

# Llego La Navidad: Breaking down the traditional Puerto Rican Christmas feast, one dish at a time

The holiday season is here, which means parties, giftgiving, acts of kindness, and yummy food. It's the time of year to not only give and receive, but also to celebrate the different ways to celebrate, so that we can relate to one another. And what better way to do that than to see what's cooking for the holidays across cultures?

Nora Dooley's famous children's book *Everybody Cooks Rice* comes to mind, where the main character gets to sample dinner at every house in her neighborhood while searching for her brother to bring him home for their own dinner. Not only did she get her fill of delicious food, but she had a world of possibilities opened up to her, all while realizing that despite their differences, each dinner had one common denominator: rice.

In Puerto Rican culture, the traditional Christmas feast (held on December 24 or *Noche Buena*) definitely has rice as an absolute must. Every nook and cranny of your place fills up with smells and warmth to make your mouth water and cheeks flush with anticipation. And now, *a la* Nora Dooley, I'm going to break down each dish that makes up this coveted feast. A comer!

## Main Course

### *Pernil y Arroz con Gandules*

It wouldn't be a Puerto Rican Christmas without *Pernil* (roasted pork shoulder) and *Arroz con Gandules* (rice and pigeon peas). The pork is seasoned, then slow-roasted in the oven for most of the day (just like the turkey on Thanksgiving Day), and by the time it is out of the oven, the tender meat and juicy pork skin slide right off the bone. The rice is yellow from a combo of *sazón* and tomato paste, getting its distinct flavor from *sofrito*, the first ingredient that goes into the pot, along with *recao*, oregano, and bay leaves.

## Side Dish #1

### *Pasteles*

The best way to describe the magic of *Pasteles*: simply delicious. You start with a plantain-based masa and fill it with all the good things - cubes of meat (mainly pork), chickpeas, and large green olives with a cherry tomato piece in the center. Although a delight to eat, they are time-consuming to make, taking hours to mash up the masa, mix in the fixings, and wrap them up in banana leaves. *Pasteles* are typically made in large quantities and frozen for consumption for up to several months, making them easy to get from family or close friends when you are too tired to make them yourself.

## Side Dish #2

### *Morcilla*

In between bites of your *Arroz con Gandules*, *Pernil*, and *Pasteles*, fill your fork with some well-seasoned *Morcilla*. This blood sausage can also be eaten on its own as an appetizer, and despite its name, it is well-cooked and consists mostly of rice, onions, and seasoning mashed together. The first bite is a mix of firm crunchiness from the outside casing and warm, fragrant softness from the rice and spices, with a little spicy kick at the end.

## **Drink**

### ***Coquito***

At some point, you will need to wash down all the deliciousness described above. The go-to Boricua drink is *Coquito*, a coconut eggnog rum that will keep you smacking your lips long after the first sip. *Coquito* is celebrated in Puerto Rican culture for its toasty, sweet taste and creamy consistency that will make you reach for seconds in no time. Along with coconut milk and rum, the drink is made with condensed milk, vanilla extract, and cinnamon sticks - a recipe for extra holiday cheer. Just make sure you drink it on a full stomach!

## **Desserts**

### ***Arroz con Dulce / Turrón***

And last but certainly not least is dessert, a quintessential classic - *Arroz con dulce*. But this dish is more than just sweetened rice with cinnamon sprinkled on top - it's the island itself embedded in each grain of rice soaked in coconut milk and vanilla extract. While you can definitely warm it up, the dessert is typically eaten cold, just like rice pudding.

If *Arroz con Dulce* is just too rich and creamy to pair with the *Coquito*, there is always *Turrón*, another traditional Christmas dessert that gives peanut brittle a run for its money. *Turrón* is a firm, toasted almond nougat candy made from egg yolk, sugar, and honey that will keep you crunching up a storm all the way to the New Year.