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Holiday tables in Puerto Rican households filled with food, family, fun ☐

Christina Maldonado-Coffey answers questions about pasteles, tembleque and more ☐



MARY ELLEN WRIGHT | Staff Writer Dec 9, 2015 Comments ☐



In Puerto Rican households during the holidays, Christina Maldonado-Coffey says, meals are all about family.

“Our holiday tradition is having family over,” she says. “Family is huge. Music. Food. Fun. We are a very proud people. We’re loud. We are a very celebratory people.

“That’s just our culture. That’s the love. That’s the passion that we have.”

Paired with that passion and love, Maldonado-Coffey adds, Puerto Rican cooks serve up dishes such as pasteles, arroz dulce and tembleque.

Maldonado-Coffey, 40, runs her own catering company, Catering by Christina, out of the shared East Side Community Kitchen. She sells food based on Puerto Rican and other cuisines at her stand at Lancaster’s Central Market.

After working for many years at the former Pfizer plant in Lititz, she trained at the Pennsylvania School of Culinary Arts at Lancaster’s YTI Career Institute before opening her own business five years ago.

We asked Maldonado-Coffey about the Puerto Rican food served at Christmas and New Year’s celebrations.

What are some Puerto Rican foods usually served at the holidays?

Traditionally, for your Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's meal, you'll have, in a Puerto Rican household, pernil — roast pork. You'll have yellow rice and pigeon peas. You will have, perhaps, a turkey or a ham. But your main meat is the pork. Then we have something called vianda, which is basically all these root vegetables that we have — many of them are from the taro family — and we boil them. It's our side dish; it's our vegetable. Another side dish for us is boiled green bananas; we drizzle them with olive oil and fresh cracked pepper. We often have a (warm) potato salad, and we always have a macaroni salad on a Christmas plate.



Is there a Puerto Rican dish served mostly on holidays?

The biggest thing right now, which I'm offering by the dozen, is pasteles. They're typically served for Christmas, for New Year's and for Thanksgiving; I made and sold 64 dozen at Thanksgiving. It's a Puerto Rican version of a tamale. A tamale is made with cornmeal masa (as part of its filling). We use green-banana masa, which is a mixture. You grate the green bananas and whatever other root vegetable you decide to use. ... I was raised making it with green banana and a little bit of yautia (a starchy brown tuber). It gives a slight sweetness to it. ... And instead of beef, like a tamale, for the filling, we use roast pork, our penil.



What do you wrap them in?

Rather than wrap it in a corn husk, we wrap it in a green banana leaf. Now, here in the States, you can buy that stuff at your local grocery store or Spanish grocery, but you're actually getting a plantain leaf, which is a little thicker and a little waxier, and when you boil it, it has a little bit of a bitter taste to it. So I get banana leaves shipped to me from my mother, who is in Puerto Rico.

How is a pastelito prepared?

It's a lot of work to make. ... I chop up the yautia and mix it in with my green banana, and put it in the food processor. And then you would need to use annatto oil. We take annatto seeds and we put them in a pot with oil of

your liking — I use canola oil — and simmer it. And this is what we add into the masa to give it that nice, brownish-orange color when it's cooked. (The oil is) also put on the banana leaf before you put the masa on, so it slides out easily after cooking.

How is the masa seasoned?

I like to put in a little bit of sofrito, which is the Latin mirepoix. Traditional mirepoix that you use for soups is your carrot, your onion and your celery. Our mirepoix, which is what makes Puerto Rican food — if you don't have it, you don't have Puerto Rican food — is cilantro, red and green peppers, onion and something called ajies dulces. They're a sweet pepper, and they look like a jalapeno, just not hot. We also season the masa with our two traditional spice (mixes). Adobo is onion powder, garlic salt, oregano, pepper and turmeric for the yellow color. And the other is sazón, which is more of a coloring, but it has dried cilantro, oregano, garlic salt, onion, coriander. Sazón literally means flavor.

What about the pernil?

Typically we would take a huge piece of pork, we would cut it up, we would dice it up into small pieces, cook it in a big pot, add your spices, your tomato sauce, your sofrito in there. I like to cook it to the point where it starts to shred, so when I put it in my masa, you're going to get a bite of pork in every single bite that you get.

How do you finish them?

You put the annatto oil on the banana leaf, spread on the masa, and I like to load it up with pork. I'm not stingy. And we add some Manzanilla olives — that's a Spanish olive — and red peppers. Some people like to add capers. Then you fold (the banana leaf) over, and flip it. You have to be very gentle with these banana leaves because these are so delicate. ... I freeze the pasteles, and sell them frozen. Then you can take out as many as you want, and you boil them in good salty water, for about 45 minutes to an hour.





What about Puerto Rican holiday desserts?

A couple of desserts are really popular for the Christmas holiday. One would be what we call arroz dulce, which is a sweet rice. It's kind of like a sweet rice pudding, but it's molded onto a flat dinner plate. It has cinnamon, raisins, ginger, a little bit of nutmeg, condensed milk, regular milk, clove, and you cook that up with a medium-grain or an Arborio rice, a nice small-grain, sticky rice. And you cut it like a pie once it's refrigerated and cooled down.

Another dessert is tembleque. That's a coconut custard. Tembleque means "jiggle." So when you make that custard, you're basically taking coconut milk, coconut cream, and you're cooking that, and you're going to thicken it up

with a nice little cornstarch slurry. And once you thicken it up and it starts bubbling, you take it out and put it in whatever mold or dish you like and you cool it. And after it's cooled you should be able to take it out of the mold and it should jiggle when you put it on the plate. Sprinkle some cinnamon on top, and you have a wonderful, delicious, coconut dessert.



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