Puerto Rico is a small island in the Caribbean that has been a part of the United States since the Spanish-American war in 1898. The original Taino Indians lived in small villages and had limited knowledge of agriculture. Their main food sources were local tropical crops of pineapples, cassava, and sweet potatoes supplemented with seafood. The island was discovered and claimed for Spain in 1493 by Columbus, who introduced beef, pork, rice, wheat and olive oil to the island’s food source. The Europeans who arrived after Columbus brought tropical fruits, including oranges, limes, mangos, rice, coffee, breadfruit and even sugarcane. Although it was not settled by the Spaniards until 1507, their influence is seen in all phases of life since that time including Spanish as their original language.1

The Puerto Rican culture includes people whose ancestors and current extended family members are from the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico. Under Spanish rule and then under American rule, Puerto Rico has never been an independent nation. Puerto Ricans are American citizens and can legally enter and leave the mainland. Because of this circular migration, elements of both cultures thrive in both places, and a specific Puerto Rican “cultural type” can be difficult to describe.

Food Sources

The cuisine of the island reflects the island’s location, topography, tropical climate, and various foreign influences. Bordered on the north by the Atlantic Ocean and on the south by the Caribbean Sea, the population enjoys delights from both waters. Foods grown on the island such as pineapple were prized by the Spaniards and spread elsewhere to become a part of food patterns of many countries of the world. The southern central plain must be irrigated because of the mountains that cross the midland. These mountains cut off trade winds that provide breezes in the north and also cut off rainfall. Mango, avocado, papaya, and other fruit trees are found in the northern and southwestern parts of the island, which are fed by mountain streams. The valleys are planted with sugar cane and pineapple while the slopes of the mountains are used for coffee and tobacco plantations. Puerto Rican coffee is very strong and can be found locally in the United States for a high price, similar to Hawaiian Kona.

Since World War II, Puerto Rico has been increasingly influenced by the United States. In terms of foods, this has meant the importation of an increasing variety of products. The labels used on imported food products are those that are used in the United States. US federal laws for labeling apply to products sold in Puerto Rico. In terms of education about foods, Puerto Rican government agencies are connected directly to US federal agencies and receive materials in English and Spanish directly from these agencies. Thus while the eating patterns are different, there is a tremendous influence of stateside-based nutrition education as well as foods.

Today, almost 70% of the food on the island of Puerto Rico is imported from the United States. Because of this, the Puerto Rican diet — particularly the diets of younger generations — has become very Americanized. Favorite foods include pizza, hot dogs, canned spaghetti, cold cereal, and canned soups. Fast food restaurants are also popular. Some Puerto Rican families living on the mainland have shifted away from traditional dietary patterns. Others maintain their ethnic food patterns after living on the mainland several decades.

Puerto Rican Fare

The Puerto Rican diet has many positive aspects. Complex carbohydrates such as tropical tubers and roots, the primary source of starch for many tropical climates, were used by both the Tainos and the Africans. Vegetable proteins, such as...
legumes, rice, and beans were raised by the Indians and continue to be a staple of the diet today. Pork was a highly prized meat and continues to be popular, while beef was not considered as tasty. Fish is eaten, but in quantities smaller than other meats. The diet includes some calcium and milk products. Adult women will drink milk in cafe con leche (coffee with milk) and consume calcium in flan (custard).

When available, viandas (starchy vegetables) are also included in the Puerto Rican diet. Viandas include plantains, green bananas, taniers, white and yellow sweet potatoes, and chayote squash. Lettuce salads with tomato are also popular. Nutritionists in Puerto Rico consider viandas to be bland tasting foods from plant sources that have a high starch content. They are usually white or cream in color. According to this definition viandas include green bananas, breadfruit, breadfruit seeds, yuca, celery root, green and ripe plantains, potatoes, sweet potatoes (white to bright orange in color), white and yellow yautia, white tropical yams, and malanga. Non-nutritionists in Puerto Rico have some problems with this definition: they become confused as to whether potatoes, calabaza (local pumpkin), and carrots are viandas. Viandas have been a staple of the diet since Columbus arrived. Potatoes are imported because they do not grow well in a tropical climate. Thus they are not part of the traditional “viandas” of Puerto Rico. Calabaza and carrots are frequently cooked in stew. However, they are placed by nutritionists in the vegetable group because they are relatively low in calories and have a high vitamin A content. Bright orange sweet potatoes are another food that causes problems of definition because of its color. However, usually white or cream-colored sweet potatoes are preferred, and the bright orange form is seldom served.

Fruits are conceptualized as “sweet or semisweet foods from plant sources that can be eaten raw.” Everyone who works with foods in Puerto Rico understands that ripe bananas are fruit, while green bananas, which need to be cooked, are viandas.

**Tips for Nutrition Education**

The population has a tendency toward high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes (three to five times higher than the general population), cancer, arthritis, gastrointestinal disorders, and obesity. Nutritional objectives should involve the following:
- encouraging selection of foods from all food groups;
- maintaining ideal body weight;
- encouraging the use of low-fat dairy products;
- encouraging the consumption of unsugared fruit juices;
- drinking plenty of water;
- teaching a greater variety of preparation styles; and
- introducing a greater variety of vegetables.

The Puerto Rican diet tends to be relatively high in calories, fat, complex carbohydrates, and sodium. It is somewhat deficient in calcium and vegetables. Younger individuals have abandoned the traditional diet for a more Americanized diet that includes a great deal of fast food, pizza, hot dogs, canned spaghetti, and cold cereals. Many need to be discouraged from eating sugar and simple carbohydrates, and using excessive fats in cooking. Breast-feeding is frequently practiced. Puerto Ricans believe breast-feeding is nourishing and creates bonding between mother and child.

In general, approaches to dietary counseling in Puerto Rican communities are most successful if the teacher is respected, the approach is personal, and the counseling is sanctioned by a respected member of the community. Educators and counselors may benefit from developing a trust relationship and engaging learners on a personal level. For example, when passing out papers, hand them to each individual rather than passing them down the row. This will show that “personal touch.” Also, do not be offended if you are asked personal questions. Puerto Ricans typically like to touch and feel close, both physically and emotionally, to those around them. Enlisting the help of a member of the community (such as an elder or an older woman, both of whom are well-respected) may benefit your presentations.

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Teaching the women may be easier. Frequently, however, the men’s support is needed before the women will listen, so always try to include the man in counseling sessions. Respect for family is critical in the Puerto Rican culture. Mothers and elders are adored, and duty to the family, including the extended family, is essential. Family ties are strong. Families often gather for holidays, birthdays, and weddings. Machismo is a critical element of the society. Women usually make decisions on foods purchased and served. Traditionally, meals are served when the entire family is together.

References

**Holiday Traditions**

Holidays no doubt are the most anticipated time of the year in Puerto Rico. Many of the customs, such as Noche Buena, Año Viejo, and Three Kings Day, are celebrated with great enthusiasm.

For Noche Buena, on December 24, it is customary for family and friends to get together to celebrate Christmas Eve. Lechón asado, arroz con gandules, pasteles, morcillas, tembleque, and arroz con dulce are a few of the holiday food favorites that are a staple of the Noche Buena celebration. After the holiday feast, a lot of Catholic families attend a special Christmas Eve mass called “Misa de Gallo,” also known as midnight mass. Misa de Gallo is a solemn yet festive mass that celebrates the birth of Jesus. In some churches, members create a live nativity scene, dressing up as the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph, and the three wise men.

After saying good-bye to the old year, a lot of Puerto Ricans do one of many rituals to receive the New Year or Año Nuevo. Eating 12 grapes at midnight is a custom that comes from Spain. It is said to bring lots of prosperity to those who do it. Another one is to throw a bucket of water out into the street to rid the home of all the bad things and prepare it for the arrival of all the good things. Another ritual is throwing sugar around the outside of the home to attract good luck and ward off bad luck.

_Tres Reyes Magos_ is celebrated on the eve of January 6 when children pick grass and put it in a box to leave at the foot of the bed for the Three Kings’ hungry camels. Early the next morning, they awake to see what gifts the Three Kings, Gaspar, Melchor, and Baltazar, have left them. For the month leading up to “el Día de los Reyes,” the Three Kings of Juana Diaz go from town to town and participate in the Catholic masses. They prepare spiritually for this role months in advance.