



LATIN AMERICAN CUISINES BY REGION

From Mexico to the tip of South America, Latin American cuisine embodies the traditions of its many peoples and their ancestors. This guide illustrates the rich and diverse food culture developed over the centuries and explains the flavor profiles for each region.

MEXICO



Turkey in Mole Poblano Sauce



Grilled Snapper



Pozole

Modern-day Mexican cuisine has been shaped by the varying climates of the different regions, the geography of each region, as well as the influence of Spanish and Mediterranean culinary traditions brought over during colonization. When the Spanish arrived in Mexico, they found the native people cooking primarily with chili peppers, black beans, tomatoes, squash and corn. The Spanish then introduced cattle, pigs and other livestock, as well as flavoring agents like onions, garlic, and spices. This influence can be seen in dishes like *Huachinango a la Veracruzana*, or Veracruz-Style Red Snapper, which combines both the cooking techniques and flavors of the Spanish and pre-colonial Mexico. The fish is marinated in lime juice, salt, pepper, nutmeg and garlic before being pan fried and then baked with a sauce of tomatoes, oregano, capers, olives, raisins, jalapeños, more garlic, and onions.

In addition to outside influences, the cuisines within the various regions of Mexico have developed independently of each other due to great distances and based on the ingredients available to them. For example, the Gulf Coast and Pacific Coast regions rely heavily on fish and other seafood-based dishes. In Central Mexico, the famous mole poblano, a 35-ingredient dish that takes advantage of the many available spices and chocolate, which originated in Mesoamerica, is a culinary highlight.

In addition to the original staples mentioned above, Mexican cuisine includes a mixture of Old World and New World foods like wheat, avocados, pineapples, hearts of palm, mangoes, papayas, radishes, yuca, cabbage, cactus, fava and pinto beans, epazote, cilantro, amaranth, and potatoes.



CARIBBEAN



Sofrito



Adobo



Mangu

The Spanish colonized the larger islands of the Caribbean during the turn of the 15th century, including the current Spanish-speaking islands of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and modern day Dominican Republic. Cuba and Puerto Rico remained under Spanish rule until the end of the 19th century, though the Dominican Republic gained its independence in 1821. Like other Latin American countries, the Hispanic Caribbean countries rely on corn, starchy vegetables and beans to form the base of their diet. Plantains are one of the most important ingredients and along with white rice, accompanies many of the dishes. A popular rice and beans variation, called Rice and Peas, uses coconut milk and thyme to flavor the dish. Some of the native crops are still used in modern cuisine today such as corn, yams, yuca, peanuts, guavas, pineapple, black-eyed peas, and lima beans.

The different countries have variations of similar dishes, like the African-inspired plantain mash, called *mangu* in the Dominican Republic, *fufu* in Cuba, and *mofongo* in Puerto Rico.

Similar to Italian *soffritto* used as a base in Italian cooking, *sofrito* is a purée of tomatoes, cilantro, parsley, pepper, onion and garlic and is used as a base for many Hispanic-Caribbean soups, stews and sauces. Many cooks make it in large batches because it flavors so many dishes!

Adobo is another important way to season dishes and it can be a liquid, a paste or a powder. Found in the spice aisle, adobo is a mix of salt, pepper, turmeric, oregano, garlic powder, and onion powder. In the homes of Latin American cooks, it is a seasoning blended with an acidic liquid, such as vinegar, that's used to marinate meats and seafood.

The indigenous people of the area, the Taíno, are thought to have been the inventors of barbeque. *Barbakoa*, as it is called in Hispanic countries, is the process of slow-cooking meat over a fire, which has evolved into modern-day barbeque.

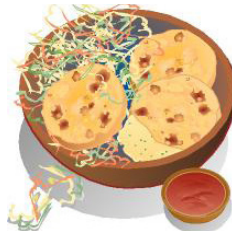
Rope Vieja, or "old clothes," is a popular dish in many Latino countries, especially Cuba, that comes originally from Spain. First beef is used to flavor a stew, and then that beef is taken out, shredded, seasoned in a new sauce and served with rice.



CENTRAL AMERICA



Gallo Pinto



Pupusas



Heart of Palm Salad

The location of Central America, between North America and South America, and its proximity to the Caribbean, as well as the European influence from 300 years of Spanish rule, has resulted in the region having a rich cuisine similar to other Latin American countries, but unique to the region. The land is fertile and the weather is warm which creates rich soil to grow many different types of fruits and vegetables. Central America is different from other areas of Latin America in that it does not use chili peppers often and therefore the food is less spicy. Guatemala is an exception to this, as chili peppers are important to their regional cuisine.

- **Corn, or maize**, was and remains one of the most important ingredients in a Central America diet. It is commonly ground and treated with lime to make what's called *masa harina*. *Masa harina* is then used to make tortillas, *pupusas* (a thick tortilla filled with meat, cheese and beans), empanadas (a stuffed pastry that is baked or fried), and tamales (*masa harina* and other fillings wrapped in corn husks and steamed). It is also commonly stirred into stews as a thickener. In some parts of Central America, yuca is also used to make tortillas.
- **Beans and rice** are another staple, similar to other Latin American countries. *Gallo Pinto*, a mixture of rice and beans is often served at every meal in many of the countries. It is the national dish of both Nicaragua and Costa Rica.
- **Coconut** is a popular ingredient in Central American cuisine, most likely due to the Caribbean influence. The milk is often used to flavor a rice and bean dish, but coconut oil and shredded coconut are also used.
- **Fruits** are often eaten as dessert (and throughout the day). Some common options are: banana, papaya, pineapple, plum, mangoes, pineapples, and melons. Ripe plantains are also served as dessert, sometimes boiled and served with spices and cheese. Unripe plantains are served as the starch accompaniment to a meal, commonly slice and fried, or mashed.
- **Vegetables** are an ingredient in *picadillo*, a dish similar to hash, as well as used in stews and salads. Heart of palm, or *palmito*, is a native vegetable often considered a delicacy that is most commonly found canned or jarred in America. It has a subtle flavor and consistency similar to an artichoke. It is most commonly enjoyed in a salad with other vegetables and a vinaigrette.



SOUTH AMERICA



Ceviche



Sopa di Mani (peanut soup)



Empanadas

The Spanish and Portuguese colonization of South America in the 16th century shaped the culinary history of the continent. These European influences mixed with the Indigenous cultures to create a cuisine that is built on the Old World staples of corn, potatoes, manioc (or yuca) and beans and embellished by the European influences of meat, especially beef, wheat, a variety of fresh vegetables and exotic fruit. The long coastlines also mean a lot of fresh seafood, which makes up one of the most popular South American dishes: ceviche. This dish uses the fresh seafood native to South America, as well as traditional preservation methods, with the citrus juice of the fruits brought over by the Europeans.

The popular dishes vary from country to country depending on climate and geography, but many dishes are popular throughout the continent including empanadas, *asado* (barbequed meat), and pasta. Another popular tradition is the use of sauces to flavor dishes. *Chimichurri* is a fresh sauce made from parsley, olive oil, vinegar, and oregano. It is especially popular in Argentina and Uruguay, where they vary slightly in ingredients, but the freshness and tastiness stay constant.

It is typically used to accompany grilled meats, but it's a universal sauce that can be added to pretty much anything! *Sopa di Mani* is a peanut soup especially popular in Bolivia. It is made with beef, potatoes, onions, carrots and seasonings like cumin and oregano. The peanuts are ground up to provide a creamy texture.

Other Traditional Staples Across South America:

- **Grains:** indigenous grains like quinoa and amaranth, as well as grains brought by the Europeans such as oats, barley, rice and wheat.
- **Tubers:** yuca (or manioc), potatoes, sweet potatoes and yams.
- **Vegetables:** tomato, lettuce, chili peppers, squash, onions, lettuce, eggplant, zucchini and corn.
- **Fruits:** avocado, citrus, coconut, *cherimoya*, mango, guava, pineapple, papaya, acai, plantains and passion fruit.
- **Nuts:** the peanut, technically a legume, is a native plant that appears in many sauces and is often mixed with the European flavors of onion and garlic. Almonds, brought by the Spanish are another popular nut in South American cuisine.
- **Beans:** lima beans, black beans, kidney beans, and lentils.



COMMON FOOD AND FLAVORS OF THE LATINO DIET

Vegetables & Tubers	cabbage, carrots, cassava, chard, chayote, chili peppers, eggplant, garlic, jicama, kale, lettuce, maize/corn, nopales, peppers, potatoes, pumpkin, onion, okra, spinach, yams, yuca, zucchini
Fruits	acai, agave, avocados, bananas, breadfruit, cocoa, caimito, chirimoya, coconut, custard apples, grapefruit, guanabana, guava, lemons, limes, mangoes, melons, oranges, papayas, passion fruit, pineapple, plantains, pomegranate, prickly pear, pumpkin, quince, sapote, sopadilla, starfruit, sugarcane, tamarind, tangerine, tomatoes, tomatillos
Grains	arepa, amaranth, breads, maize/corn, pasta, quinoa, rice, tortillas
Fish & Seafood	abalone, clams, cod, conch, crab, crayfish, mussels, octopus, sea bass, scallops, shrimp, squid, whelk
Poultry, Eggs, Cheese, & Dairy	chicken, duck, geese, guinea fowl, squab, turkey eggs (chicken, quail, and duck) cheese (examples include asadero, cojita, minas, reggianito) yogurt, crema, milk
Nuts, Seeds, & Legumes	almonds, brazil nuts, beans (black, garbonzo, kidney, pinto), cashews, peanuts, pine nuts (piñon), pecans, pumpkin seeds (pepitas)
Herbs & Spices	chili peppers (examples include aji, cayenne, jalapeño, guajillo, habanero, pasilla, poblano, scotch bonnet, serrano), cilantro, cinnamon, epazote, garlic, oregano, parsley
Meats & Sweets	beef, goat, lamb, pork sweets (examples include: flan/custard, cakes, candy, chocolates, cookies)
Water & Alcohol	Drink plenty of water Enjoy all alcohol In moderation

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