

THE CUBAN KITCHEN



500 SIMPLE, STYLISH, AND FLAVORFUL RECIPES
CELEBRATING THE CARIBBEAN'S BEST CUISINE

RAQUEL RABADE ROQUE

THE CUBAN KITCHEN

Raquel Rabade Roque



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For my family and friends with love and gratitude.

Thank you for sharing your Cuban recipes and memories.



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: Cuban cooking: lore, history, and anecdotes

STOCKING A CUBAN KITCHEN: Equipment and ingredients

CLASSIC CUBAN COCKTAILS: More than sugar and rum
cócteles clásicos cubanos

BATIDOS: Milkshakes and juice drinks the Cuban way
batidos y jugos tropicales

APPETIZERS: Croquettes, empanadas, and fritters
aperitivos: croquetas, empanadas, y frituras

BROTHS, SOUPS, AND CREAMS CUBAN STYLE
caldos, sopas, y cremas al estilo cubano

NUTRITIOUS POTAGES
potages más nutritivos

CUBAN SANDWICHES, WRAPS, AND CHOPS
sándwiches y bocaditos

DRESSINGS, SAUCES, MOJOS, AND THE FAMOUS SOFRITO
aliños, salsas, mojos, y el sofrito

VEGETABLES AND ROOT VEGETABLES
vegetales y viandas

PLANTAINS IN MANY VARIATIONS
los plátanos en variantes

RICE GOES WITH EVERYTHING

el arroz va con todo

PASTAS CUBAN STYLE
pastas italianas a la cubana

CUBAN SALADS
ensaladas cubanas

CUBAN EGG RECIPES
platos rápidos con huevos

TROPICAL CATCH OF THE DAY
con el sabor del Mar Caribe

CHICKEN THE CUBAN WAY
pollo a la cubana

BEEF
carne de res

PORK
puerco

VEAL, SAUSAGE, AND OTHER MEATS
ternera, salchichas, y otras carnes

CUBAN BABY FOOD
para los más pequeños

THE CUBAN PRESSURE COOKER
la olla a presión cubana

LIGHT CUBAN
platos ligeros cubanos

CUBAN DESSERTS
postres cubanos

CUBAN ICE CREAMS AND FROZEN TREATS
helados y granizados cubanos

CUBAN COFFEE, CORTADITO, AND MORE

café cubano, cortadito, y más

CUBAN CANDIES: Old- and new-fashioned
caramelos cubanos

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

RESOURCES

INDEX



INTRODUCTION:

Cuban cooking

lore, history, and anecdotes



THE COOKING OF CUBA is as rich as its landscape and as diverse as its people. It is a fusion and a work in progress. It combines the simplicity of peasant food, which has little regard for measurements, with elegant European cooking traditions. As the Caribbean's largest and most beautiful island, from its early days Cuba boasted an ocean full of fish and a land filled with fruits and vegetables. You will find recipes that come directly from Spanish, French, African, Caribbean, and Chinese origins. You will be surprised by recipes that are just uniquely Cuban. Cuban cooking was at its height in the 1950s. Havana had so many restaurants. One could find Spanish taverns, American diners, Italian eateries, and Jewish delis alongside Chinese kitchens. The streets were jammed with food vendors selling peanuts and *pirulíes* (Cuban candy on a stick) and lined with classy French gourmet restaurants. Cuban cooking was and is glamorous and exciting. Today Cuban cooking is alive in Miami and wherever the roots from Cuba still grow strong. It is a defining cuisine that keeps new generations of Cubans proud of their heritage. It is what we share and what we like to share with others, and that is why I wrote this book.

Through the years, I have realized how much I love being Cuban, even though my own family in Cuba was always very “modern” and *americana*. My parents spoke English, even in Cuba. My dad was a World War II veteran and had studied in Richmond, Virginia. My mom worked outside the home. She was a teacher in a very cool school in Cuba called the Havana Business Academy, which was owned by Canadians. She used to drive her all-American '57 Chevy all around the streets of Habana Vieja, Vedado, and Fontanar. We used to celebrate Halloween when no one else did, and we used to watch Jerry Lewis flicks and love them as much as the Mexican comic actor Cantinflas's films. Our neighbors were *americanos*, and our family always spoke of Miami as if it were an extension of a magical Cuban territory. But now I know how Cuban I have always felt and will always feel. It is the way we eat, dress, dance, and sing. And I do know that, as Cubans, we have always loved to share what it means to feel Cuban. I know of no better way to share that experience, that feeling, than through food. Cooking Cuban is feeling Cuban. This book has all the recipes that shaped me through childhood and adulthood, and that have given my children and, I hope, someday their children a heritage and a way of life. This book is for chefs and novice cooks, for Cubans and non-Cubans, for those who lived on the island and those who have never set foot there. This book is meant to preserve for

future generations the rich culinary tradition of a people, and to reflect the best of my two worlds: the Cuba of the 1950s, when I was a child, and our Hispanic presence in today's America. The essence of all this is captured in *The Cuban Kitchen*.

Ever since the days of Ricky Ricardo, the idea of being Cuban has always been fun. So many jokes, so many caricatures, and so much nostalgia ready to tug at us at any moment. We play dominoes, smoke cigars, talk politics, drink Cuban coffee, wear *guayaberas*, and have splendid parties. We are proud that we grew up in a Cuban household:

Where coffee, milk, and sugar were part of a balanced breakfast.

Where all it took was just that *one* look.

Where we loved white rice and fried eggs.

Where lentil soup was considered *comida de presos* (prison food).

Where Spanish was my primary language and the only language I was allowed to speak at home.

Where music and TV were never played on Good Friday, because it was a *pecado capital*—cardinal sin!

Where we ate *bacalao* (dried codfish) on Good Friday because all other fish were too expensive, and if it was good enough for our ancestors in Spain, it was good enough for us!

Where we ate *lechón* (suckling pig) at Nochebuena (the traditional Christmas Eve party), New Year's Eve, birthday parties, and every other social function.

Where *malanga* (a root vegetable) and *manzanilla* (chamomile tea) were the remedies to end all remedies. And they still are!

Where we cured everything with Vicks VapoRub. Okay, I admit I really think it is the cure for everything.

Where I was not allowed to sleep over at anybody's house, but my friends could all come over to our house, and that was completely logical to my parents, to me, and even to my friends.

Where *la carne* (meat) came only from *la carnicería* (meat market) and from your own personal *carnicero* (butcher), who was also your unofficial Cuban shrink, and the meat and potatoes were literally *carne con papas*. And the dish was served over rice.

Where oxtail stew had the colorful name of *rabo encendido*, or “fiery tail.”

I grew up in a household where the *frijoles* exploded in the pressure cooker just about

every day.

I grew up in a proud Cuban household, survived, and thrived!



STOCKING A CUBAN KITCHEN: Equipment and ingredients

YOU CAN CERTAINLY GO ALL OUT and splurge on your Cuban kitchen, but the basics of a well-stocked kitchen are simple. Don't be tempted by all the gadgets, and remember that ingredients are more important in creating great recipes. Here is a list of must-haves for Cuban (or any other serious) cooking.

POTS AND PANS

- A large pot for soup or stew stocks
- Roasting pan and rack
- Saucepans (at least two different sizes)
- Skillets (one nonstick and one cast-iron)

BAKING EQUIPMENT

- Cookie sheet
- Glass baking dish
- Loaf pan
- Pie plate
- Wire rack

UTENSILS

- Colanders
- Pastry bag
- Rolling pin
- Spatulas
- Spoons (slotted and long-handled)
- Tongs

KITCHEN APPLIANCES

- Blender
- Electric mixer
- Food processor

For the experienced or just plain curious Cuban cook, these are great to add

slowly as you acquire more skill:

- La Caja China (The Chinese Box—the Cuban roasting box)
- Candy thermometer
- Churro maker (*churrera*)
- Corn-and-meat grinder
- Cuban coffeemaker
- Electric *palomilla* grill—for off-the-grill flavor
- Flan mold
- Flying saucer (*platillo volador*) sandwich press
- Garlic mortar
- Ice-cream maker
- Paella pan (straight-sided skillet)
- Plantain slicer
- Pressure cooker (both traditional and microwave)
- Rice cooker
- Sandwich press (press grill)
- Tostón* maker (*tostonera*)

You can find much of this equipment in general superstores, national chains, bodegas, or supermarkets. More specialized items are available online at sites such as www.cubanfoodmarket.com (see [Resources](#)).

BUILDING THE CUBAN PANTRY

These are the herbs, spices, and other flavors to emphasize in your kitchen for Cuban and many other Latin cuisines.

- Bay leaves
- Bijol annatto powder (yellow food coloring)
- [Bitter or sour orange juice](#)
- Black pepper
- Cinnamon
- Cumin
- Dry white wine
- Garlic
- Lemons and limes
- Onions
- Oregano
- Paprika (hot)
- Parsley
- Salt
- Star anise
- Tomato sauce
- Vanilla extract

In addition, this is what the Cuban cook buys regularly at the grocery store or bodega; many of these items are available online as well (see [Resources](#)).

Coco López cream of coconut
Condensed milk (sweetened) Chorizo
Cuban bread
Cuban crackers
Cuban cracker meal
Evaporated milk
Frozen tropical-fruit pulp
Green bell pepper
Guava paste
Ironbeer (soft drink)
Jupiña (soft drink)
Malta beverage (in a six-pack)
Malanga, *ñame*, cassava, and plantain
Mango and tamarind nectar
Masa harina
Materva (soft drink)
Olive oil
Queso blanco (white cheese)
Rice
Roasted red peppers
Salt cod (*bacalao*)
Sangria (bottled)
Sidra (Spanish cider)
Spanish green olives
Sugarcane juice
Vegetable oil



CLASSIC CUBAN COCKTAILS: More than sugar and rum

cócteles clásicos cubanos



THE CREATION of these classic romantic Cuban cocktails dates back to the 1920s, when barmen from all over the world joined the native Cuban bartenders to serve tourists from all over the world. A unique style of cocktail making was soon born, in which tropical fruits were mixed with the smoothest of rums, and numerous celebrities became regulars at the island's famous bars. Over the years, you could often see Ava Gardner, Errol Flynn, Mary Pickford, Nat King Cole, and Greta Garbo having a drink and dancing to the rhythms of the island in their *guayaberas* and smoking Cuban cigars. El Floridita and La Bodeguita del Medio were hangouts for the legendary honorary Cuban Ernest Hemingway in the 1940s and 1950s. Federico García Lorca, the Spanish poet, was also a regular at most of the bars in Havana in the 1930s. What a mecca, and what a legend! Mix one of these drinks, close your eyes, and dream....

STOCKING YOUR CUBAN BAR

These items are essential to create your ultimate Cuban cocktail party. The basics are the same for all good drinks.

Glassware

Drinks always taste better when served in a beautiful glass. When shopping for glassware for your bar, bear in mind that the trend over the years has been to serve drinks in larger glasses. Not only do they look better, but they can accommodate many different types of drinks, and the home bartender will need to buy less. Some glasses to consider:

SHOT GLASSES—always present in any bar, the original bar measure

PONY GLASSES—stemmed glasses for liqueurs and brandies

COCKTAIL GLASSES—varying in size from 3 to 6 ounces; the most

popular glasses. Beloved for their distinctive Y shape.

HIGHBALL GLASSES—straight-sided glasses holding 8–10 ounces

OLD-FASHIONED GLASSES—just the right size for anything on the rocks

CHAMPAGNE GLASSES—for all bubbly drinks

Garnishes and Condiments

Angostura bitters, black pepper, cocktail olives (no pimiento), cocktail onions (pickled), limes, lemons, oranges, grenadine, horseradish, maraschino cherries, Rose's lime juice, salt, coarse salt, sugar, Tabasco sauce, Worcestershire sauce, orange bitters

Mixers

Water, club soda, cola, diet cola, lemon-lime soda, milk, orange juice, tomato juice, tonic water, ginger ale, cranberry juice, pineapple juice, beer

CUBANS AND RUM

Rum and rum drinks are very much part of the Cuban heritage. Don't forget that rum is a product of sugarcane, which for centuries was the major industry in the Cuban economy. After all, Santiago de Cuba, on the southeastern tip of the island nation, was the birth site of the original Bacardi distillery. The highly respected and dominant firm of Bacardi and Company Ltd. began its corporate life in 1862 in a plant that consisted of a tin-roofed shed housing a few essential barrels and fermenting tanks, and also a colony of fruit bats, which eventually became the icon of this famous brand. At the height of rum mania in the 1950s, Havana was full of "rum-tasting" distillery tours. Bacardi had launched its famous Hatuey beer brand and had already erected in the capital city an Art Deco masterpiece, the Havana Bacardi Building. Other brands of Cuban rum are Casa Moreno, Havana Club, and Ron Matusalem.

CUBA LIBRE *Cuba libre*

Viva Cuba! (Long live free Cuba!) was the war cry of the Mambises, the combatants of the Independence Army, who fought to free Cuba from the Spanish colonists. The Cuba libre was one of the first cocktails to be mixed by Cuban bartenders, and throughout the years this drink has also been ironically called La Mentirita, or the Little Lie. You see, the people of Cuba have seldom experienced true liberty. Despite the political context, or perhaps because of it, this drink has gained worldwide fans.

1 DRINK

2 oz (either crushed or cubes)

2 ounces cola

2 ounces white rum

1 teaspoon lemon juice

1 lime slice for garnish

Place the ice in a chilled glass; pour in the cola, rum, and lemon juice. Mix well, and garnish with the lime slice.



DAIQUIRI *daiquiri*

This cocktail was created at the Daiquiri mines, located in the easternmost region of Cuba, by an engineer who needed relief from the intense humid heat of the area. In the 1920s, the drink was improved and made famous by the bartender at El Floridita bar, known as Constante. This is what Hemingway drank at El Floridita, and what he so vividly describes in his book *Islands in the Stream*. The classic daiquiri uses lime juice, but a daiquiri can also be made with strawberry, pineapple, or other fruit juice. It can be frappé, which is mixed in the blender for a frozen-drink appeal, or *natural*, which is just mixed and served.

1 DRINK

ice of ½ lime

teaspoon sugar

cup crushed ice

ounces white rum

lime slice for garnish

In a blender or food processor, blend all the ingredients until frosty. Pour into a chilled cocktail or champagne glass, and garnish with the lime slice.

NOTE You can use your favorite fruit, but always make sure it is fresh and in season for the best flavor. You can also use a combination and call it a tutti-frutti daiquiri. Check out the effect on your guests when you serve multicolored daiquiris at your next get-together. This is a perfect drink for summer weddings, birthdays, and barbecues.

ORANGE DAIQUIRI *daiquiri de naranja*

1 DRINK

ounce lime juice

ounce fresh orange juice

teaspoon sugar

drops curaçao

cup crushed ice

ounces rum

In a blender or food processor, blend all the ingredients for about 20 seconds. Pour into a chilled cocktail or champagne glass.

CHERRY DAIQUIRI *daiquiri de cerezas*

The vibrant color always makes this a huge hit.

1 DRINK

ounce lime juice

teaspoon cherry liqueur

teaspoon grenadine

cup crushed ice

½ ounces white rum

lime slice for garnish

In a blender or food processor, blend all the ingredients for about 20 seconds, and pour into a chilled cocktail or champagne glass. Garnish with the lime slice.

CHAPARRA PUNCH *Chaparra*

This old Cuban punch is perfect for a weekend of festivities and celebration, since you can refrigerate it for a couple of days and it actually tastes better the second time around. The name is derived from the famous Chaparra sugar mills in Cuba. Serve it in a punch bowl or pitcher. Pour the punch, listen to Arturo Sandoval music, and be transported to Havana in the 1940s.

8 DRINKS

el of 1 lime

bottle white rum

bottle sweet vermouth

Place the lime peel in a jar, and add the rest of the ingredients. Refrigerate for at least 24 hours for better taste. Serve chilled. Refrigerate the rest for future use.

SPECIAL HINT If you would like to make individual Chaparra drinks, stir in a mixing glass 1 ounce white rum and 1 ounce sweet vermouth with ice, and strain. Add a lime twist and serve. But remember that refrigeration serves to blend the two liquors to perfection.