



*Sweet, crisp corn fritters and fluffy white rice are two of the side dishes in this tropical menu.*

# Contemporary Cuban Cooking

A menu that's bright and full of flavor

BY VIVIANA CARBALLO

## MENU

◆  
*Sopa de Pimiento*  
(Roasted red pepper soup)

◆  
*Fricasé de Pollo con Arroz Blanco*  
(Chicken stew with white rice)

*Tostones y Buñuelitos de Maiz*  
(Fried green plantains & corn fritters)

*Ensalada de Aguacate y Cebolla*  
(Avocado & red onion salad)

◆  
*Torta de Queso con Mango*  
(Mango cheesecake)

I fled Havana (and Castro) in 1961. Since then, I've cooked, shopped, and tasted my way around the globe. Wherever I am, I adapt my cooking to local influences, but the tropical traditions and flavors of Cuba are never far from my heart. My cooking is typical of that of many Cubans living in the United States today. Some of the dishes are traditional, others are adaptations of old favorites, and a few are entirely new creations inspired by a culture that is constantly evolving.

### A RICH MIX OF CULTURES

Cuban cooking reflects the rich history of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Native foods such as corn, peppers, and cassava were changed forever when they met with Spanish cooking. The Spanish brought steaming, stewing, and frying to Cuba, along with new ingredients, such as pork, beef, onions, melons, radishes, beets, oranges, limes, and rice. The cultivation of sugar cane brought African slaves, who introduced okra, yams, and bananas to our larders. In a very short time, these influences married, and Cuban cooking was born.

Before you try your hand at this new Cuban cooking, let me remind you that it's a well-known fact that Cuban food tastes better if it's prepared to the strains of Cuban music. So put on some salsa and let the music be your guide.

### BEGIN WITH BRIGHT FLAVORS AND COLORS

I like to begin this menu with an intensely flavored soup of roasted red peppers, *sopa de pimiento*. I prefer to make it with freshly roasted peppers, but good-quality, smoky-tasting jarred peppers can be substituted. Plain pimientos won't do, and finding a good brand is worth your time. Peloponnesian or La Molinera are both excellent brands.

Because the peppers are the dominant flavor in this recipe, homemade chicken broth can be a lot of work without much payoff. Using a good-quality canned broth will save both work and money. Make

*Red pepper soup is delicious hot or cold. A swirl of sour cream complements the spicy-smoky roasted red peppers. A bit of chopped onion and a few sprigs of cilantro are the finishing touches.*





**A sweet-salty stew.**  
The typically Cuban flavors of this delicious chicken fricasé come from slow cooking with an aromatic sofrito, green olives, and sweet raisins.

the soup a day ahead so the flavors can develop and marry. It's delicious served either hot or cold, and because you make it ahead of time, it's great for entertaining. If you do serve this soup cold, remove it from the refrigerator an hour before serving, because too much cold will dull the flavors.

A swirl of sour cream thinned with a little milk will add just a touch of richness to help balance the smokiness of the peppers. I also like to add a sprinkling of minced onions and some cilantro to complete the presentation.

#### **A SWEETLY AROMATIC FRICASE**

*Fricasé de pollo*, or chicken stew, is a traditional Cuban dish in concept, but this version reflects the

changing times. Originally, the chicken was cut into pieces and browned in pork fat, vegetables were then sautéed in the fat, and finally the chicken was returned to the pan with chopped olives, capers, and raisins. All was left to simmer and develop the sweet, salty taste that is so much a part of the Cuban cook's repertoire.

The chicken tasted wonderful, but as you ate it, you could almost feel your arteries clogging. So to lighten the dish, I use olive oil instead of lard. If you choose, you can also remove the chicken's skin before searing. A splash of red wine helps develop the deep flavors and rich sauce.

#### **A TRIO OF TRADITIONAL SIDE DISHES**

As the main dish, the chicken offers complex flavors, so the side dishes can be simpler in character. I like to serve three traditional favorites.

**White rice.** White rice is a Cuban staple if ever there was one. I make it the traditional way, with a little oil, salt, and  $1\frac{1}{3}$  cups cold water for each cup of long-grain rice: this produces a fairly dry and firm rice, with each grain remaining separate. It all goes into a heavy casserole over high heat, where I bring it to a boil, cover it immediately, turn the heat to low, and leave it to simmer slowly for 20 minutes. Then I remove the pan from the heat, uncover it, fluff the rice with a fork, cover the pan again, and let it rest for 10 minutes.

**Tostones.** Plantains are basically large, starchy bananas, and they're as much a staple in the Cuban diet as potatoes are in other countries. They're eaten at all stages of ripeness, from the very hard and starchy green or *verde* plantain, to the yellow-brown or *pintón*, to the black, fully ripened, and very sweet *maduro*.

For *tostones*, which are twice-fried chunks of plantain served as a savory snack or side dish, you'll need green plantains. When shopping for plantains, look for ones that feel hard and have a solid green color with no black spots. If left at room temperature, plantains will continue to ripen, so to keep them green, refrigerate them immediately after you buy them.

To peel a green plantain, use a sharp knife and slice off the ends. Slice the plantain into two-inch lengths and then cut slits along the natural ridges of



*Choose the greenest plantains you can find to make tostones. Plantains are a variety of cooking banana used throughout the Caribbean and other parts of Latin America.*



*Smash the plantain slices flat between two layers of brown paper bag. This will expose the starchy interior before a second frying.*



*Drain tostones well to keep them from tasting greasy, first against the pan and then on paper towels. Sprinkle them with salt and eat them while they're hot.*

the skin, cutting through just to the flesh. Using the sharp edge of the knife, lift the skin away from the flesh, pulling it crosswise rather than lengthwise. To keep green plantains from staining the skin under your fingernails black, you may want to perform this operation under cold running water.

After the plantains are peeled and cut, keep the slices in water that's mixed with a little lemon juice until you're ready to fry them. This will keep the fruit from darkening.

**Corn fritters.** Caribbean cooks believe that anything edible is greatly enhanced by deep-frying. So we not only fry our plantains, but we also fry lots of fritters, especially ones made with corn. These corn fritters are embedded in every Cuban's taste memory.

For best results when making corn fritters, you must allow the baking-powder batter to rest 15 to 30 minutes before cooking so the leavening can do its magic; otherwise, the fritters will be flat instead of puffy. The frying oil for the fritters should be at a medium-high temperature—350° to 375°F.

Drop the batter into the oil by the teaspoon or tablespoon. Only a few fritters should be cooked at a time so the oil doesn't cool down. As they cook, keep the oil moving slowly by "drawing circles" in it with a slotted spoon. Turn the fritters over as they brown. The first side usually takes two minutes and the other side slightly less; they should be golden when done. If the fritters split open while cooking,

add a little more flour to the batter. Always use a slotted spoon to remove the fritters from the oil and allow them to drain on paper towels before serving. Fritters don't reheat well, but they can be kept warm in a low-temperature oven.

#### **A SIMPLE SALAD**

In Cuba, there is no tradition of eating salad greens—lettuce just doesn't grow in the tropics, and the imported iceberg lettuce, which we refer to as *lechuga Americana*, or American lettuce, is not part of the Cuban palate. It's more in keeping with Cuban tastes to make a salad of avocado slices and thin yellow or red onion rings with a little salt, a drizzle of olive oil, and a squeeze of lime. I compromise, however, and serve a small amount of avocado and chopped red onion on a bed of spring greens with a sprinkling of salt and lime juice and a dash of olive oil.

#### **FRAGRANT MANGO FOR DESSERT**

To finish this Cuban meal filled with deep flavors, rich colors, and interesting textures, I serve a mango cheesecake. I have a very prolific mango tree (affectionately known as "La Generosa") in my back yard in Miami, and its fruit has inspired many great recipes—including this one.

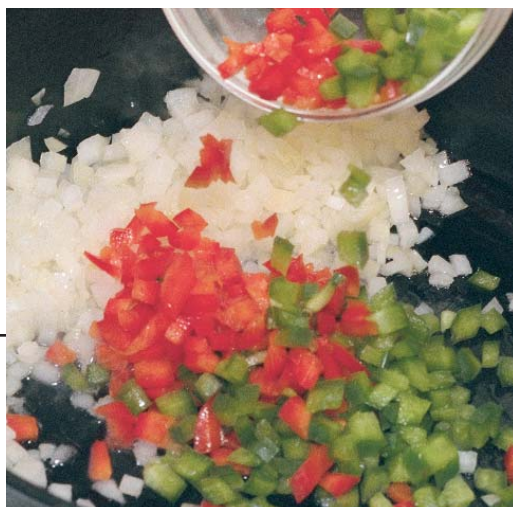
My cheesecake is based on an Italian recipe that uses ricotta. I punch up the flavor by adding

## Sofrito

*Sofrito* is the cornerstone of Caribbean cooking, the taste of the islands. It is the Caribbean version of the aromatic sautéed vegetable mixtures used in many different cuisines—the Italian *battuto*, the French *mirepoix*, and the Catalan *sofregit*. Like its European counterparts, *sofrito* is used as an aromatic building block when making many soups, stews, and sauces.

As with any *cocina del pueblo* (which translates loosely to “everyday cooking”), the recipes for *sofrito* vary greatly. In its simplest form, *sofrito* can be a mixture of chopped and lightly sautéed onions and garlic. The recipe might also include vegetables and herbs like green and red bell peppers, tomatoes, and cilantro. There are countless versions, and each county, city, neighborhood, family, and cook takes pride in guarding its “authentic” recipe. But virtually all *sofritos* begin with the basics, and almost every recipe from the Spanish Caribbean begins with “*haga un sofrito con...*” (“make a *sofrito* using...”).

Many cooks make a basic *sofrito* in large quantities and refrigerate it to use as needed. Then they add other ingredients, customizing the *sofrito* for soups, stews, fish dishes, or beans. This allows the *sofrito* to be made in advance, but it still enables the cook to build up many layers of flavor. Some cooks also purée the finished *sofrito* so that it blends smoothly into dishes.



### BASIC SOFRITO

This can be made ahead and stored in the refrigerator for up to a week. Chop all vegetables the same size—about 1/8-inch dice. The vegetables should be cooked slowly. If you’re making a large batch, cook the *sofrito* for about 1 hour, stirring often. (Slow really is better, but I confess that if I’m in a hurry, I cook the *sofrito* over high heat, stirring constantly, for 3 or 4 min.) *Yields about 1 cup.*

2 Tbs. olive oil  
1 medium onion, diced (about 1 cup)  
1/2 green bell pepper, diced (about 1/2 cup)  
1/2 red bell pepper, diced (about 1/2 cup)  
4 cloves garlic, minced  
1/4 tsp. freshly ground black pepper  
1/4 tsp. salt  
1 tsp. minced fresh oregano  
Add to suit your tastes: more garlic,  
1 bay leaf, 1/4 to 1/3 cup chopped cilantro,  
1 minced jalapeño or 1/2 minced Scotch  
bonnet pepper, 1 Tbs. tomato paste,  
1/2 cup chopped fresh tomatoes

Heat the oil in a skillet over medium heat. Reduce the heat to low, stir in the onion, and cook, stirring, about 1 min. Add the remaining ingredients. Continue cooking slowly for about 15 min.

### SOFRITO FOR MEAT & CHICKEN

Substitute 1/4 cup diced slab bacon plus 1 Tbs. oil for the oil in the basic *sofrito* recipe. Add 1 Tbs. tomato paste, 1/2 cup chopped fresh tomatoes, and 1/3 cup chopped pimiento-stuffed olives (optional).

### SOFRITO FOR FISH

Begin with the basic recipe but omit the red bell pepper, use 1 cup diced green bell pepper, and add 1/4 cup chopped parsley, chopped cilantro, or a mixture of the two.

### SOFRITO TO USE IN BEAN DISHES

Add 1/4 cup diced slab bacon or 1/3 cup ground or diced baked to the basic *sofrito*. When making black beans, simply use the basic *sofrito* without any meat.

some candied ginger and finish it off with a drizzle of fresh mango purée.

To pick out a good mango, smell the fruit. It should have a faint aroma, especially around the stem. No perfume usually means no taste (this is true of most fruit). If the mango smells sour or like alcohol, discard it: it has begun to ferment. Choose firm fruit that’s just beginning to show some yellow or red in the skin (only a few lesser-known varieties remain green when ripe). The skin should be tight around the flesh. Once it loosens, the mango is past its prime and should be used only for drinks or purées.

### SOPA DE PIMIENTO

(Roasted red pepper soup)

Roasting the peppers yourself will give this soup a mild, smoky flavor that’s certain to jump-start any appetite. Serve it hot or chilled. *Serves six.*

5 red bell peppers, roasted, peeled, cored, and seeded (or a 14-oz. jar roasted red peppers, drained)  
1 Tbs. olive oil  
1/2 cup minced onion  
2 cloves garlic, minced  
1/8 tsp. cayenne  
3 1/2 cups low-salt chicken broth  
Salt and freshly ground black pepper  
Sour cream, thinned slightly with milk  
Diced onion  
Parsley or cilantro sprigs

Purée the roasted red peppers in a food processor. Heat the oil in a large pot over medium-high heat. Sauté the onions and garlic until soft and translucent. Add the cayenne and then the pepper purée; stir to combine. Stir in the chicken broth, add salt and pepper to taste, and simmer 10 min.

Divide the soup among six bowls and swirl some sour cream into each bowl. Garnish with diced onion and sprigs of parsley or cilantro.

### FRICASE DE POLLO

(Chicken stew)

Traditionally, this *fricasé* is made with a whole cut-up chicken, but I find that the dark meat has more flavor and is better suited to stewing; white meat has a tendency to become dry. This dish stores well in the refrigerator

and reheats well, but it loses flavor when frozen.  
*Serves six.*

*¼ cup flour*  
*¼ tsp. salt*  
*⅛ tsp. freshly ground black pepper*  
*¼ tsp. paprika*  
*2½ lb. chicken thighs*  
*2 Tbs. olive oil*  
*1 cup basic sofrito with cilantro (see sidebar opposite)*  
*¼ cup tomato sauce*  
*⅓ cup chopped pimiento-stuffed olives*  
*2 Tbs. drained capers*  
*¼ cup dark raisins*  
*½ cup red wine*  
*Salt and freshly ground black pepper*  
*2 Tbs. chopped cilantro*

Mix the flour with the salt, pepper, and paprika. Dredge the chicken thighs in the flour mixture; shake or pat to remove excess flour.

In a heavy pot, heat the olive oil over medium-high heat and put in the chicken. Cook until lightly browned on all sides. Do this in two batches to avoid crowding, which would cause steam and prevent the meat from browning.

When all the chicken is browned, remove it from the pot; drain off any fat left in the pan. Add the *sofrito*, tomato sauce, olives, capers, raisins, and wine and stir to blend. (If you prefer a bit more sauce, add a little more chicken broth or water, but not wine, which would make it too acidic.)

Return the chicken to the casserole with any accumulated juices. Stir to coat the chicken with the sauce; cover and simmer until the thighs are completely tender when pierced with a knife, about 45 min.



**Rich but not heavy.** Using olive oil instead of the traditional lard helps to lighten the flavor of this chicken stew. To cut down on fat, you can use skinless chicken thighs.



### **TOSTONES**

*(Fried green plantains)*

*Tostones*, a kind of twice-fried green banana, are a staple food all over the Caribbean. They're great on their own, simply salted and eaten hot, or they can be served with a sauce as an appetizer. *Serves six.*

**Vegetable oil for frying**

**2 large green plantains (1½ lb. total), peeled and cut into slices 2 in. thick**

**Salt**

In a heavy, deep-sided skillet (preferably cast iron), heat about 1 in. of oil over medium heat to 350°.

Fry the plantain slices in oil 3 to 4 min., just until they begin to color very lightly; don't crowd the pan. Turn and cook on the other side. Drain on paper towels.

When the plantain slices have cooled slightly, lay a piece of brown paper bag or paper towel on top of each slice and, using your fist or the palm of your hand, flatten the slice to about ½ in. Do this while the plantains are hot; they'll be too hard when they cool.

Increase the oil temperature to 375° and return the plantains to the pan. Fry for 2 to 3 min. or until golden, turning once. They're done when they rise to the top and make a little pop. Drain on paper towels, sprinkle with salt, and serve hot, or they'll harden.

### **BUNUELITOS DE MAIZ**

*(Corn fritters)*

These fritters are a perfect complement to the *Fricasé de Pollo* as well as to roast chicken or pork chops. They're quite

### **Bananas and beer?**

*They may look like the bananas you're used to, but these savory plantains are a perfect side dish or snack when fried and sprinkled with salt.*



*Sweet, ripe mangoes and a hint of candied ginger make for a tropical dessert. The author uses mangoes from a tree in her own back yard when she makes this cheesecake.*

sweet, so they also can be served as dessert with honey or warm molasses. Serves six.

**2 cups fresh, well-drained canned, or thawed frozen corn kernels**  
**1 cup flour**  
**¼ cup sugar**  
**1 tsp. baking powder**  
**½ tsp. salt**  
**2 eggs, lightly beaten**  
**Vegetable oil for frying**

In a food processor fitted with a metal blade, process the corn kernels into a coarse purée; set aside.

Sift the flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt into a bowl. Add the eggs and the corn purée; stir to combine well. The batter should be quite thick; add more flour if it looks too loose or a bit of milk if too thick. Lightly cover the batter and set aside for 15 to 30 min. (This will make the fritters fluffier.)

Heat about 1 in. of oil in a large, deep-sided skillet (preferably cast iron) to 350° over medium heat. Drop the batter by the tablespoon into the oil; don't crowd the pan. Fry the fritters, turning them until golden on all sides, 3 to 5 min. Drain on paper towels and keep warm.

### **TORTA DE QUESO CON MANGO**

*(Mango cheesecake)*

This recipe is a classic Italian cheesecake made with the king of tropical fruits, the mango. Serves eight to ten.

**½ lb. cream cheese, softened to room temperature**  
**1 lb. ricotta cheese**  
**1 cup sugar**  
**2 Tbs. flour**  
**6 eggs**



Photo: Matthew Kestenbaum

*Add the diced mangoes last so they don't sink to the bottom during baking.*

**1 cup mango purée (see Basics, pp. 76–77)**  
**1 Tbs. lemon juice**  
**1 Tbs. finely chopped crystallized ginger**  
**1 large mango, diced (¾ lb. or 1 cup)**

Heat the oven to 350°. Butter and sugar a 9-in. springform pan. Fit an electric mixer with a paddle attachment and put the cream cheese in the mixing bowl; beat until the cheese is smooth and creamy. Add the ricotta and mix well. (You can mix by hand with a wooden spoon, but don't use a food processor, as it will change the texture and consistency of the cheeses. Also, don't use the whisk attachment on your mixer because the cheeses will get stuck in it.)

Slowly beat in the sugar and flour, and then beat in the eggs, one at a time. Add ½ cup of the mango purée, the lemon juice, and the ginger; beat just to combine. Pour the mixture into the prepared pan and sprinkle with the diced mango. (This method will preserve the shape and texture of the cut fruit and prevent it from sinking to the bottom.)

To prevent spills and to distribute the heat more evenly, put the pan on a heavy baking sheet. Bake 1 hour. Turn off the oven and let the cheesecake sit in the oven for another hour. Allow to cool completely before slicing.

To serve, drizzle individual plates with the remaining mango purée and place a slice of cheesecake on each.

*Viviana Carballo earned a grand diplôme from Le Cordon Bleu and has tasted her way through Paris, Jakarta, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and many other exotic locales. She now lives in Miami. ♦*