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Recipe for Rice and Beans in Post-Maria Puerto Rico

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Today, cooking a simple dish of rice and beans is not as easy as it used to be: buying the rice and finding clean water to cook it in, and preparing the *sofrito* have become a challenge for many on the island. With much of the island without clean water and electricity more than a hundred days after Hurricane María, the meaning of a savory home-cooked meal could change drastically.

The passing of Hurricane María through Puerto Rico affected 80% of the island's agriculture industry and completely destroyed

(<https://www.elnuevodia.com/negocios/economia/nota/cosechadeplatanoycafeenpuertoricoseperdioensutotalic2360644/>) the island's plantain and coffee crops, pillars

(https://www.elnuevodia.com/negocios/consumo/nota/reanudancargamentosdeplatanosalaisla-2385618/#cxrecs_s) of the island's agricultural sector. Like most islands, Puerto Rico's food supply

greatly depends on imports. However, as the media (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/28/us/jones-act-waived.html>) helped point out, the antiquated Jones Act controls all imports, placing an undue burden on the island and slowing the process of recovery. A waiver of the Jones Act, petitioned by Governor Roselló Nevares, was granted by the federal government for only 10 days, causing Puerto Ricans to empty supermarket (<https://www.elnuevodia.com/negocios/consumo/nota/escaseanciertosproductosbasicosenloscomercios-2364633/>) shelves, searching for non-perishable food and drinking water.

Creativity and Imagination as Substitutes

A recipe in the Puerto Rican cookbook, *Cocina Criolla* (1954), overlooks certain aspects in the preparation of a dish: the availability of propane, proper refrigeration for perishable ingredients, and water for sanitary purposes.

Scarcity and the possible loss of flavors have also been experienced by other Caribbean neighbors. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Cuba entered what came to be known as the “Período especial en tiempos de paz”. In the mid-90s, Cubans experienced the loss or displacement of essential ingredients for traditional Cuban dishes. Writer Antonio José Ponte expresses as he begins his collection of essays *Las comidas profundas*, “I write on the dining table. The table is covered by a rubber tablecloth with drawings of food: fruits and grilled meat and glasses and bottles, everything I don’t have” (47, my translation).

One of the things that mark Cuba’s “Período especial” is not just the scarcity of ingredients, like beef for instance, but the ingenuity-or rather creativity in culinary practices. In his essay titled “Cuatro,” Ponte recalls an urban story about a lost cargo of blankets that had allegedly been used as a meat substitute, or “bistec de frazada.” Ponte describes the dish as a blanket cut into squares, left overnight in lemon juice, passed through a beaten egg and breadcrumbs, and later fried in oil that had been previously used to fry real meat. The point he makes is that in moments of extreme necessity, imagination and creativity serve as ways of surviving. He points out that “The story repeats itself in any country in an economic depression. Desperation makes metaphors multiply. Poverty flourishes in a ruse, thus all imagination can be wasted on remedies” (Ponte 67, my translation).

Culinary tactics in times of survival and desperation do not equal hope for Ponte. In a conversation with Puerto Rican scholar Juan Carlos Quintero-Herencia he pointed out that the multiplication of metaphors is not synonymous with a hopeful celebration of human creativity, it is rather its «waste» in times of hunger and scarcity.

With the restoration of the island’s power supply still at 55% of a total of 1.5 million customers and parts in the center of the island without water supply, Puerto Rico’s cuisine could be entering a similar phase. People have shared pictures of innovative tactics to brew their morning coffee, new practices for preparing their everyday meals, and others have shared stories about sharing meals in community. People have realized the importance of relying on fresh ingredients grown in their own

homes and the reliance on imported ingredients. This is both needed and problematic in terms of the timeliness of the aid Puerto Ricans have received. Puerto Ricans, as Ponte shares in his essay, are too multiplying metaphors as a mean of survival and desperation.

While some people, have relied on the use of BBQs and have access to buy fresh groceries, others are surviving on FEMA's emergency food supplies. FEMA food supplies are a way to help provisionally, but are not meant to serve as a sustainable everyday diet. FEMA food rations have come under scrutiny because they offer little to no nutritional value.

Alternative practices

As Ponte states, "Desperation makes metaphors multiply". Cuban cuisine was transformed by the "Período especial" and Ponte wanted to problematize this transformation through the politics of hunger and taste in his essays. This makes me wonder, is absence needed for imagination to flourish? When did having *export-soda* (saltine crackers), *salchichas* (Vienna sausages), or even *jamón* (canned luncheon meat) "pa' resolver" in case of power outages or water interruption, become staple foods in Puerto Rican cuisine?

It is amazing to see the number of Community initiatives (https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/masde10000personasrecibencomidaenarecibo-2367367/#cxrecs_s--Arecibo) addressing meal preparation (<https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/chefjoseandresestoyinteresadoendarledecomeralagenteah-2365274/>) and food sustainability in Puerto Rico by delivering food to inaccessible communities and working to re-establish fluidity in the local economy. Even more intriguing is thinking that this practice could become more and more common.

How then can we resist the system that leaves us hungry when desperation and survival are everyday life struggles? What do we do with this empty table? Are practices like cooking a meal together or taking turns to cook a meal for our community enough for restocking the pantry of Puerto Rican cuisine post-María?

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