

FOOD & DRINK

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Dominicans enjoy an array of foods as colorful as their landscape, but simple in taste. Women, especially, take pride in preparing enticing traditional dishes, layered with ingredients of the land. Inspiration for Dominican cuisine stems from native Antillean and hearty Creole recipes and is prepared similar to the dishes of Central and South America with rice, fish and other seafoods, meats or vegetables. Light spices or coconut add depth and warm the soul. Culinary specialties of the country vary from region to region, although residents of the Dominican Republic (DR) share a common hunger for its staple meals.

FOOD

Traditional Fare

Breakfast typically calls for a serving of “*Mangu*,” a mix of plantains, butter, onions and cheese (some recipes also include bacon), which can be found at most hotel and resort restaurants. *Mangu* has been dubbed the “mashed potatoes” of the DR and is a must-try for all visitors. Locals are also known to prepare the dish for evening meals.

A foundation of the native diet, “*La Bandera Dominicana*,” or the Dominican flag meal, is eaten by nearly everyone at lunch time. The most important meal of the day, *La Bandera* consists of rice, beans, meat, vegetables and fried plantains to ensure energy throughout the afternoon and evening.

Another popular dish is “*Sancocho*,” a Spanish-style stew usually served with rice. Ingredients include various roots, green plantains, avocado and typically chicken or beef, although it sometimes includes a combination of seven meats (*Sancocho prieto*). Goat meat, a staple in many Dominican homes, may also be used in this recipe. (It adds character to any dish as these animals graze on wild oregano.)

“*Locrio*,” or Dominican rice, varies with its preparer. An adaptation of the Spanish paella, *locrio* is made with *achiote* (a colored dye produced from the seeds of the achiote plant), since saffron spice is unavailable.

Near Samana, coconut trees decorate the landscape and provide a delectable milk sauce for fish, known as “*Pescado con Coco*.” Throughout the south central coast, “*bulgur*,” or whole wheat, is a main ingredient in “*Quipes*” (ground beef wrapped in wheat) or “*Tipili*” (bulgur salad).

Other favorite Dominican dishes include:

- “*chicharrones de pollo*” (diced chunks of deep fried chicken)
- “*yucca cassava*” (type of bread)
- “*monfogo*” (plantain-based dish)
- “*pastelitos*” (meat or cheese filled pastry turnovers).

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Leave Room for Dessert

A proper Dominican meal is not complete without dessert. In a land abundant with sugar cane, most desserts are exceptionally sweet. Cakes, puddings, caramel-dipped fruits and creams are common.

Additional specialties found at hotels and resorts include:

- “arroz con leche” (rice pudding)
- “mango cake”
- “flan”
- “dulce de leche” (milk cream flavored with coconut or fruit)
- “dulce de coco” (thick, sweet coconut paste)
- “helados bon” (ice cream shops with tropical sherberts, macadamia, coconut and rum flavored ice creams)
- “bizcochos” (cakes with white cream topping)
- “frio frios” (shaved ice with fruit syrups)
- “agua de coco” (sliced coconuts mixed with sugar cane juice and native fruits of the island such as mangoes, pineapples, oranges, bananas and plantains)

A favorite item and a popular souvenir for visitors to return home with is rum cake. Flowing freely in the DR, rum provides the signature ingredient for this tasty treat.

Recipe for Rum Cake

Serves 10

Cake Mix

2 cups cake flour
1 1/2 cups granulated sugar
4 teaspoons baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup butter, cut into bits
3 tablespoons vegetable oil

1/2 cup finely chopped walnuts
1 (3.5 ounce) package instant vanilla pudding mix
1/2 cup milk
4 eggs
1/2 cup rum
1/2 cup vegetable oil
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Rum Soaking Glaze

1/2 cup butter
1/4 cup water
1 cup granulated sugar
1/2 cup rum

Combine “cake mix” ingredients with a low-speed electric mixer in a large bowl until mix is the consistency of fine gravel and all of the particles are almost equal in size.

Preheat oven to 325 degrees F. Spray a large (12-cup size) bundt pan with nonstick cooking spray. Sprinkle the chopped nuts into the bottom.

Place cake mix, pudding mix, milk, eggs, rum, oil and vanilla extract in a large bowl and combine on medium speed with an electric mixer for about 2 or 3 minutes. Scrape down the bowl halfway through. Batter should be very smooth. Pour into prepared bundt pan and level out top. Bake until fully golden and tester comes out clean and cake springs back - about 55 minutes.

MORE

Remove from oven and place on cooling rack while making soaking glaze.

In a small saucepan combine butter, water and sugar. Bring to a boil carefully as mixture boils over very easily. Reduce to a simmer and cook until sugar is dissolved and syrup is combined well and a little thicker. Remove from heat and add the rum and mix to combine.

While cake is still cooling, pour hot syrup into and on top of cake. There is a lot of syrup and if cake doesn't soak it up right away just wait a couple minutes and add the rest. It will eventually take the entire mixture.

Cool cake completely in bundt pan before turning out onto serving platter.

This cake is delicate, so once it is turned out it cannot be moved around easily. The cake can be eaten when fully cool, but it is better the next day.

For more information on authentic Dominican food and meal preparation, visit: www.dominicancooking.com

BEVERAGES

Rum

Rum production in the Caribbean is attributed to the African colonists who brought sugar cane with them to make crystallized sugar and molasses. They noticed, however, that the molasses began to ferment when left in the hot Caribbean sun and could be mixed with water to create what became known as rum.

During the 1700's, sugar cane plantations and their by-products contributed to a booming social and economic climate which eventually drew the attention of the DR's three rum brand founders. In the mid-to-late 1800's Don Andres Brugal Montaner, Don Erasmo Bermudez and Julian Barcelo started experimenting with their own personal refining processes. Today, the Brugal, Bermúdez, and Barceló brands of rum have become popular across the globe and are considered some of the world's best. Unlike that of Jamaica and Barbados, Dominican rum is produced through a more natural process of distillation. Aging is often done in special American white oak kegs, thus creating a sweet, hearty blend.

Bermudez, the eldest of the Dominican rum distilleries, was established in 1852. Its first formula, Bitter Panacea, remains famous. Distilling in Santo Domingo, Bermudez boasts the Dominican's oldest aging cellar.

<http://www.ronbermudez.com/>

Brugal, established in 1888, is located just east of Puerto Plata and produces more than one and a half million liters of white and dark rum each year. Considered the most popular distiller, Brugal offers affordable bottles of rum for sale at its bottling plant and gives guests a free rum drink. Tours are offered Monday through Friday and admission is free.

<http://www.brugal.com.do/>

Barcelo, established in Santo Domingo in 1930, is said to be best-liked by locals. The plant manufactures 40 thousand liters of rum per day. <http://www.barcelo.com.do/2003/>

After a visit to a DR rum distillery, guests enjoy making a Cuba Libre, or "rum and coke" for friends and family back home.

MORE

Cuba Libre

Two shots white rum
Coke or another cola brand
Ice
Juice of one lime (rub rim of glass with lime peel)

The infamous Coco-Locho drink, made with the juice of a real coconut, is perfect for vacationers willing to leave their inhibitions behind.

Coco-Locho

1 oz. coconut rum
1 oz. rum
1 oz. tequila
1 oz. gin
½ oz. grenadine
Cut a 3-inch hole in the top of a coconut. Pour in tequila, rum and gin. Add several ice cubes and stir. Throw in slice of lemon. Serve with long straw.

Insider's tip: Make sure to check out the Dominican Cocktail Festival, held each year in Santo Domingo. The festival showcases the best bartenders in the country's restaurant and hotel industry. For two evenings the talented mixologists compete by serving up unique drink creations in hopes to earn the title of "Dominican Bartender of the Year."

Beer

Brewed in Santo Domingo, Presidente is the DR's most popular beer and is served at just about every establishment in the country. As part of a marketing agreement designed by the company to maximize its consumption, Presidente is the only beer offered for sale at convenience and liquor stores in some areas. It is nearly impossible to find the same Presidente brew back in the states. Best when served ice-cold (locals will *only* take it that way), it's a light-tasting pilsner with six percent alcohol, opposed to the United States' version which contains only five percent (never comparing in taste). Therefore, Presidente beer is a popular souvenir for tourists.

Mamajuana

A "miracle" potion developed in the DR, Mamajuana is a concoction of various herbs, roots, leaves and bark that is mixed with rum, gin, wine, honey and lemon to cure everything from impotency to the stomach flu. While an acquired taste, Mamajuana is used to promote overall good health, sexuality and vitality. Only a handful of families still brew the mixture. <http://www.mamajuanaparapalo.com>

Coffee

Travelers to the Caribbean know that the region is among the best in the world for strong-bodied specialty coffees. The DR is no exception. Its position in the tropics, rainfall levels, and fertile soil make it an ideal location for growing organic coffee beans that provide great taste and a rich aroma. The coffee trade in the DR dates back over 250 years, giving its growers a deep-rooted tradition to continue.

The DR has more than 60,000 growers who together export nearly one million bags of coffee per year, although most of their crop is kept for domestic use. DR coffee, sold under the "Santo Domingo" brand name, is grown in six different regions on the island: Azua, Bani, Cibao, Barahona, Juncalito and Ocoa.

Beans from the higher altitudes are thought to be richer and have a higher acidity than low-grown coffees that tend to be the opposite. Dominican coffee is 100 percent Arabica and varieties include: nuevo mundo, catuai, caturra and bourbon. While in the DR, coffee is typically served black in an espresso cup with a large pour of sugar.

Popular coffee factories and warehouses in the DR are listed below:

Americo Melo & Co.

Anacaona No. 14, Barahona

Phone: (809) 524-2440 / E-mail: americo.melocxa@verizon.net.do

The Melo coffee factory in Anacaona, Baharona is open from 8 a.m. – 5 p.m., Monday through Saturday.

**Insider's tip: For an informal tour of the facility, the owner of Melo's café next door grants them by request.*

Ramirez Coffee Warehouse

Monte Plata

Here, visitors walk through the large stock of coffee and watch locals haggle for fair priced beans.

Chez Jose Tobacco and Coffee Farm

Cabrera

The farm offers two-hour tours each Wednesday to demonstrate the bean picking and processing.

www.dominicancoffee.com

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NOTE TO EDITOR: Be sure to visit the new Dominican Republic Ministry of Tourism website www.godominicanrepublic.com