

Cuba and US: Food Customs and Health¹

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Cubans in the US

Cubans have been coming to the US as far back as the 1890s, but did not arrive in large numbers until after the Cuban Revolution in 1959 (Smith 2012). Since then, Cubans have continued to migrate to the US, where they are currently the third largest Hispanic population, totaling 1.8 million people (Ennis et al. 2011). Over two-thirds of Cubans live in Florida, and most of them in Miami, where they have used their influence to dominate many aspects of the culture, most noticeably the cuisine (Ennis et al. 2011; Smith 2012). Cubans only make up 3.7% of the total Hispanic population in the US but have the second largest Latin gastronomy in the country (Smith 2012).



Figure 1. A Cuban restaurant in Miami, FL.
Credits: Edwin Makarevich

Traditional and Common Meals

Traditionally, Cubans consume some type of meat at almost every meal. The most popular meat is pork, which usually is served as *lechón asado* (roast pork), *masas de puerco* (fried pork chunks), or as *pan con lechón* (in a sandwich) (Boswell and Curtis 1984). Pork is also found in *croquetas* (fried breaded meat paste), *chorizo* (spicy sausage), the sandwich *Cubano*, and the *medianoche* (midnight sandwich) (Boswell and Curtis 1984; Vicaria 1990). Along with pork, both the Cuban sandwich and *medianoche* contain Swiss cheese, but the Cuban sandwich is larger and served on Cuban bread, whereas the *medianoche* is served on an egg batter-based roll (Boswell and Curtis 1984). Finally, for special occasions, an entire pig is cooked open-pit style (Vicaria 1990). Pork is a very popular ingredient in Cuban meals, whether it is roasted, fried, or served on a sandwich (Porrata 2008).

Beef, the second most popular meat in the Cuban diet, can be served as *palomilla* (thin sliced sirloin), *ropa vieja* (shredded beef), *frita* (pork/beef burger), and *picadillo* (a spicy beef hash) (Boswell and Curtis 1984). Chicken is eaten as *arroz con pollo* (chicken and yellow rice), as pan-fried boneless chicken breast, or as chicken soup (Boswell and Curtis 1984). Seafood is most commonly eaten as fried shrimp or lobster added to paella, or in *sopón marinero* (seafood stew) (Vicaria 1990). Even though Cuba is an island nation, it is much more common to see Cubans eating pork or beef than any type of seafood. This is due to the typical Cuban taste preference for high-fat, high-calorie beef and pork over the leaner flesh of fish (Porrata 2008).

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Another staple of the Cuban diet is black beans and rice (preferably white rice), which is prepared using a thick sauce consisting of fat, small pork chunks and lard. Kidney beans or white beans may also be used in place of black beans (Boswell and Curtis 1984).

Less than 20% of the native Cuban population consumes adequate amounts of fruits and vegetables (5 to 9 servings per day) (Porrata 2008). However, when eaten, *fruta bomba* (papaya), *coco* (coconut), mango, *mamey*, *guava*, grapes, sweet bananas, and plantains are the most commonly consumed. Green plantains are boiled and eaten as a vegetable or fried to make *tostones* (Boswell and Curtis 1984).

Root vegetables most often eaten include *yuca*, *malanga*, *nama*, and *boniato*, which are often prepared by boiling. Corn can be found in soups, stews, and tamales. Cuban tamales are prepared using corn meal, spices, and bits of meat to make a thick paste that is then wrapped in a cornhusk. Potatoes are eaten as *papas fritas* (French fries) or served in soups and stews (Boswell and Curtis 1984).

Typical deserts include a variety of pastries, cakes, and custards that are consumed on special occasions or at meals throughout the day (Vicaria 1990). The quintessential beverage is known as *café cubano*, *un cafecito*, or Cuban coffee, which is a dark espresso served in shot-sized coffee cups (Smith 2012). Other common drinks include *café con leche* and a variety of sodas known as *Marterva* and *Pina*, as well as *guarapo* (sugar cane juice), that are specifically marketed towards Cubans (Vicaria 1990).

Diet and Health

The traditional Cuban diet is high in calories, fat, and sugar due to cooking in fat, an abundance of starchy refined foods, and the frequent consumption of sugary drinks and desserts. Cuban Americans who adhere to this diet often have problems with excess body weight. Unfortunately, Cubans who adopt the typical American diet often gain weight and increase their risk for diabetes and other health problems (Boone 1989; Vicaria 1990).

Fortunately, there is hope in the form of a government-supported diet change campaign in Cuba (Giraldo 2006). Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990, organic farms have been popping up all over Cuba (Giraldo 2006). Most of their crops have been sold to tourists until recently. Under Raúl Castro's control, the Cuban government has begun to educate its citizens about ways of incorporating vegetables into everyday dishes and about their importance for health (Cuban Cuisine and Health 2013; Giraldo 2006).

Health and Dietary Future

Unfortunately, 50% of Cubans living in Cuba do not relate diet to health, and fall into the habit of eating the same foods every day with no regard for food or health recommendations (Porrata 2008). In 2000, Cuban women had the highest coronary heart disease (CHD) mortality rate and Cuban men the third highest, when compared to nine other Latin American countries, the United States, and Canada. Cuban immigrants in the US, surrounded by a plethora of inexpensive fast food, experience higher prevalence of obesity and type 2 diabetes than residents of Cuba (Peña et al. 2012).

The push by the Cuban government for its citizens to consume more fruits and vegetables is an essential step in curbing Cubans' obesity and health challenges. Teaching its citizens the health costs associated with eating the traditional Cuban diet can encourage citizens to make their own educated dietary decisions. After the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Cubans experienced a great food shortage. Their caloric intake dropped 1,000 calories per day and they went without meat for months (Porrata 2008). Then, in 2000, the Cuban government implemented a vegetarian initiative that the Cuban people completely rejected, forcing the closure of the six state-run vegetarian restaurants (Porrata 2008). Changing the traditional Cuban diet will not be easy, but increased availability of fresh vegetables and dietary education can make a difference for those who remain in Cuba and those who move to the US.

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