

Foodie's Guide to Regional Gastronomy: Latin America's "Empanada"

Glorious, glorious, empanadas – filled with meat, vegetables, even fruit and wrapped up in a pastry dough.

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.



Argentinian version of the empanada with the national “sauce,” green chimichurri- generally made of parsley, oregano, vinegar, garlic and pinch of red pepper flakes. Photo: Rick Wood.

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.

Be honest. When you saw the word “Empanada” your salivary glands were activated and you saw an image of your grandmother’s or mom’s empanadas. You may have even picked up a faint aroma. With this sensory activation comes memories – sitting around the table, walking about the house, laughing, faces of friends and family come and gone, etc.



*Classic, traditional empanada that you will find locally.
Photo: “The Photographer.”*

In my case, the word conjures memories of an old company on

the waterfront I used to work at. I've had many an empanada – in different parts of the world, too – but none compared to a Dominican lady that brought them in on special occasions. I swore there was some kind of voodoo afoot. Some magic powder must have been put inside, because these were special.

Now, I don't know if she wanted to keep the family recipe secret, or she was being dishonest, but no matter how much I pried she would say that it was just dough, meat and a few everyday spices. Thing is that even though I followed her recipe to a "T," it never came out the same. Heck, it never even came out **close**. You can't just know the ingredients, but have to have been cooking it for years and it has to come from the *corazon*.

The world over has something similar or close: Vietnam has the *Bánh gỏi*, Turkey has the *Börek*, Eastern Europeans the Knish, Jamaica the patty, India makes the *Kajjikaya*, England has a pasty, and of course, Italy has the Calzone. I'm going to limit this article the Latin American kind – there are enough variations among the nations! Though we will stray a bit, it will be into nations that either speak Spanish or are influenced somehow by the culture.

For those who don't know * gasp * an empanada is a stuffed bread or pastry that can be baked, but is usually fried. The word comes from the Spanish "*empanar*" which means to wrap in bread – literally means to "embread" something. In this case, the bread is dough to make a pastry crust and what is "embreaded" is a filling that varies. While many nations have their own favorite filling, you will see most of them everywhere. Typically savory, the fillings are generally a meat, but you will also come across seafood, just vegetables, eggs or even the dessert variation of fruit. In parts of Mexico they put *huitlacoche* or corn smut inside which is a – believe it or not – a fungus that grows on corn.



A Peruvian version with chicken thigh, boiled egg, onion, garlic, green olive and spices, served with a slice of lime. Argentines love their beef, but you'll also find raisins, ham or spinach. Colombians enjoy potatoes and meat, Spain prefers vegetables that grow in the Mediterranean. In Chile you'll see lots of sauteed onions, olives and eggs. In Portugal you can find sardines, tuna, pork, cod and duh – chouriço, accompanied with perhaps garlic, tomato and onion in a sauce.

The first mention in history comes from a Catalan (Spain) history book appropriately called "*Libre del Coch*" written in 1520 by a one Robert de Nola. In de Nola's book he mentions empanadas crammed with seafood and includes recipes from Catalan, of course, but also France, Italy, and the Middle East. Since then, the empanada went from Spain and Portugal, was brought to the Philippines and Latin America by Spaniards and then eventually to North America by immigrants. The empanada has spread across cultures, through time to modern day – so biting into one is like biting into history.

So where are the best spots on the SouthCoast to get empanadas? Let us know so we can head out and try them!