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SOFRITO

It's impossible to discuss Puerto Rican food without mentioning sofrito.

Our cuisine essentially begins with sofrito; it is the backbone of flavor in many of our dishes. Proper Puerto Rican sofrito is an aromatic sauté of garlic, tomatoes, onions, *culantro*, cilantro, and *aji dulce* and cubanelle peppers cooked in annatto oil flavored with bacon, salt pork, or cured ham. Bay leaf, cumin, *sazón* (a seasoned salt), and oregano can be added, along with *alcaparrado* (a mixture of pimento-stuffed olives and capers). The Spanish introduced the technique of building the flavors of a dish by starting with sofrito many centuries ago when they explored and settled in the Caribbean and what is now known as Latin America. At that point, the mixture may have been nothing more than oil and onions and possibly garlic. As people spread across the various lands that make up Latin America, *sofrito* morphed to take on the nuances of local ingredients and evolved according to the influence of indigenous people or the habits of the cooks in a certain place.

A sofrito in Cuba or the Dominican Republic will be very different from a Puerto Rican sofrito. To achieve a true Puerto Rican sofrito, it is very important to include cilantro, *alcaparrado*, and *culantro*, a broad-leaf aromatic herb (also called sawtooth cilantro, pictured at center of photo opposite, being chopped). *Culantro* has a flavor similar to that of cilantro but is much stronger—we use the two together in many recipes because the subtle differences in flavor complement each other. If you have a hard time finding *culantro*, you can simply use cilantro in its place. We sauté the mixture in bright yellow annatto-infused oil. Sofrito can be stored in the refrigerator for about a week or frozen for up to three months (some cooks freeze it in ice cube trays so it's easy to pull out a small bit at a time when needed). It is a common practice for home cooks and professionals alike to keep sofrito on hand at all times so that it is always available to start a recipe.

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