

Foodie's Guide to Regional Gastronomy: Dominican Republic's Mofongo, Chimichurri and Pastelitos

Series Introduction (Move down if you're familiar with the thread or don't care)

In this series, we hope to highlight and showcase in as interesting a way as possible, the stories behind our favorite, mouth-watering local dishes. While we'll focus on greater New Bedford and the South Coast, we will occasionally "travel" to places like Plymouth, Providence or even Boston. I will attempt to keep it light-hearted, fun and easy to read. While I can't promise to keep you compelled and pull you along with prose – that would take a professional writer – I will promise to be liberal with the drool-inducing images of these dishes.

I grew up in a Sicilian household where everyone – man, woman, child – was participating in preparing meals. It was a "trick" to get everyone together, talking, laughing and of course, the occasional heated debate. Food was a huge part of our identity, where we came from, who we were. There was something special about the atmosphere that revolved around a meal that we prepared.



This is certainly not unique to an Italian or Sicilian household. Every ethnic group in the country has a proud culinary tradition that they grew up around. You can easily replace “Sicilian” with Irish, Vietnamese, Portuguese, Ethiopian, Greek or anything else. This is why food as a topic is always so popular. We humans love our food and that passion goes beyond the gustatory or taste – we crave the aromas, delight in the presentation, are fueled by the atmosphere, and relish – pardon the pun – discussion about our favorite dishes, restaurants or cuisines.

One thing that is often not discussed – is glossed over, or barely touched upon – is the history or background of these dishes. Now, to some, this conjures up the voice of the guy from the “dry eyes” commercial. The terms, for many, are synonymous with “boring,” “dull,” or “It’s time to go.” However, the background can be interesting, fun, or funny and it can be so without being facetious, dumbed-down or popular. I will make every attempt to maintain a fresh balance with those elements in this series.

As always, feedback is encouraged. Anecdotes are wanted. Discussion is paramount. **Please** join in!

There are many cultures that have contributed their cuisine to greater New Bedford. While the most known are Portuguese and French-Canadian, the various Latin American cuisines from the Hispanic world when combined is one of the greatest contributors in the region and the nation, for that matter.

While the language may be shared (though some native Spanish speakers may accuse other nations of not actually speaking Spanish!) the cuisines can have some astounding, stark differences. Having said that, nations near each other geographically can often have variations of one particular dish – often claiming to be the originators.



The Dominican Republic has a relatively large presence in greater New Bedford and has brought a number of mouth-watering dishes. The Caribbean island nation shares the island with Haiti and is east of Cuba and Jamaica. That will give you a sense of the influences on their cuisine which comes primarily from Spain, but also has strong influences from the indigenous Taino, the Congo in West Africa and Levantine Middle East.

While nothing is ever better than home cooking, there are restaurants in the region that either specialize or offer a few dishes: La Candela, Celia's, El Caribe and Panchi's here in New Bedford and the aptly named Dominican Restaurant and Latino in Fall River. I have eaten quite a bit at the first three places, never at the others. I've also eaten at restaurants around the country and been privileged enough to have eaten home-cooked Dominican food from co-workers while working throughout New Bedford.

Mofongo and Mofongo Relleno

I will state from the get-go that **Mofongo** is one of the greatest dishes ever created on this planet. While Mofongo is considered by the majority of the Spanish speaking world to be Puerto Rican, it is, in fact, a dish that has its roots in West Africa's Fufu, and when combined with Spanish influences became common throughout the Carribean.

So, what is the *manna*, this food dropped from heaven, this dish so good every bite is life-changing? Its base is mashed and fried plantains seasoned with garlic, salt and oil, and throughout the Carribean that is about the only thing they agree on. Plantains are native to Asia but made their way to West Africa before the Carribean where they are a staple to both.



Now, when it comes to things we foodies love, the word “juicy” is quintessential and pretty much describes everything that has ever been delicious. We need “juicy.” I will go into a cry-closet and not come out if something is dry. I will have temporary PTSD. The founding father Patrick Henry actually said “Give me juicy, or give me death.” and only through Chinese Whispers has his original historic statement been lost.

The plantains’ purpose is to absorb all the mouth-watering juiciness that comes from the meat and sauce that is poured over the top so we can enter foodie Nirvāṇa. An upside down bell is formed with the mashed plantains and then flipped onto a plate before being smothered with sauce and your choice of meat. The sauce is typically a chicken-based broth, garlic, olive oil, and the standard meat is chicken, shrimp or beef but can also be octopus, bacon, or chicharrón (pork cracklings).

In my opinion, the only thing better than that is the *mofongo relleno* or stuffed mofongo. Before flipping the shell you load it with sauce and filling, cap it off with more mashed plantain, flip it over and smother it with sauce and meat.

I have seen variations – mostly food stalls and food trucks – that leave the upside down bell in a plastic bowl and then they pour everything inside the “bell” and served.

Since we live in a melting pot of a community, I would love to see a fusion with Portuguese cuisine – a mofongo stuffed with shrimp Mozambique, pork Alentejana, or linguica, anyone?



Pastelitos and Pasteles en Hojas

Pastelitos or Savory Turnovers are common not only throughout the Latin world but all over the world. You'd be hard pressed to find a culture that didn't have some version, whether savory or sweet. Each culture has a different preference for the filling and even the name – pastelitos, pastelillo, pasteles, empanada, empanaditas, pastie, croquettes, dumpling, calzone, et al are used synonymously. Often the difference in a word is just the size or which preference a region or country has settled on.

Whatever you call them, planet earth and earthlings have a love affair with them. While they can be baked, they are

typically fried to get the dough to be crispy and flaky and then stuffed with a delectable sauce and diced, chopped or ground beef, chicken or shrimp. Some can even have some melty, gooey cheese. My first foray into the Dominican version was simple ground beef and spices cooked by someone's grandmother. If you have had one, you know that you really don't need anything more than perfectly, lightly seasoned fresh ingredients and a crust that was fried until it was golden crisp. Simple ingredients, culinary works of art.

I have heard that some blasphemers will dip them in ketchup. If you witness evil in this form, please call your local police department and report it.

Pasteles en hojas is the use of grated plantains, on occasion cassava or potato, seasoned, mashed into a paste, shaped and stuffed with meat. They are then wrapped with a banana leaf and boiled. Sound familiar? Yes, it is akin to the famous Mexican *tamale*.

What makes these varieties of *pasteles* so popular beyond their tastiness are their utility: you can grab one on the go. Or if you are so predisposed, grab 2,3 or 8 on the go.



Chimichurri Dominicano or Chimi Hamburguesa

Like the pasteles, the Chimichurri Dominicano or Chimi Burger, is extremely popular among street vendors, trucks and stalls, perhaps even more so. There are even Chimi Trucks specializing in just this one iconic dish.

This sandwich is symbolic of much of Dominican cuisine – it takes the best of a few cultures and makes it their own. You have one part hamburger, one part Argentinian chimichurri, and one part Puerto Rico's *pan de agua* bread. The meat is ground pork or beef, *chimichurri* is chopped garlic, fresh parsley and oregano, olive oil, vinegar, and a pinch or two of red pepper flakes, and the bread is a sort of baguette which is crispy on the outside and soft inside.

Like red sauce with Italians, each cook makes their own special recipe and hungry foodies all swear their favorite variation is best of all. As you well know, there is an astounding variety in Italian sauce with just tomatoes, salt, pepper and garlic which everyone claims is distinctly

different and superior to everyone else's. So you can imagine the variety and claims to superiority that the Chimi Burger comes with. In fact, just look at how zealous people can get in America when you ask them who makes the best burgers. A few ingredients prepared a particular way to differentiate it.

Honorable Mentions

Chicharrón de pollo (or puerca) Dominicano or chunks of fried chicken which can be eaten alone or used as a filling or topping are incredibly popular. A dish that sounds strange is *Spaghetti a la Dominicana* – spaghetti cooked with...milk, garlic, onions, peppers, olives and oregano covered in a salami based tomato sauce. I've never had it, so can't vouch for it.



Of course, you'd have to live under a rock to have never heard of or tried *tostones* which are sliced plantains fried, removed from the oil, slightly flattened and then fried again. Salt and/or lightly season, serve still warm and you have a delicious snack.

Sopa de mondongo is a diced tripe (cow stomach) slow-cooked

soup with vegetables, celery, tomatoes, cabbage, carrots, onions, bell peppers, garlic and cilantro.

When it comes to desserts, the Dominican Republic makes a rice pudding (Arroz Con Leche) and Dulce de leche (with pineapple jam) that rivals anyone's, but probably most popular and known the world over is *Arepa* a dense cornmeal and coconut cake. It is considered a "poor man's" dish because of the common, few and simple ingredients (water, milk, sugar, egg, butter, cinnamon) and it is so easily made that kids often make it. Think of a moist cornbread with coconut and a hint of cinnamon added.

This was not meant to be an exhaustive list, so if I didn't include something it is because I am unfamiliar with it.

Do you have a favorite among these Dominican dishes? Or is your favorite not one that is mentioned? Do you make any of these dishes or know someone that does? Have a recipe? Let us know in the comments!