

A COMPLIMENTARY TASTE

La Buena Vida

The Joy of Puerto Rican Finger Foods

Recipes, stories and beer pairings



Crisp edges. Warm memories. The good life.

Gregor Rafael Fisher

FREE SAMPLE EDITION

A taste of the good life

Put the utensils down. Pick up something crisp, warm and delicious. These pages bring you into a Puerto Rican kitchen through family memories, island flavors and food made to share.

This sample includes three complete recipes, with their photographs, cooking notes and beer pairings. Start with the tostones, plan ahead for the salt cod, and finish with guava and cheese.

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Beer is optional. Each pairing can be replaced with a nonalcoholic beer of the same general style. Alcohol is intended only for adults of legal drinking age.

Selected from *La Buena Vida: The Joy of Puerto Rican Finger Foods*.
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Introduction: Puerto Rico in the Pan

Eating with Our Hands

When I was a teenager, I visited my mother in Puerto Rico after she had returned to live on the island. At the time, I remember being embarrassed that she sometimes ate with her hands. I admonished her: “*Why don’t you use a knife and fork, Mom?*” I had absorbed the idea that eating with silverware was proper and eating with your hands was somehow not.

My mother was no pushover. She told me that knives and forks were, historically speaking, relatively modern inventions. Human beings had been eating with their hands for far longer than they had been eating with utensils. Then she asked me to consider what was really more natural: touching food with your fingers or sticking a cold piece of metal into your mouth with every bite.

I thought about it. I thought about history, colonialism and the peculiar authority we give to the customs of those who conquer us. A knife and fork were not simply tools; somewhere along the way they had become evidence of refinement. Eating with one’s hands had been assigned the opposite meaning, as though an older and more intimate relationship with food were something to outgrow. My mother had recognized the absurdity of that distinction long before I did.

She made a great deal of sense, even if I mostly still use silverware. But Puerto Rican finger food asks us to put the utensils down. An alcapurria is meant to be held. So is a bacalaíto, a pastelillo, a pincho or a sorullito still warm from the oil. You pick it up, feel its warmth through the paper, pass another to the person beside you and reach for a cold beer. Eating with your hands collapses the distance between you and the food—and often between you and the people with whom you share it.



My wife, also known as The Good Queen

La Buena Vida

The title of this book comes from my cousin Rafael—Rafelito, as we called him.

My mother loved Rafelito dearly. He was tall, thin and somewhat lanky, with pale blue eyes and a face that reminded me of a young Jerry Lewis. His appearance may have suggested any number of places, but his heart was fiercely Puerto Rican. He had little affection for the United States and chose to remain on the island even after his immediate family moved to the mainland. Puerto Rico was not simply where he lived. It was where Rafael belonged.

I was visiting my mother in Puerto Rico and lying in a hammock beneath a mango tree outside her casita. I had not seen Rafelito in years. As he came up the incline toward the little house and saw me stretched out in the shade, he smiled with the recognition of someone who understood the scene immediately.



Yours truly, hammocked out!

“¡La buena vida!” he called out.

The good life.

He was teasing me, but he was also right. There I was beneath a mango tree in Puerto Rico, with nowhere I needed to be and my mother waiting inside. Rafelito and I went into the casita and talked with her. Later, he, a friend of his, and my mother and I traveled around the island on an adventure, seeking out the best little eating places the island had to offer—the roadside kiosks, chinchorros and cuchifrito stands where the food comes out hot, the beer comes cold—and nobody needs a knife and fork.

At that time, Rafelito had recently been diagnosed with cancer. He died not long afterward. That journey around Puerto Rico remains one of my last wonderful memories of him. I remember the places we stopped and the food we ate, but most of all I remember the pleasure of being together. Whatever difficulties may have been waiting beyond that day, for those hours we had the road, the island, one another and the expectation that something delicious was just ahead.

That is la buena vida as I understand it. It is not a life without hardship, nor is it necessarily a life of wealth or ease. It is the life we create in the midst of hardship: food passed from one hand to another, a cold beer, an

afternoon beneath a mango tree, a cousin's knowing smile. Puerto Ricans have made an art of creating such moments—not because the island has been spared suffering, far from it. Because joy, intimate and personal, among loved ones, can itself be a form of resilience in a sometimes difficult world.

This book is about the food that accompanies those moments. It is also about the people, places and histories that give the food its meaning. Every alcapurria, bacalaíto, pastelillo and pincho belongs to a larger story. Rafelito belongs to mine.



Rafael Chabrán

A Note on Names and Origins

Food history rarely provides a clean birth certificate. Household cooks did not always write recipes, and the people who cultivated, cooked and sold everyday food were often excluded from official records. For that reason, this book distinguishes between documented history, reasonable interpretation and tradition.

The words pastelillo and empanadilla vary across Puerto Rico. A kiosk may use one name where another family uses the other. Cuchifritos (pronounced: coo-chee-free-tose) properly refers to fried foods, although the word may also be used informally for a place selling them. Chinchorro usually describes the modest bar, food stop or roadside gathering place itself. The variation is part of the culture, not an error to be corrected.

Cooking Safely with Hot Oil

- Use a heavy, deep pot and a clip-on thermometer. Keep oil well below the rim.
- Dry ingredients thoroughly. Water makes hot oil spit and surge.
- Lower food away from you and never crowd the pot.
- Keep children, pets, loose sleeves and wet utensils away from the stove.
- If oil smokes, turn off the heat. Never use water on a grease fire; cover the pot with a metal lid and use an appropriate extinguisher if necessary.
- Cool oil completely before straining or discarding it. Never pour oil down a drain.

Bacalaíto

Bacalaíto is probably the most popular snack food on the island. It is definitely another of my favorites.



Crisp salt-cod fritters

Cod is a cold-water fish, nowhere near native to Puerto Rican seas. It reached the island as bacalao through Atlantic commerce: salted, durable and inexpensive enough to feed laboring people. Colonial trade turned northern fish into a Caribbean staple.

Puerto Rican cooks changed necessity into appetite. Shredded cod, garlic, oregano and batter became a broad, crisp fritter whose best edges are almost translucent. The bacalaíto is both imported history and local invention. Finally, it is important to measure the ingredients precisely and get the consistency of the batter just right. The batter should not have structure and should of an almost watery consistency. If you make a mistake in either of these areas, your bacalaíto will come out too thick and without the crispy crunch that make bacalaíto irresistible.

The Pairing

Makes	Time	Drink with
12 large or 20 small fritters	45 minutes, plus soaking	Pilsner or Kölsch

Why it works: A dry finish and firm carbonation answer the salt cod, garlic and lace-like fried edges.

Recipe

Ingredients

- 8 ounces boneless salted cod
- 1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 2 garlic cloves, finely grated
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped culantro or cilantro
- 1 1/2 to 1 3/4 cups water
- Neutral frying oil, as needed

Method

1. Rinse the cod. Soak in cold water in the refrigerator for 8 to 12 hours, changing the water two or three times. Drain, taste a small cooked flake for saltiness, then simmer the cod in fresh water for 10 minutes. Drain, cool and shred finely.
2. Whisk flour, baking powder, pepper and oregano. Add garlic, herbs, cod and 1 1/2 cups water. Whisk to a thin pancake-like batter, adding more water as necessary. Rest 10 minutes.
3. Heat 1/2 inch oil in a wide skillet to 365°F. Pour 1/4 cup batter into the oil and spread gently into a thin round. Fry until crisp and golden, 2 to 3 minutes per side. Drain on a rack. Serve immediately.

Cook's Notes

- Salt cod varies greatly. Soak and taste before adding any additional salt.
- For extra-crisp edges, keep the batter watery thin and the oil hot.
- Using club soda in place of water in the recipe will also help create a thin lacy and crisp bacalaíto. Try it!

Tostones with Mojo de Ajo

Tostones may be the best known pounded and fried plantain dish. They are the original plantain chip.



Twice-fried green plantains with garlic sauce

The plantain came to the Caribbean from the Old World through trade routes inseparable from colonization and slavery. It became essential because it grew abundantly, filled the stomach and could be cooked at every stage of ripeness.

Tostones reveal the intelligence of technique: fry a hard green slice once to soften it, flatten it, then fry it again to create crisp edges and a tender center. What looks simple carries generations of practiced knowledge.

The Pairing

Makes	Time	Drink with
24 tostones	40 minutes	Pilsner or light lager

Why it works: The beer's dryness cuts through frying oil and garlic while leaving the plantain flavor intact.

Recipe

Ingredients

- 3 green plantains
- Neutral frying oil, as needed
- Kosher salt
- 1/3 cup olive oil
- 4 garlic cloves, finely grated
- 2 tablespoons lime juice
- 2 tablespoons water
- Pinch of salt

Method

1. Combine olive oil, garlic, lime juice, water and a pinch of salt. Let stand while preparing the plantains.
2. Peel plantains and cut into 1-inch rounds. Fry at 325°F until pale gold and tender, about 3 minutes. Drain briefly.
3. Flatten each round to about 1/3 inch with a tostonera or the bottom of a sturdy cup. Raise oil to 375°F and fry again until crisp and golden, 1 to 2 minutes. Salt immediately.
4. Serve with mojo on the side.

Cook's Notes

- Adding wet plantains to hot oil causes dangerous splattering; dry them thoroughly.
- Do not pour the watery mojo directly into hot oil.

Guava and Cheese Pastelillos



Sweet savory turnovers

Guava and cheese is one of the Caribbean’s great arguments for refusing to choose between dessert and snack. The tropical fruit’s intense sweetness needs the salt and tang of cheese; the crisp shell gives both somewhere to meet.

This is also diaspora food in the best sense: easy to assemble from supermarket ingredients, immediately recognizable to Puerto Ricans and welcoming to anyone encountering the combination for the first time. As a personal piece of advice, don’t try and make the dough casing yourself unless you are an expert baker. The casing discs you get at the market really fry up perfectly. I highly recommend you go this route and avoid the unnecessary extra work, unless you have a very good reason not to.

The Pairing

Makes	Time	Drink with
12 pastelillos	35 minutes	Belgian dubbel, fruit sour or nonalcoholic wheat beer

Why it works: Fruit and gentle tartness meet guava; malt and spice handle the salty cream cheese.

Recipe

Ingredients

- 12 empanada discs for frying, thawed
- 6 ounces guava paste, cut into 12 batons
- 6 ounces cream cheese, cut into 12 batons
- Neutral frying oil, as needed
- Powdered sugar, optional

Method

1. Place one guava baton and one cream-cheese baton just off center on each disc. Moisten the rim, fold and crimp securely.
2. Fry at 350°F until blistered and golden, about 2 minutes per side. Drain and cool several minutes; the filling will be extremely hot. Dust lightly with powdered sugar if desired.

Cook's Notes

- Do not overfill; melted guava can leak and burn.
- Allow the pastelillos to rest before the first bite.

Keep the good life going

You have tasted the crisp, the garlicky and the sweet. The full cookbook takes you farther down the kiosk road, through Puerto Rican food, family stories and the pleasure of eating together.

Waiting in the full cookbook

More island favorites: Alcapurrias de Carne, Pastelillos de Carne, Empanadillas de Jueyes, Rellenos de Papa and Sorullitos de Maíz con Queso.

From plantain to grill: Piononos, Arañitas, Yuca Frita, Mini Mofongo Bites, Pinchos de Pollo, Carne Frita and Arepas de Coco.

The last stop: Guavate and Lechón de Guavate for the Home Oven.

Make it your own: Foundations and sauces, beer pairings, a shopping list, sources and an index.

Bring La Buena Vida to your table.

Get the complete cookbook from this book's [Leanpub page](#).

¡La buena vida!