coat both sides, and gently lay it into the hot oil.

5. Fry to a deep golden brown.

Cook for 2 to 3 minutes per side until properly crispy, then transfer to a paper towel-lined plate to drain. Repeat with the remaining bread, adding more oil between batches if necessary.

6. Bathe and chill the torrijas.

Arrange the fried bread in a single layer in a deep serving dish and generously pour the warm syrup over the top, discarding the spent spices. Dust lightly with ground cinnamon, cover, and refrigerate for at least an hour so the bread absorbs the liquid, transforming into a dense, cold custard.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Replicate the canonical cooking wine if you can't find it.**

If Edmundo brand vino seco isn't waiting on the shelves at your local grocer, do not use regular drinking wine. Mix a standard dry white wine or dry sherry with a generous quarter teaspoon of kosher salt.

- **Patience is a culinary virtue.**

While the smell of frying cinnamon will tempt you to eat them hot out of the pan, true torrijas demand fridge time. Serve them cold the next day alongside a shot of dark Cuban coffee.



Dulce de Coco Rallado con Queso

dool-seh deh koh-koh rah-yah-doh kohn keh-soh

The Cuban adaptation of the Moorish almíbar tradition is a masterclass in domestic resourcefulness. In Havana, this was an exercise in patience—cracking, peeling, and grating fresh coconuts by hand. For those of us cooking on a weeknight in the American suburbs, high-quality unsweetened shredded coconut yields a phenomenal, sticky-sweet reduction that hits every nostalgic note. The secret here isn't a complex technique, it's the pairing. We serve this intensely golden, syrupy reduction cold alongside a hefty spoonful of rich cream cheese. The dairy cuts straight through the sugar, creating a sweet-and-salty dynamic that is hopelessly addictive and unmistakably home.

INGREDIENTS

14 oz	unsweetened shredded coconut <i>thawed if frozen</i>	1 med	cinnamon stick
2 cup	granulated white sugar	1/4 tsp	kosher salt
2 cup	coconut water	8 oz	cream cheese <i>kept cold until serving</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Combine the base ingredients off the heat.

In a large, heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven, stir together the shredded coconut, sugar, coconut water, cinnamon stick, and salt.

2. Bring the mixture to a gentle boil.

Place the pot over medium-high heat and allow the liquid to come to a bubbling boil, ensuring the sugar begins to dissolve evenly.

3. Reduce the heat to a lazy simmer.

Immediately drop the heat to medium-low and let the mixture cook for 30 to 40 minutes. You do not need to hover constantly, but give it a thorough stir every five minutes to prevent the sugar from catching and scorching on the bottom.

4. Cook until the syrup reaches the sweet spot.

As the water evaporates, the coconut will take on a glossy, pale golden color. Drag your wooden spoon across the bottom of the pot; if the liquid parts enough for you to clearly see the bottom for a second before filling back in, it is done. Do not cook it until completely dry, or the sugar will crystallize and turn hard as it cools.

5. Cool completely and serve alongside cold cheese.

Remove from the heat, discard the cinnamon stick, and transfer the hot mixture to a heat-proof glass container. Let it sit at room temperature until cooled, then cover and refrigerate. Serve a portion of the cold, sticky coconut alongside a generous spoonful of cold cream cheese, making sure to get a bit of both in every bite.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Frozen coconut is the holy grail for this recipe.**

Look for frozen, unsweetened grated coconut in the freezer section of your local Latin grocer. It retains the natural moisture and oils of fresh coconut without the brutal labor of cracking and peeling. Dry desiccated coconut works perfectly fine as a backup, but verify that it is strictly unsweetened.



Plátanos en Tentación

plah-tah-nohs ehn ten-tah-syohn

If you grew up in a Cuban household, you know the magic that happens when a plantain is forgotten on the counter until it turns alarmingly, beautifully black. Forget the noisy restaurant versions that drown the pan in dark rum and set it on fire for a cheap thrill. The true grandmother's secret is a slow, quiet bake in butter, dual sugars, and a heavy splash of vino seco—a salted cooking wine that sharply cuts the cloying sweetness of the fruit. This is honest, sticky, deeply comforting food that takes zero effort on a Tuesday night.

INGREDIENTS

4 large	black plantains <i>peeled and left whole or halved crosswise</i>	1/3 cup	dark brown sugar <i>packed</i>
3 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>cut into small cubes, plus extra for greasing</i>	1/4 cup	vino seco
1/3 cup	white granulated sugar	2 med	cinnamon sticks <i>broken into 1-inch shards</i>
		1/2 tsp	ground cinnamon

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat your oven to 375°F and generously grease a 9x13-inch glass baking dish with butter.**
- 2. Make three to four shallow, diagonal cuts across the top of each peeled plantain.**
- 3. Firmly wedge a jagged shard of cinnamon stick directly into each slit.**
This is the old-school trick: the ambient heat pulls the bark's essential oils right into the center of the dense fruit as it bakes, flavoring it from the inside out.
- 4. Whisk the white sugar, dark brown sugar, and ground cinnamon together in a small bowl.**
- 5. Assemble the dish by sprinkling half the sugar mixture over the plantains, pouring in the vino seco, then scattering the remaining sugar and butter cubes evenly across the top.**
- 6. Bake uncovered in the center of the oven for 45 to 60 minutes.**
Baste the fruit with its own bubbling juices halfway through. You'll know they're ready when the plantains have turned a deep mahogany brown and the liquid has reduced into a thick, sticky caramel syrup.
- 7. Let cool slightly to tighten the glaze, then serve hot with a generous scoop of vanilla ice cream.**
Just remember to pull out the whole cinnamon shards before digging in.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Patience is non-negotiable when it comes to the plantains.**

The skins must be entirely black. If there is any yellow remaining, the fruit is still too starchy and won't break down into the necessary custard-like texture. Buy them days in advance and ignore them on the counter.

- **Replicating authentic vino seco.**

Vino seco is a heavily salted Cuban cooking wine that balances the intense sugars in this dish. If you can't find it at your local market, substitute exactly 1/4 cup of standard dry sherry mixed with 1/4 teaspoon of kosher salt to nail that crucial savory backbone.