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APRIL 2021

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What to Eat to Ease Asthma

Chicken & Broccoli with Herb Butter Sauce, PAGE 49



IN PUERTO RICO
THIS INNOVATIVE
COLLECTIVE IS
CELEBRATING THE
ISLAND'S CULINARY
HERITAGE WHILE
SUPPORTING A
COMMUNITY OF
FARMERS GROWING
FOOD THAT IS
BETTER FOR BOTH
THE PEOPLE AND
THE LAND.

BY VON DIAZ

RECIPES BY
VERÓNICA QUILES
MALDONADO

LOCATION
PHOTOGRAPHY
BY MARA CORSINO

RECIPE PHOTOGRAPHY
BY JENNY HUANG



ENSALADA DE
LA HUERTA CON
VINAGRETA DE
GUAYABA
PAGE 79

CULTIVATING RESILIENCE

MORNINGS BEGIN QUIETLY ON A SMALL COMMUNAL FARM CALLED OTRACOSA IN CAGUAS, PUERTO RICO.



Tara Rodríguez Besosa started the farm OtraCosa to provide for the members of their queer chosen family.

Steep mountains delay the sunrise, providing an extra hour of peace before the day begins. There's coffee and conversation, then work: tending farm animals, planting, building and repairing structures, foraging and harvesting. Fresh herbs, such as culantro, and field peas, such as gandules, are collected for the communal kitchen, where resident chef Verónica Quiles Maldonado works wonders. The effort required to support themselves from the land is substantial—they live off the grid, using solar power and collecting rainwater—but the farm residents remain deeply connected to the broader needs of their island home.

That's why many of the residents volunteer for the neighboring nonprofit El Departamento de la Comida (or El Depa, as it's commonly known). Tara Rodríguez Besosa—one of El Depa's founding members and a queer architect and activist—envisions a Puerto Rico where crops that reflect the richness of the island's culture are grown by and for its people. Food sovereignty—the right of a community to have access to healthy, culturally appropriate food grown in a sustainable way—is central to the work of the collective. "It's about making the necessary connections between our health, the health of our ecosystem, the autonomy of our communities, and the right to healthy food that is not dependent on outside sources," says Rodríguez Besosa, who uses they/them pronouns.

Rodríguez Besosa's forward-thinking work began in 2010 when they co-founded El Depa as a CSA collective that connected local farmers to those wishing to support them.

Slowly, it evolved into a restaurant and local produce market, and, in 2019, into a nonprofit that supports local farmers with resources and education.

Calls for food sovereignty in Puerto Rico have become more urgent in recent years. In 2017, the island was battered by Hurricane Maria, which killed thousands of people, caused billions of dollars in damage and destroyed 80% of the crops grown on the island. Storms now appear to be worsening as a result of climate change, and an unprecedented "swarm" of nearly 10,000 earthquakes shook the island in 2020—toppling homes and crippling the already-delicate power grid. These environmental factors are further complicated by colonialism and U.S. government policies. An estimated 85% of food in Puerto Rico is imported, due in part to the 1920 Jones Act, which limits the island's trade capacity and drives up food prices. In 1947, Operation Bootstrap—a strategy by then-governor Luis Muñoz Marín to industrialize the island—led to an abrupt shift toward monoculture that to this day prioritizes growing profitable exports like sugar, corn, bananas and coffee over foods that could feed the island. In all, these compounding factors create the perfect storm that has led to an unsustainable food system.

Today, a small team of volunteers and staff at El Depa are working to weather that storm. They distribute heirloom seeds free of charge, loan out farm equipment, share farming skills and hold workshops. Their vision is to support a resilient, decentralized network of small-scale farms that can supply the island's residents with an array of nutritious, sustainable foods, even in the most challenging times. To Rodríguez Besosa, the future looks like "many crops, many colors and nutrients, from different small-scale projects, grown from seeds given to us with stories from our ancestors."

Seed saving and distribution is critical to this vision. "There is no food sovereignty without seed sovereignty," says Rodríguez Besosa. "After Hurricane Maria, when many farmers lost most if not all of their crops and trees, seeds became essential for rebuilding our food system. They also carry knowledge: as seeds are being shared, planted and saved, so is our culture of these crops."

Inspired by their experiences recovering from Hurricane Maria—and more recently coping with COVID-19—members of El Depa are developing a production kitchen where small-scale farmers can make sauces, pickles and other shelf-stable staples from the crops they grow. They hope to create opportunities for farmers to extend the shelf life of their produce while simultaneously creating healthful products that will withstand the island's storms.

"No project is too small. But some are too big," says Rodríguez Besosa, explaining that this is one of the collective's core values. "We are not trying to feed a whole island. We're trying to support the island to feed itself."

VON DIAZ is a writer, documentary producer and author of *Coconuts & Collards: Recipes and Stories from Puerto Rico to the Deep South*. Born in Puerto Rico and raised in Atlanta, she focuses on food, culture and identity in her work. She teaches Food Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill and her forthcoming book explores the foodways of islands around the globe.

RAÍCES
ISLEÑAS CON
PESTO DE
CILANTRILLO
Y AGUACATE
PAGE 79

SOPA DE
CALABAZA
ROSTIZADA
PAGE 80

H
ES
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Chicken
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PUERTO RICO GROWN

Harvested and foraged ingredients are the building blocks of meals in the OtraCosa kitchen.

1. Aji dulce (Capsicum chinense) These small peppers resemble habaneros but are sweet, not hot. They grow well in Puerto Rico's climate and are used in many dishes.

2. Amaranth (celosia) is a leafy plant that is cultivated for both its leaves and seeds. You can use the leaves as you would spinach, while the protein-packed seeds are often sold dried and can be cooked and prepared as a grain.

3. Caribbean pumpkin (calabaza taína dorada) This squash variety grows well in tropical climates. It has a sweet taste similar to butternut squash and is often used in soups and stews.

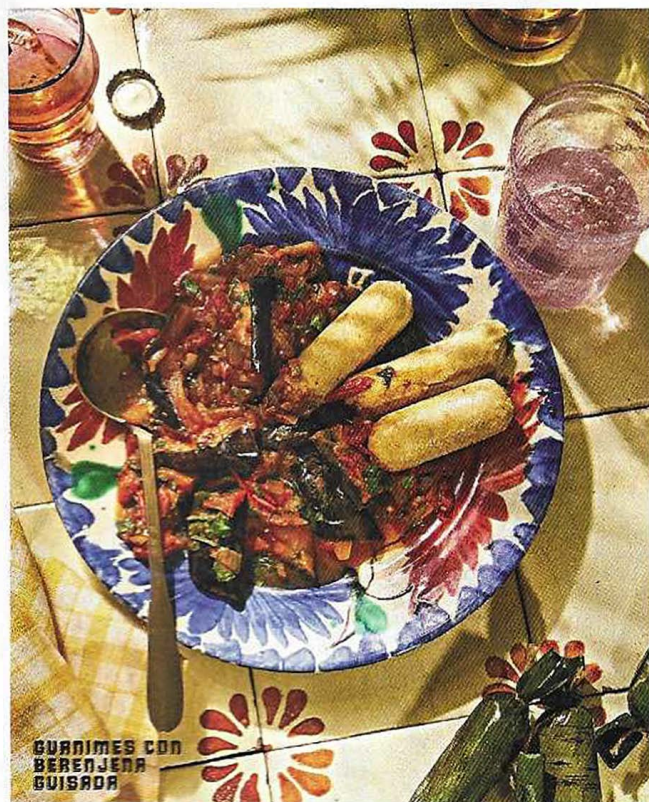
4. Culantro (recao) is a leafy green herb with an intense, concentrated flavor similar to cilantro. It is a key ingredient in sofrito, a blend of aromatics that forms the base of many dishes in Puerto Rico.

5. Fresh pigeon peas (gandules verdes) are a staple in Puerto Rico, where they are often cooked with rice or stewed. The small, round legume is similar in size to an English pea.

6. Papaya This large tropical fruit can be eaten in both its unripe and ripe state. Unripe papaya, called green papaya, has a mild flavor and a denser flesh that can be sliced or shredded.

7. Malanga & yautía roots are starchy root vegetables similar to potatoes but with an even starchier texture and a nutty taste. They can be roasted, boiled, fried or steamed. Both must be cooked before eating.





GUANIMES CON BERENJENA GUISADA



Chef Verónica Quiles Maldonado relies almost entirely on ingredients grown and foraged on the island. Even the salt used is local—it comes from the Cabo Rojo salt flats in southwest Puerto Rico.

GUANIMES CON BERENJENA GUISADA
(Guanimes with Stewed Eggplant)

ACTIVE: 45 min **TOTAL:** 1½ hrs
TO MAKE AHEAD: Assemble guanimes (Step 2) and refrigerate for up to 1 day.

EQUIPMENT: Kitchen string
Guanimes are made with masa harina (corn flour), which you can find in most grocery stores. They are traditionally served alongside stewed salted codfish (bacalao); here, a vegetarian version features stewed eggplant and sweet peppers.

GUANIMES

- 2 cups masa harina
- 1 cup low-sodium vegetable broth
- 1 cup canned coconut milk
- 2 tablespoons amaranth seeds (see *Pantry*, opposite)
- 2 tablespoons honey
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground pepper
- 12 banana leaves, thawed if frozen (see *Tip*, right)
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

BERENJENA GUISADA

- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil

- 4 medium Italian eggplant (about 3½ pounds total), cut into 2-inch chunks
- 1 small onion, diced
- 8 aji dulce or 1 large red bell pepper, seeded and chopped
- 2 cups diced tomatoes
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh oregano
- 1 cup low-sodium vegetable broth
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground pepper
- 2 cups chopped fresh cilantro

1. **To prepare guanimes:** Put a large pot of water on to boil.
2. Mix masa harina, broth, coconut milk, amaranth, honey, ½ teaspoon salt and pepper in a medium bowl. Cut each banana leaf into a 6-inch square. Brush a leaf square with ½ teaspoon oil. Shape ¼ cup of the dough into a 4-by-1-inch log and place on the leaf, leaving a 1-inch border on the bottom and sides, and a 4-inch border above it. Fold in the sides of the leaf. Fold the bottom of the leaf over the dough and roll up the guanime. Tie a piece of kitchen string around the bundle to secure it. (Alternatively, roll up the dough in the banana

- leaf square. Twist the ends to close and secure the ends with kitchen string.) Repeat with the remaining leaves and filling to make 12 guanimes. (See *photos*, page 105.)
 3. Drop the guanimes into the boiling water and cook until the leaves start to pull away from the dough, about 45 minutes.
 4. **Meanwhile, to prepare berenjena guisada:** Heat oil in a large pot over medium-high heat. Add eggplant, onion, aji dulce (or bell pepper), tomatoes, garlic and oregano; cook, stirring often, for 3 minutes. Add broth, paprika, salt and pepper; bring to a simmer. Cook for 5 minutes. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover and cook until the eggplant is tender, 10 to 15 minutes more. Stir in cilantro.
 5. Drain the guanimes. Let stand until cool enough to handle, about 10 minutes. Unwrap and serve with the stewed eggplant.
- SERVES 6:** 2 guanimes & 1½ cups eggplant each
Cal 463 Fat 24g (sat 9g) Chol 0mg Carbs 60g
Total sugars 18g (added 6g) Protein 9g Fiber 12g
Sodium 353mg Potassium 980mg
- TIP:** You can substitute cornhusks for banana leaves. Before using them, soak in hot water, weighted with a heavy plate or pan to keep them submerged, for 30 minutes. Drain.

ASOPADO DE GANDULES

(Pigeon Pea Stew)

ACTIVE: 20 min TOTAL: 35 min

TO MAKE AHEAD: Refrigerate for up to 3 days.

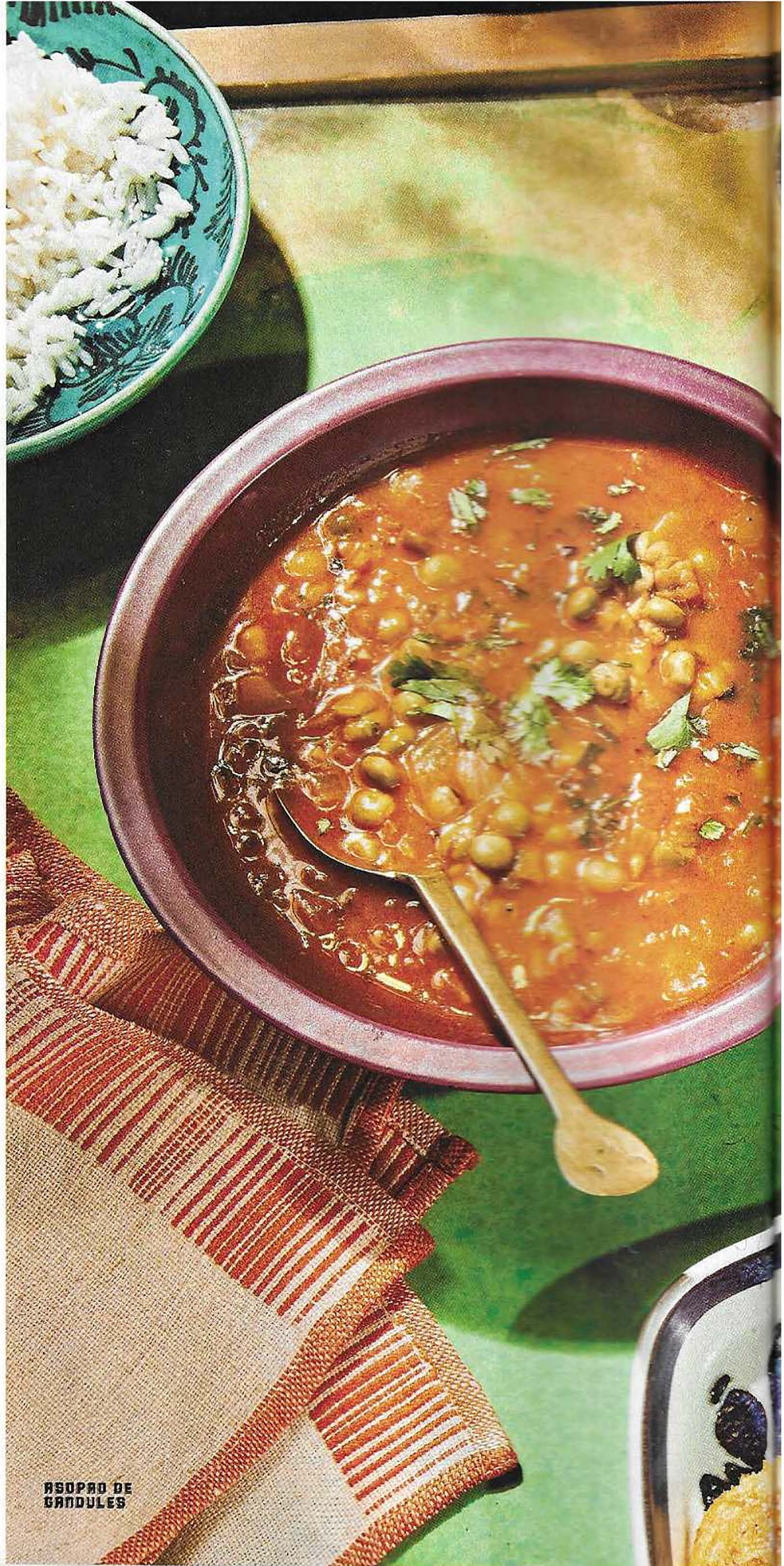
This simple vegetarian stew makes a hearty and inexpensive main course. Serve it with rice, tostones (fried plantains) or viandas (steamed or boiled root vegetables).

- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 8 ounces gandules (green pigeon peas, fresh or frozen; see *Pantry*, page 76) or one 15-ounce can, rinsed
- 1 small onion, diced
- ¾ cup chopped aji dulce or ⅓ cup chopped red bell pepper
- 4 cloves garlic, chopped
- 4 cups low-sodium vegetable broth, divided
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh oregano
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon ground pepper
- ¾ cup chopped fresh culantro or cilantro

Heat oil in a large pot over medium heat. Add gandules, onion, aji dulce (or bell pepper) and garlic. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the vegetables are soft, about 3 minutes. Add 1 cup broth, tomato paste and oregano. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the liquid is almost completely evaporated, about 5 minutes. Stir in the remaining 3 cups broth, salt and pepper. Reduce heat to maintain a simmer, cover and cook, stirring occasionally, until the vegetables are very tender, about 15 minutes more. Stir in culantro (or cilantro).

SERVES 4: 1¼ cups each

Cal 241 Fat 15g (sat 2g) Chol 0mg Carbs 22g
 Total sugars 5g (added 0g) Protein 5g Fiber 5g
 Sodium 489mg Potassium 463mg.

**ASOPADO DE GANDULES**



ENSALADA DE LA HUERTA CON VINAGRETA DE GUAYABA

(Harvest Salad with Guava Vinaigrette)

ACTIVE: 20 min TOTAL: 20 min

TO MAKE AHEAD: Refrigerate vinaigrette (Step 1) for up to 4 days.

This salad marries the flavors of cooked and raw ingredients, celebrating the wide array of produce that is grown and harvested on the OtraCosa farm and on neighboring farms. (Photo: page 73.)

- ½ cup guava puree (thawed if frozen)
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ cup rice vinegar
- 1 clove garlic, crushed and peeled
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground pepper
- ¼ cup grapeseed oil
- ½ cup no-salt-added canned small white beans, rinsed
- 8 okra pods, thinly sliced
- 2 cups fresh amaranth leaves (see *Pantry, page 76*) or microgreens
- 6 cups packed arugula
- ¾ cup crumbled farmer's cheese
- ¼ cup thinly sliced red onion

1. Combine guava, olive oil, vinegar, garlic, salt and pepper in a blender. Blend until smooth.
2. Heat grapeseed oil in a medium skillet over medium-high heat. Add beans and okra; cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 5 minutes. Add amaranth (or microgreens) and cook, stirring, until wilted, about 1 minute. Remove from heat.
3. Toss arugula with the vinaigrette in a large bowl. Top with the bean mixture, cheese and onion.

SERVES 4: 1½ cups each

Cal 375 Fat 32g (sat 5g) Chol 13mg Carbs 12g
Total sugars 4g (added 0g) Protein 11g Fiber 4g
Sodium 485mg Potassium 366mg.

RAÍCES ISLEÑAS CON PESTO DE CILANTRILLO Y AGUACATE

(Island Roots with Cilantro Pesto & Avocado)

ACTIVE: 20 min TOTAL: 30 min

Malanga and yautía, two root vegetables that grow across Puerto Rico, are an important food source because of their resiliency. Grown underground, they can better withstand hurricanes and large storms. At the farm, this dish is served with homemade pique, a local hot sauce made with pineapple skin and caballero peppers. A simple watercress salad makes an ideal accompaniment. (Photo: page 75.)

- 1½ pounds malanga (see *Pantry, page 76*) or taro, peeled and cut into 2-inch chunks
 - 1 pound yautía or yucca, peeled and cut into 2-inch chunks
 - 2 cups fresh cilantro with tender stems
 - 2 cups fresh culantro (or more cilantro) with tender stems
 - 6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
 - 1 large clove garlic, crushed and peeled
 - ¾ teaspoon salt
 - ¼ teaspoon ground pepper
 - ½ ripe avocado, sliced
- Hot sauce for serving

1. Place malanga (or taro) and yautía (or yucca) in a large pot and cover with water by 1 inch. Bring to a boil. Adjust heat to maintain a lively simmer, cover and cook until the vegetables are tender, 20 to 25 minutes. Drain.
2. Meanwhile, combine cilantro, culantro (or more cilantro), oil, garlic, salt and pepper in a food processor. Process until smooth.
3. Serve the vegetables with the pesto, avocado and hot sauce, if desired.

SERVES 8: ¾ cup vegetables & 1 Tbsp. pesto each
Cal 290 Fat 13g (sat 2g) Chol 0mg Carbs 42g
Total sugars 1g (added 0g) Protein 2g Fiber 5g
Sodium 239mg Potassium 691mg.

SOPA DE CALABAZA ROSTIZADA

(Roasted Pumpkin Soup)

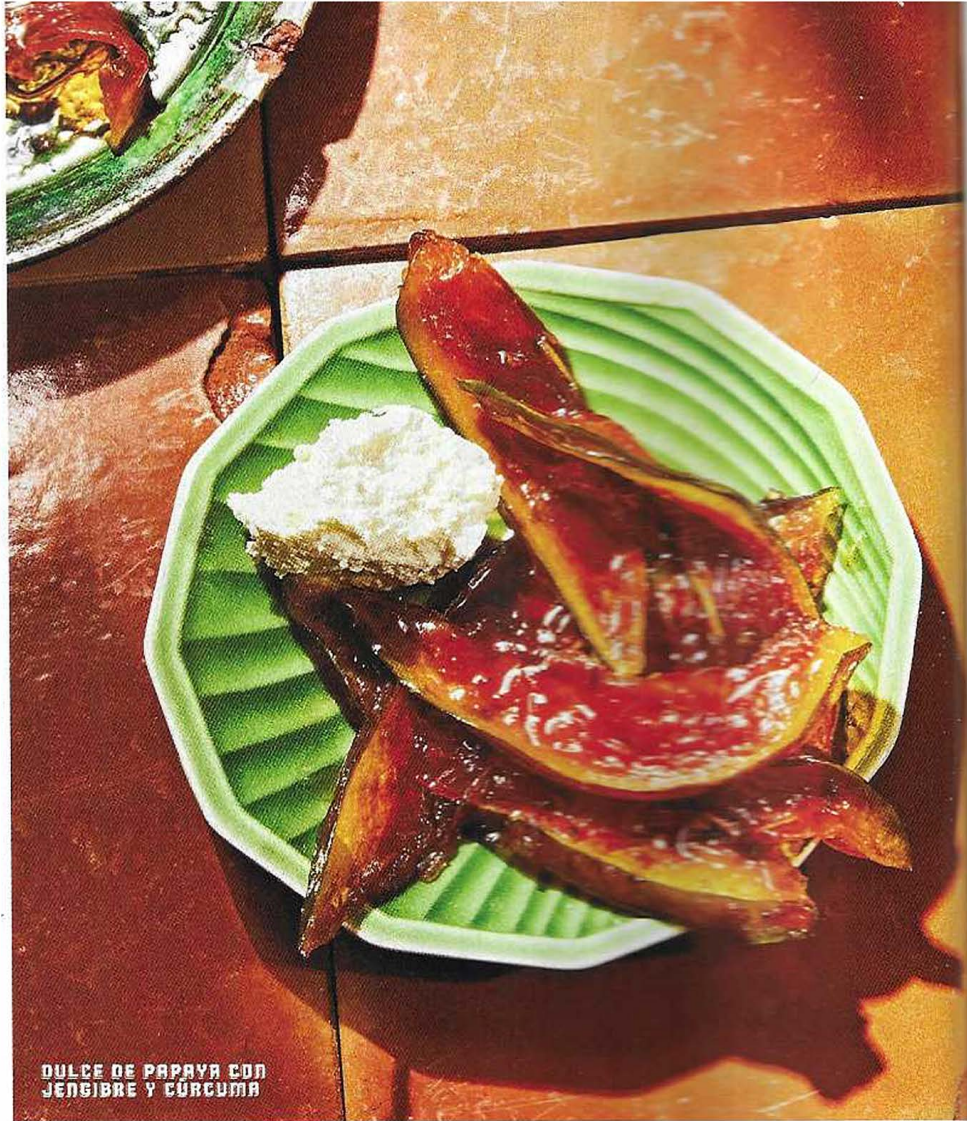
ACTIVE: 25 min TOTAL: 1 hr 10 min

TO MAKE AHEAD: Refrigerate for up to 3 days.

This comforting and nourishing soup is an El Departamento de La Comida classic and was served often at the restaurant until it closed in 2017. It is traditionally prepared with Caribbean pumpkin, which grows abundantly in Puerto Rico. (Photo: page 75.)

- 1 2-pound Caribbean pumpkin (see *Pantry*, page 76) or butternut squash, peeled, seeded and cut into 1-inch pieces
- 6 tablespoons grapeseed oil, divided
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt, divided
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup diced onion
- 3 cloves garlic, chopped
- 2 tablespoons chopped peeled fresh turmeric or 2 teaspoons dried
- 6 cups low-sodium vegetable broth, divided
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh rosemary
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon chopped fresh oregano
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon ground pepper
- Extra-virgin olive oil for serving

1. Preheat oven to 350°F.
 2. Toss pumpkin (or squash) with 2 tablespoons grapeseed oil and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt on a large rimmed baking sheet. Roast, stirring occasionally, until golden brown and tender, 40 to 45 minutes.
 3. Heat the remaining 4 tablespoons grapeseed oil in a large pot over medium heat. Add onion, garlic and fresh turmeric (if using dried, add it later). Cook, stirring occasionally, until soft and starting to brown, 3 to 5 minutes. Add the roasted pumpkin (or squash) and 2 cups broth. Cook, stirring occasionally and scraping up any browned bits, for 5 minutes. Add the remaining 4 cups broth and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt, rosemary, oregano, pepper and dried turmeric, if using. Increase heat to medium-high and bring to a simmer. Adjust heat to maintain a simmer, cover and cook for 10 minutes.
 4. Puree the soup with an immersion blender or in batches in a regular blender until smooth. (Use caution when pureeing hot liquids.) Serve drizzled with olive oil, if desired.
- SERVES** 6: $1\frac{1}{4}$ cups each
Cal 173 **Fat** 14g (sat 1g) **Chol** 0mg **Carbs** 12g
Total sugars 5g (added 0g) **Protein** 1g **Fiber** 2g
Sodium 423mg **Potassium** 405mg



DULCE DE PAPAYA CON
JENGIBRE Y CURCUMA

DULCE DE PAPAYA CON JENGIBRE Y CURCUMA

(Candied Green Papaya with
Ginger & Turmeric)

ACTIVE: 25 min TOTAL: 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ hrs

TO MAKE AHEAD: Refrigerate for up to 2 weeks.

EQUIPMENT: Parchment or wax paper

Papaya is one of the most common fruits grown in Puerto Rico. Here, the unripe fruit is candied, transforming it into a dessert that is often served with queso de pais, a soft white farmer's cheese. The slices are traditionally prepared over an open fire, but here we translate the recipe for an indoor kitchen. Soaking the papaya in a baking soda solution prevents it from falling apart when cooked. The leftover spiced syrup is delicious added to cocktails or drizzled over ice cream.

- 5 cups water
- 3 tablespoons baking soda
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ pounds green (unripe) papaya (see *Pantry*, page 76), halved, seeded and thinly sliced
- 5 cups packed brown sugar
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup sliced peeled fresh ginger

- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sliced peeled fresh turmeric or 4 teaspoons dried
- 4 whole star anise
- 1 tablespoon grated orange zest

1. Combine water and baking soda in a large bowl. Add papaya and soak for about 30 minutes.
 2. Thoroughly rinse the papaya. Place in a large pot and add brown sugar, ginger, turmeric, star anise and orange zest. Bring to a simmer over medium heat, stirring occasionally. Adjust heat to maintain a simmer and cook, stirring occasionally, until the liquid is syrupy and the papaya is dark and slightly translucent, about 45 minutes.
 3. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve. (Reserve the syrup for another use, if desired.) Spread the papaya on a baking sheet lined with parchment or wax paper and let cool to room temperature, about 15 minutes.
- SERVES** 12: $\frac{1}{3}$ cup each
Cal 126 **Fat** 0g (sat 0g) **Chol** 0mg **Carbs** 32g
Total sugars 30g (added 27g) **Protein** 0g
Fiber 1g **Sodium** 100mg **Potassium** 126mg