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## Popular Diets of the World: The Latin Diet

By [Jenny Stamos](#)

WebMD Feature

Reviewed by [Charlotte Grayson Mathis, MD](#)

Americans can learn a lot from the way people eat in Latin countries. The traditional Latin diet is simple and healthy; it is full of fresh fruits and vegetables, beans, and one-dish meals. In Latin cultures, meals are occasions for friends and family members to come together and enjoy each other's company. WebMD turned to the experts to learn more about the Latin diet. We've compiled some tips to help you dine the Latin way -- including ideas for how to improve on the not-so-healthy aspects of modern Latin cooking.

### Make Meals a Priority

The main difference between the traditional Latin American diet and the American way of eating is that Latinos make time for meals, says Liz Mintz, the Latino Nutrition Coalition Manager at Oldways Preservation and Exchange Trust, a nonprofit group in Boston that studies the health benefits of traditional diets. No one eats on the run, at the computer, or in the car. Most of us would do well to follow this example.

"When it comes to food preparation, the easiest appliance [we use] isn't a microwave, it's a drive-through," says Harry Balzer, vice president of the NPD Group, a market research firm that tracks global consumer and retail information. Forget sitting down at the dinner table; according to Balzer's research, nearly one-quarter of U.S. meals are eaten in the car.

Eating while distracted is mindless eating, which often translates into eating much more than you'd intended. When you use silverware and eat from a plate instead of grabbing handfuls straight from the bag, you appreciate your food more, Mintz says. And eating this way makes it more likely you'll eat your food slowly, and therefore eat less.

### Make Meals a Social Occasion

For Latin Americans, meal time is about connecting as well as eating, Mintz says. According to Child Trends, a nonprofit research firm based in Washington, D.C., compared to African-Americans and Caucasians, Latin families are far more likely to have meals together.

Focusing on family during dinnertime, rather than on the TV screen or driving conditions, may have added benefits for your health, researchers from the University of Minnesota report. A study of 277

adults found that when families sat down to dinner together with the TV off, the adults tended to eat less fat and more fruits and vegetables.

Parents may make a greater effort to prepare nutritionally balanced meals when they're planning for others, instead of just grabbing something on the go, says researcher Kerri Boutelle, PhD, an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. Consider starting a tradition of family meals in your own home, if you don't do so already. Try to plan at least two or three nights a week to sit down to dinner together. Family meals don't have to be a big production, Boutelle says, A meal of turkey sandwiches with carrots, for example, is just fine. All that matters is that you eat together as a family.

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### Make More One-Dish meals

In the Latin diet, grains and meat are seldom eaten as separate dishes, says Mintz. More often, they're combined in one main dish like tacos, burritos, soup (called *ajjaco* or *sancocho*) or a stew-like meal of pulled meat with rice or potatoes.

Most Latin American countries (other than Argentina) use meat mainly as a condiment or flavoring, says Steven Raichlen, author of *Healthy Latin Cooking*, *The Barbecue Bible*, and *How to Grill*, and host of the PBS show *BBQ University*. One-pot meals make it easy to reduce the amount of animal protein, which is often high in fat and contains no filling fiber, while barely noticing a difference in taste. One-pot meals are also a great way to include more vegetables -- an essential food that seems to be disappearing from most American tables.

Last year for the first time, the average dinner included fewer than three items, Balzer tells WebMD, "with one of those items being a beverage." Dropping veggies from the dinner menu is bad news, since the average American's consumption of all vegetables except starchy ones -- like white potatoes, corn, and peas -- is far below the recommended amount, research from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion finds. Buck the trend the easy way with Latin-inspired one-dish meals like chicken fajitas (grilled chicken, onions, green peppers, lettuce and diced tomatoes wrapped in a soft tortilla), scrambled eggs with vegetables, stir fries (make them light on meat and heavy on vegetables) or Raichlen's recipes for *Rice and Black Bean Pilaf (Congri)* and *Hominy and Pork Stew (Pozole)*.

### Embrace the Bean

Beans and legumes, an essential part of the Latin diet, often stand in for meat in meals like beans and rice, tacos, soup, stew and burritos. The average American diet, on the other hand, is skimpy when it comes to nonmeat proteins. But beans are so healthy that the latest dietary guidelines recommend that we triple our current intake -- from one to three cups per week. High in fiber and water content, beans help you feel fuller, while eating less. And it shows on the waistlines of people who eat them. In one study, people who ate beans weighed an average of seven pounds

less and had slimmer waists than their bean-avoiding counterparts, all while consuming 199 calories more per day.

Warm up to beans by substituting them for half the ground beef in tacos and burritos. Refried beans work well in these types of dishes, says Dawn Jackson, RD, a registered dietitian at Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Wellness Institute in Chicago, and a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. Or be brave and go completely meatless.

### **Savor the Flavor**

“Latinos make robust use of intense flavors,” Raichlen tells WebMD, “Spices like cumin and oregano, herbs like cilantro and epazote, and condiments like coconut milk and hot sauce.”

Cumin, a spice with 10 times the antioxidant power of vitamin C, is a great alternative to salt in dishes like chili, stew and beans, and may also help protect against cancer, research in animals shows. Oregano is a staple of Latin-style cooking as well. In a U.S. Department of Agriculture study of 39 different herbs, oregano was found to possess the highest antioxidant activity. The herb's potential antibacterial and cancer-fighting qualities are the subject of current research both in the lab and in animal studies.

Cilantro, a member of the parsley family, contains a compound called dodecenal, which may contain antibiotic properties. When University of California, Berkeley researchers tested its effects on salmonella, a major cause of food poisoning, the compound destroyed the germ even more effectively than the antibiotic gentamicin.

Research shows that capsaicin, the chemical in chili peppers that makes hot sauce “hot,” may have benefits as varied as helping to improve digestion, fight diarrhea, prevent heart disease, bacterial infections and cancer, and strengthen the lungs.

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#### **Go Back to Basics**

Although the traditional Latin diet is light on sweets and meat and heavy on vegetables, beans, and grains, the American fast-food culture spells trouble for Latinos who live here and adopt the typical lifestyle and diet. The popularity of desserts in this country is a prime example. In the traditional Latin diet, dessert was saved for Sundays, Mintz tells WebMD. But as fewer Latinos are following the traditional Latin diet, more are being diagnosed with diabetes. If current trends continue, of children born in the U.S. after the year 2000, one out of three Americans will have diabetes, the CDC reports. Among Latin Americans, the projected ration is one out of two.

To make the Latin diet healthy again, the Latino Nutrition Coalition recommends eating fruits, vegetables, whole grains, tubers (a potato-like vegetable), beans, and nuts at every meal; milk, cheese, fish, shellfish, chicken, eggs, turkey, and plant oils (soy, corn and olive oil) in moderation; and red meats, sweets, and alcohol only on occasion.

## Make Smart Substitutions

To eat as healthily as possible the Latin way, Mintz suggests consuming smaller portions of not-so-healthy foods like red meat and sweets, steering completely clear of artery-clogging pork rinds, and practicing the following substitutions:

- Choose corn tortillas (made with almost no fat) instead of flour tortillas, which contain lard.
- Choose food cooked with healthy oils (soy, corn, olive) instead of food cooked with lard.
- Choose baked or steamed instead of fried foods.
- Choose ingredients that come from the ground instead of processed products.
- Choose fish, poultry or vegetarian meals instead of red meat.
- Choose fajitas (made with grilled meat) instead of quesadillas (which are fried).

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### Latin Diet Recipes

Here are some recipes from author Steven Raichlen, reprinted with permission.

#### **Rice and Black Bean Pilaf (Congri)**

*This popular Cuban rice dish won't win any beauty contests, but the depth of flavor is fantastic. To make healthier rice and black beans I use olive oil instead of bacon fat.*

- 1 piece (1" square) green bell pepper
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1/2 cup dried black beans, sorted, rinsed, and soaked in cold water to cover overnight
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 1/2 onion, finely chopped
- 1/4 green bell pepper, finely chopped
- 1/4 yellow or green bell pepper, finely chopped
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/4 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 cup long-grain white rice
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh cilantro

Salt and ground black pepper

Add the bell pepper square and 1 of the garlic cloves to the pot containing the beans. Bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to medium-low, loosely cover, and simmer, stirring occasionally, for 1 hour, or until tender. (Alternatively, cook the beans in a pressure cooker for 7 minutes.) Strain the beans, reserving the cooking liquid. You should have about 1 cup beans and 2 1/2 cups liquid. Discard the square of bell pepper and the garlic.

Meanwhile, heat the oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Mince the remaining clove of garlic and add to the pan. Add the onions, all the bell peppers, cumin, oregano and bay leaf. Cook for 4 minutes, or until the vegetables are soft. Stir in the rice and cilantro. Cook for 1 minute, or until the rice is coated with the oil.

Stir in the beans and the reserved 2 1/2 cups cooking liquid. Season with salt and black pepper. Bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to low, cover, and simmer for 20 minutes, or until the rice is tender. Remove from the heat, uncover, and drape a clean dish cloth over the pan. Recover the pan with the cloth still in place, and let stand for 3 minutes. Fluff the rice with a fork, and add more salt and black pepper if desired. Remove and discard the bay leaf.

Makes 4 servings.

Regional variation: For **Cuban Rice and Red Beans**, replace the black beans with small red beans.

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### **Hominy and Pork Stew (Pozole)**

*Pozole (poh-ZOH-leh) is a soulful stew made from hominy (hulled corn), pork, and red or green chile peppers. It originated in Mexico's Pacific Coast region and is traditionally served at celebrations. The pork is used mostly as a flavoring rather than a principle ingredient. To cut back on the fat, I've slashed most of the lard in the traditional recipe but otherwise left it intact. Canned hominy makes the dish simple to prepare (looked for canned hominy in the canned vegetables or rice section of most supermarkets).*

2 dried red New Mexican or guajillo chile peppers, stems removed and seeded (wear plastic gloves when handling), or 2 to 3 teaspoons pure chili powder.

1 tablespoon lard or canola oil

8 ounces lean pork loin or tenderloin, trimmed of all visible fat and cut into 1" cubes

1 onion, finely chopped

4 cloves garlic, minced

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1 teaspoon dried oregano

1 bay leaf

6 cups water

2 cans (14 1/2 ounces each) hominy, rinsed and drained

Salt and ground black pepper

1/4 cup chopped scallions (optional)

1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro (optional)

Lime wedges (optional)

If using the chile peppers, soak in hot water to cover for 20 to 30 minutes, or until softened. Transfer the chile peppers to a blender or food processor. Add 1/4 cup of the soaking liquid and puree until smooth.

Heat the lard or oil in a large saucepan over medium-high heat. Add the pork and cook for 3 minutes. Add the onions and cook for 2 minutes. Add the garlic, cumin, oregano and bay leaf. Cook for 1 minute, or until the pork and vegetables begin to brown. Add the water and hominy and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer for 30 minutes, or until the pork is tender and the broth is thick and richly flavored. Season with salt and black pepper. Remove and discard the bay leaf. Stir in the pureed chile peppers or chili powder and simmer for 5 minutes. Taste and season with salt and black pepper.

Ladle into shallow bowls. If desired, sprinkle the scallions and cilantro on top and serve with lime wedges for squeezing.

Makes 4 servings.

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