

# FRUITAS



## TROPICAL FRUITS

Gorgeous tropical fruits are abundant on the island, and even in the busiest parts of our largest cities you'll find fruit trees growing on small patches of land and in the yards around houses.

In most parts of the United States, many of these fruits are a real luxury item and can be expensive. Here, there are often too many citrus fruits, mango, and papaya to even use before they fall to the ground.



**AVOCADO** This delicious and healthful fruit is actually not sweet and is rarely used in deserts. The avocados that are typical here are different from the California Haas avocados and have a brighter, cooler taste. They're more like the Fuerte variety that is often grown in Florida. Avocado

should always be used ripe and should be peeled and the pit removed. The flesh can turn dark very quickly once it is cut, so it is a good idea to have some lemon or lime juice ready to sprinkle over it to slow the oxidation process, and to cut avocado just before you plan to serve it.

**BANANA** *Guineo*, as they're called in Spanish, are everywhere in Puerto Rico, and we use them in all forms for our dishes. There are several varieties including the common medium- to large-sized bananas that you can pick up in any supermarket. We use these in their green, unripe form in savory dishes such as the Pickled Green Bananas on page 109. There are very small bananas that we call *guineitos niños*, which are very sweet and have a strong concentrated banana flavor—almost like banana candy. And there are some called *guineos manzanos* that taste a bit like apple when they are ripe. Ripe, yellow bananas and baby bananas are enjoyed plain and are also used in desserts, from simple fruit salads to more sophisticated dishes like the Warm Chocolate Cake Filled with Baby Bananas (page 191), one of the most popular dishes at Santaella.

**CITRUS** The range of flavors that the citrus fruits of the world provide is vast. The standard oranges, grapefruits, lemons, and limes that you find in a grocery store are a poor reflection of the profiles that can be achieved by stretching beyond hybridized, mass-market citrus. Trees laden with all sorts of varieties of citrus fruits grow all over Puerto Rico, and the homegrown fruits are generally much better than anything you will find in a grocery store. It is easy to find the usual varieties but also some that are less common, like the *chironja*, which is a cross between an orange and a grapefruit, and bitter orange, also known as sour orange or Seville orange. Bitter oranges, which are not nearly as sweet as regular eating oranges, were brought to the Caribbean from Spain, but their origins are in Southeast Asia. They are becoming easier to find in the States and if you do see some, grab them and start experimenting with the juice. If you need a substitution, try blending equal parts regular orange juice and lime juice.

**COCONUT** One of the most common ingredients in our food and drink culture is coconut. The trees are everywhere,



and it's not unusual to see men climbing the trees—even in the city—to pick coconuts. They are sold in markets, roadside stands, and even from boxes and shopping carts on street corners. Both green (young) and brown (old) coconuts are used in Puerto Rico. The green coconuts have not yet developed their rock-hard, brown hairy shell and are softer and have much more water inside. The flesh of a green coconut is gelatinous and not yet mature and therefore does not have much flavor. Older brown coconuts have matured. Most of the water is gone from the inside and as the flesh has matured and concentrated so has the flavor of the meat. Green coconuts are hacked open for fresh coconut water, and the flesh of the brown fruit is used in both sweet and savory dishes.

**GUAVA** Native to the Caribbean islands as well as Mexico and Central and South America, the guava is a prolific plant that spreads easily in the wild but has also become an important cultivar in tropical locales worldwide. There are many varieties ranging from golf-ball-sized strawberry guavas to softball-sized apple guavas. Starting off as a green fruit, some stay green throughout their life while others turn yellow and some maroon. The color of the flesh varies as well, but the guavas in Puerto Rico are mostly a beautiful rosy color. They can be eaten raw (some varieties, like the apple guava, can be eaten like an apple—skin and all); their flavor is a sort of citrusy, apple-strawberry combination, and their texture when ripe is soft but not mushy. They are very nutritious, boasting four times the amount of vitamin C as an orange! Because they contain a high level of pectin, we make candies, jams, and fruit pastes out of them. Guava paste can be used for cooking but also makes a delicious accompaniment to a cheese board. Try the Cream Cheese and Vanilla Panna Cotta with Guava Filling on page 225.

**MAMEY** Beautiful dark green, glossy leaves adorn the mamey tree, which grows very well and quite large in Puerto Rico. Some people plant them as an ornamental tree—they look similar to the grand Southern magnolia. The mamey tree has the additional benefit of bearing a delicious fruit that we use in jams and pastes, blend into smoothies and milk shakes, and cook into desserts like the Tropical Fruit Jubilee with Pineapple and Mamey on page 204. The apricot-like flavor of the semifirm mamey flesh is delicious raw and offers many nutrients, like vitamins B and C, and a good amount of dietary fiber. Native to the West Indies, it is a New World fruit that doesn't like too much change. While it grows very well in Puerto Rico and in South and Central America, cultivating the fruit in

the tropical areas of the Old World have not proven very successful: The mamey is a stubborn beauty. The good news is that Puerto Rico enjoys some of the most productive mamey trees in the world, with some trees producing crops biannually—that's three to four hundred fruits per tree each year!

**MANGO** Native to Southeast Asia and brought to the islands via Spanish exploration and African slave ships, the mango is a fruit tree that has adapted well to our land. They range from small and bright yellow to larger, reddish, spherical fruits to elongated green-skinned mangoes that are very large. Mangoes have a delicious peachy-pineapple-flavored flesh; some varieties have a fibrous texture and some have no fiber at all. The delicious yellow to deep salmon-colored flesh clings to a large pit that can be nearly impossible to release, so the best way to cut a mango is to slice it on either side of the flat pit, as close to the pit as possible, to obtain two cup-shaped halves. You can then peel it or score it with a knife to create cubes that can be cut from the skin.

**SOURSOP** Called *guanabana* in Spanish, soursop is an unusual fruit that looks intimidating as it is covered in small spikes, but it has a mild, almost creamy white pulp inside that tastes a little bit like a combination of strawberry and pineapple. It has a citrusy sourness that is really nice when paired with syrups or sugary desserts or used in a cocktail. Native to the Caribbean, the soursop is also related to the cherimoya and the pawpaw.

**PAPAYA** These oblong fruits, native to the island, can be yellow or orange-red on the outside and inside. They have a lovely mild taste and texture similar to some melons, but they grow on trees in large clusters. They should be peeled, leaving the sweet, dense flesh to be eaten. When the fruit is cut in half, many black seeds will be revealed, but they are concentrated in the middle so they're easy to remove. Considered to be a power food by many, papayas contain enzymes that aid digestion and are rich in vitamins A and C as well as fiber and potassium.

**PINEAPPLE** An iconic fruit native to southern Brazil and Paraguay and brought throughout South America and the Caribbean by the Indians of those regions, the pineapple, apart from being sweet and delicious in desserts, savory dishes, and cocktails, is also an ancient symbol of hospitality. Taino Indians of the Caribbean were said to hang the fruits over their doors to let visitors know that they were welcome. The fruit and the symbol was adopted by the European explorers, taken back to Europe and eventually to the colonies in North America. Some American cities that were former colonies still use the symbol today. There are a few varieties grown in Puerto Rico. Perhaps

the most popular here is the medium-sized Spanish Reds, which have a classic, deep flavor—a perfect blend of tangy and sweet. Then there are the Smooth Cayennes (the Hawaiian cultivar that is most often sold in mainland supermarkets). While they are easy to grow (and therefore have become popular on large farms), they are not the best for flavor and texture. We also have huge Cabezonas pineapples that grow as large as fifteen pounds each, and some small and delicious pineapples called Pan de Azúcar that are difficult to grow and therefore a coveted variety.



**QUENEPA** Bunches of these Key lime-sized green fruits, still clinging to their stems, are sold in markets and from roadside stands all over the island. Sometimes called the Spanish lime or genip fruit, quenepa are mostly eaten raw but can be used to make jams, fruit paste, and juice. The city of Ponce, on the

south end of the island, hosts the Festival Nacional de la Quenepa every August, with typical street-style music, arts, and crafts but also a recipe contest with prizes going to the most delicious and innovative use of the tropical fruit. The fruits have a bright green, firm skin that is not edible. To eat one, first bite a slit into the skin with your front teeth. Once you have made a slit, you can peel the fruit easily with your fingers to reveal a round, gelatinous-looking mass of pulp that surrounds a large seed. Pop the entire thing in your mouth, and begin sucking the tart-sweet pulp that clings to the large seed. Discard the seed and eat another one!



**TAMARIND** It's the pulp surrounding the large seeds in this unusual pod that provides the edible portion of this fruit and the distinct tannic and pleasantly sour flavor. An import from India, tamarind trees grow very well in the Caribbean and tamarind is a common ingredient here. The seed pods have to reach the stage where their papery skin is dry and crumbly before they will have developed enough sugars to eat. Even still, once the pulp is extracted, sugar is usually added to calm its sour nature. It is fun to eat tamarind pulp directly from the pod, the dark, sticky sweetness heightened by a bit of lip puckering. Kids love to eat them for the sensation, but eat too many and your mouth will feel raw!

Previous page, clockwise from top left: Bitter orange; tamarind; mamey; mango; pineapple; mangos *Mayagüezanos*; chinás, a Puerto Rican variety of orange; papaya; quenepas (center left); soursop; passion fruit (cut, with green center); orange.

## ROOT VEGETABLES

The broad category of *viandas*, or root vegetables, is essential to our cuisine, not just because the earthy flavors pair so well with the deep layers of so many dishes here but also because they represent a traditional way for budget-constrained farming families especially to provide excellent nutrition and satisfying bulk to large numbers of people.

These vegetables are not simply regarded as humble, starchy fillers—they are a celebrated part of our culture. They are just as important to Puerto Rican cuisine as seafood and meat, and I like to think of them as exotic options for a healthful vegetarian diet. The importance of these *viandas*—the word's etymological profile is based on the Latin root for "meat"—cannot be overstated. Considered the base—almost the meat—of our cuisine, many of them were here long before Old World ships made their way across the ocean, and some of them, brought along on those ships hauling goods and people from Europe and Africa, are now thought of as native plants.

Clockwise from top left: eggplant (although not a root vegetable, this is a popular ingredient, and this purple variety is the one used most often in Puerto Rico); ñame; apio; malanga; pana; batata; chayote; yautia (center, cut in half); calabaza; cassava.

**APIO** Indigenous to Puerto Rico and an important part of the Taíno Indian diet, this starchy root vegetable is similar in appearance to celeriac (celery root), but quite different in taste. In contrast to the strong, almost pungent taste of celery root, *apio* is mild and has a texture similar to that of white potatoes. *Apio* can be cooked and used the same way as white potatoes.

**BATATA** *Batata* is the word we use to refer to sweet potatoes. *Batatas* come in a rainbow of colors ranging from white to yellow, rose, orange, red, and even purple. We typically use the paler varieties—white and yellow—as they are less sweet and have a slightly drier, starchier texture than the deeper-colored potatoes.

**PANA** Though the spiny pod-shaped breadfruit grows on a large tree, its flesh is quite starchy and when cooked has a taste and texture similar to potatoes. Thus it's often thought of as one of our *viandas*, even though it's not a root vegetable. The cooked fruit has also been described as having the yeasty taste and smell of fresh baked bread, hence its name *panapen* or *pana* for short. Breadfruit is an easygoing kitchen companion that takes well to boiling, baking, sautéing, or steaming; it pairs well as a side to any number of dishes. (By the way, in Puerto Rico, when you call someone a *pana*, it means he or she is a good friend.) The bright green, prickly underripe fruit provides the most starch; the yellowish green fruit with skin that is slightly smoother is used both as a savory and sweet base; and the slightly overripe breadfruit that is sweet and creamy can be used in desserts.

**CALABAZA** This tropical pumpkin, also known as West Indian pumpkin, is native to the island and was historically a very valuable part of the Taíno diet. Though not a tuber, it is prepared in much the same way as root vegetables. These large squashes are of ancient origin and while their exteriors may vary a bit in color and texture, the ones found in Puerto Rico are a squat, round pumpkin with orange flesh and a mildly sweet flavor.

**CASSAVA** It's incredible that the pre-Columbian Indians figured out how to use this root, otherwise known as yuca, tapioca, and manioc. To be rendered edible, the flesh of the cassava root must be peeled and cooked. A staple crop to the Taíno Indians then, the cassava is still just as important: A vital part of world nutrition, it is the third most consumed starch after rice and corn.

**MALANGA** This root, also known as cocoyam, is often mistaken for taro root because it looks almost identical, with its irregular, oblong shape and brown, hairy exterior. The *malanga* has a mild, earthy-tasting yellow or cream-colored flesh that is moist and crunchy. It behaves well when simmered, used as a thickening agent in soups and stews, but it can be fried as well.

**ÑAME** A versatile root vegetable, *ñame* is an African yam. It is a gnarled, brown tuber that can grow to be a couple of feet long. Usually boiled like a potato, *ñame* can also be baked or ground to a flour. The taste is like that of *malanga* but very starchy with a somewhat grainy texture.

**YAUTIA** Also known as taro root, *yautia* grows naturally under the forest canopy but can also be easily cultivated in fields with direct sunlight. The tuber's ability to be grown in various conditions has secured its importance in many tropical food systems. Although it is cooked like a potato, it has a distinct nuttiness in flavor.



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## ESSENTIAL TOOLS

Puerto Rican cooks typically don't use a lot of gadgets. Our cuisine is born out of the methods of the Taíno Indians, who inhabited the island originally, the Spanish who landed here with techniques and ingredients brought from the Old World, the Africans who were brought to the New World to work fields and cook, and the more modern influx of people from around the globe. The tools we use most often are simple but effective pieces that are so essential to our recipes that they are as important as the ingredients themselves. You can find these tools online or in international markets and, when you are in San Juan, head to the Plaza del Mercado de Santurce, where fresh fruits, vegetables, meat, and fish but also many household essentials are sold.

**CALDERO** Similar in size and shape to a Dutch oven, this cooking pot is deep and wide, with a tight-fitting lid; it's usually made from thick cast aluminum. The metal is a great conductor of heat and is strong but fairly light. Many cooks have a prized caldero, a pot that they always use for a certain recipe or for cooking rice. It might be dented and discolored, but it is precious and very often a vessel that has been passed down for generations.

**GRATER** In many recipes here, starchy root vegetables and green bananas and plantains must be grated to achieve the proper texture. Investing in a simple box grater is important if you want to make the cassava, yautia, and malanga fritters in this chapter or the green banana and root vegetable *atcapurrias* on page 36. A food processor will not yield the same texture, and it can often bruise the vegetable or fruit, changing its texture and quality.

**MACHETE** The machete is used for all kinds of tasks. Often men will carry a small, eight-inch-long machete in a belted sheath around their waist—a sort of Puerto Rican pocket knife. Walking through a field or in the lush mountains, the machete is easily drawn and used to hack through brushy paths. Street vendors wield

them to lop off the tops of coconuts before sticking in straws and handing them to customers. In the *lechoneras* of Guavate, the cooks and pitmasters use large, very sharp machetes to chop through the crisp skin, meat, and bones of the cooked pigs.

**PILÓN** A *pilón* is a mortar and pestle. The act of smashing ingredients and grinding them between two stones is literally a Stone Age technique, and the *pilón* that we now use is not very far removed from what those first cooks used. From smooth polished marble, to grainier, textured stone, to the wooden ones that we use in Puerto Rico, the inside surface of the *pilón* affects the end result of whatever is being ground. We use a wooden *pilón* to prepare *mofongo* (see page 147).

**TOSTONERA** This simple tool is nothing more than two smooth wood-handled paddles hinged together, but the *tostonera* dramatically speeds up the process of making *tostones*—double-fried plantains. Sections of starchy plantains must be mashed flat before frying, and the wood paddles aid in applying even pressure to the chunks, resulting in *tostones* of consistent size and shape.