

# PUERTO RICO

## Migration to the United States

- Puerto Rico (RP) has been a part of the United States since 1898 following the Spanish-American War; Puerto Ricans were given U.S. citizenship in 1917 when the island officially became a territory of the US. Even though there is a Resident Commissioner representing the island in Congress, PR has no vote in Congress; Puerto Ricans residing in Puerto Rico cannot vote in the US presidential elections.
- Since PR is a part of the U.S., Puerto Ricans can legally migrate to all 50 states.
- In 1910, immigration to U.S. from PR was almost non-existent, due to the severe economic depression and lack of money to come over to the U.S. by boat.
- After WWII, migration to the U.S. increased to 13,000 in 1945 and a million by the mid-1960s. This boom in migration was caused partly by the U.S. factory recruiters that came to Puerto Rico to offer severely needed jobs among Puerto Ricans and the fact that air travel to the U.S. became more affordable.
- Puerto Ricans mainly migrated to Northeast Manhattan (Spanish Harlem today) as well as Chicago, Philadelphia, and the mill towns of New England.
- Many families move back and forth between PR and the U.S.



## Health Concerns of Puerto Rico

- Many believe overweight is healthy.
- Major cause of death is heart and cardiovascular disease.
- Other health problems, in descending order of occurrence: cancer, diabetes, cerebrovascular disease, pneumonia and influenza; diabetes (Puerto Ricans are 2 to 3 times more likely to develop Type 2 than white US population).
- Life expectancy for females born in 2006 is 85.5 years; for males it is 74.5 years

## Food Management Practices

- Mothers and elders are adored and revered in the Puerto Rican culture and therefore:
- Mothers usually make the decisions to purchase and prepare foods.
- Mothers will serve the food.
- As is the U.S. family sit down meals is part of the culture that is given up due to the constraints work life. On special occasions however, the entire family will sit down and eat together

## Foods

- Puerto Rican cooking is referred to as *cocina criolla*.
- Core Foods: rice and beans
- Sub-core Foods: plantains, seafood, pork, red meat



- Eat a lot of fried food (called “*frituras*”) including “*bacalaitos*” (fried mixture of codfish and flour), *empanadillas*, and “*sorullitos*” (fried cornmeal, sometimes with cheese).
- Food is used to honor friends and family members; as an escape from everyday pressures; and to prevent and treat illnesses.
- *Viandas* (starchy vegetables) include plantains, green bananas, yucca, *taniers* (*yautía*), white and yellow sweet potatoes (*batata*), and chayote squash.
- Lettuce salads with tomato are popular.
- Diet is generally high in calories, complex carbohydrates, fats, and sodium.
- A Puerto Rican typical meal will have chicken and/or beef, with rice and beans. Other dishes include: stew (like *sancocho*) or soups, and a variety of dishes made from plantain, like the twice-fried cake called *tostones*, which is also made from mashed breadfruit (*panapén*), and the *mofongo*, which is made from mashing fried plantains, garlic, oil and deep fried pork skin (*chicharrón*).
- Goya products are popular.
- Pigeon peas with rice, *Arroz Con Gandules*, (photo) is a typical dish.
- Main seasonings are routinely used in this style of cooking.
  - *Sofrito*: made from onions, garlic, sweet peppers, coriander, cilantro and oregano; when bought in supermarket the sodium content is higher. (photo)
  - *Adobo*: A dry seasoning made from crushed peppercorns, oregano, garlic, salt, oil and onion, and either lime juice or vinegar.
  - *Sazon* is a dry seasoning mostly used to add color to the food; it comes with and without annatto, a natural color spice. (photo)
- Many fruits are eaten in the Puerto Rican diet and include papaya, mango, guava and coconut. Older Puerto Ricans in the States eat a lot of bananas and oranges, since the other fruits are not readily available.
- A typical dessert is called *arroz con coco*, and is made with rice and coconut. Many desserts include coconut. *Flan* is a common dessert; other desserts include solid jellies like *pasta de guayaba* (guaba jelly), sometimes with white cheese.
- Many Puerto Ricans in the U.S. purchase Puerto Rican coffee and consume it with sugar.
- *Café con Leche* is a favorite. It is a strong espresso-like coffee drink with scalded milk. It may be made with Nescafe Instant Coffee and whole milk.
- Americanized PR teens (and adults) consume pizza, hot dogs, canned spaghetti, cold cereal and canned soups; fast food restaurants are popular and widely spread throughout the island and in U.S. neighborhoods.
- Some families maintain their cultural foods while others do not.



### Specific Food Practices

- Breastfeeding is practiced routinely in this culture as the belief is that it will make the baby healthier and promote a close bond between mother and child.

- Women usually make decisions on foods purchased and served.
- Traditional meals are served when the entire family is together.
- Food taboos followed by some Puerto Ricans usually from the countryside (Check with individual clients if they follow any of these practices.)
  - Menstruation – avoid spices, cold beverages, acid-citric fruits and substances, chocolate and coffee.
  - Pregnancy – avoid hot food, sauces, condiments, chocolate products, coffee, beans, pork, fritters, oily foods, and citric products.
  - Lactation – avoid beans, cabbages, lettuce, seeds, nuts, port, chocolate, coffee, and hot food items at all at times.
  - Infancy – avoid beans, too much rice, and uncooked vegetables
- Lifecycle Food Practices
  - Infancy – mothers tend to feed cow's milk, canned milk, or evaporated milk earlier than recommended. A baby, who is a little fat, gordito, is seen as healthy.
  - Pregnancy and lactation – iron supplements may be avoided during this time because they are considered “hot foods.”
  - Elderly – fresh squeezed juices and punches are used as a nutrition support in immune-suppressed or ill elders. Brandy may be added to black coffee for individuals who have low blood pressure and are weak.
  - Hot Illnesses:
    - Include: GI upset and diseases; pregnancy, menopause, rashes, acne, headaches, heart disease; urological illnesses
    - Treated with: cocoa products, alcoholic beverages, caffeine products, hot cereals from wheat and corn, salt, spices and condiments, beans, nuts and seeds.
  - Cold Illnesses:
    - Include: Osteomuscular disease, menstruation, respiratory illnesses.
    - Treated with: rice, milk, sugar, root vegetables, avocado, fruits, vegetables, white meat, honey, onions.

### Major Celebrations

- Families gather for holidays, birthdays, quinceañeras, baptisms and weddings.
- Puerto Rico hosts the typical holidays that are celebrated in America.
  - **Christmas** - Foods include: pasteles (savory meat mixture surrounded by mashed root crops, like plantains and yucca, wrapped in plantain leaves, and boiled), lechon asado (spit-roasted pig), rice with pigeon peas, coquito (rum and coconut milk), and pitorro (an illegal moonshine rum).
  - **Thanksgiving** - Puerto Ricans season the turkey with adobo and may stuff the turkey with Spanish style meat filling. Typical side dishes may include the rice with pigeon peas, and sometimes pasteles.
  - Other important celebrations include:
    - **Three Kings Day** (The Epiphany) is celebrated on January 6th, twelve days after Christmas. It is often viewed as the last day of the Christmas season (the end of

the 12 days of Christmas). On the feast of the Epiphany, the Three Kings visited the newly born Christ Child with gifts. This tradition is repeated and reflected in present day with the belief that on this eve the Three Kings will visit every good child to deliver gifts. On La Víspera de Reyes (the Eve of Three Kings Day) Puerto Rican children cut grass to put in a shoe box under their bed for the camels to eat. Their "wish list" is placed on top of the grass. This is a gift of food for the Kings' horses while they rest in between deliveries. If a child is good for the past year, s/he will receive candies, sweets or toys. If the child had misbehaved or was naughty, s/he would find a lump of dirt or charcoal in his box. Families in the U.S. are likely to celebrate this holiday in church groups or large family gatherings. The Hispanic tradition includes eating of Rosca de Reyes, a sweet bread in the shape of a crown. Some families bake a plastic baby Jesus inside and the person who gets that piece is required to give a party on Candlemas Day (February 2nd – 40 days after Christmas).

- **Patron Saint Celebrations** “Fiestas Patronales” The festivities are organized by dates according to the Catholic calendar of saints. Each town has its own patron saint. For a week or ten days around that saint’s day, the entire town and island celebrates. They often begin with a religious procession, since they originated as a Catholic tradition. The processions are brightly costumed reenactments of biblical stories. The festivals include African and Taino elements as well. There are stands with regional foods and live music. In the U.S. these days are celebrated with parties.
- **Quinceañera** is a festival occasion of a young girl when she turns 15; similar to that of the sweet sixteen in America. It can be lavishly or simply celebrated. It is the journey of girl ascending into maturity from childhood. It is celebrated with food, music, and dance.

### Communication Style

- Body language, hand and facial gestures are a big part of communication.
- A greeting can be done through a handshake and by a kiss on the cheek. Greeting with a kiss is done between two women or between a man and a woman, but never man-to-man.
- Puerto Ricans are considered very expressive to strangers and have a warm sense of hospitality.
- Family respect is critical; mothers and elders are adored and duty to the family, including the extended family, is essential.
- Machismo is a critical element of the society.
- Elders may not make eye contact, but younger Puerto Ricans and those born in US prefer eye contact.

This paper was reviewed by Melissa Fuster, Research Associate, Boston Health Commission