



Shera Dalin offers a sample of food to her husband, Jorge Riopedre. Among his favorites are the Croquetas in the foreground, fried croquettes made from ham and chicken. Photos by Karen Elshout | Post-Dispatch

Love and Croquetas

Language is
no barrier as
a Cuban grand-
mother passes
on a legacy
of recipes
to her beloved
grandson's wife.

By Shera Dalin
SPECIAL TO THE POST-DISPATCH

Most of the time, a meal is just a meal, but sometimes, feasts of food are really banquets of love.

When I married my husband in 1999, I joined not just a Cuban family, but an exuberant culture that is centered on family and eating. Every Cuban celebration involves dish after dish of savory, Spanish-influenced foods with exotic names such as Ropa Vieja, Picadillo, Plátanos and Croquetas. In this culture, food doesn't just sustain life; it is life.

That old saw about the way to a man's heart being through his stomach never met a truer match than the Cuban male. Cuban men love to eat, and many love to cook.

But in my husband Jorge's family, the undisputed chef was his abuela (grandmother). Blanca Sánchez Llanes was 5 feet short, but she had a big personality, a sharp wit and a no-nonsense view of life.

She also had the smallest kitchen imaginable in a tiny house converted from a laundry shed. On a white, apartment-size stove, she created one exquisite dish after another — Cuban soul food.

After leaving everything behind when she fled Cuba and Fidel Castro in

1965, Abuela lived a simple life.

"Ay no, No, NO, NO!" she shouted when we gave her a Christmas present. Her protests sounded like machine-gun fire. Then a slew of Spanish would erupt that only a true Cuban could decipher. Despite a full-family press that she accept her gifts, Abuela usually won.

On every trip to Tampa, Fla., our first stop after dropping our suitcases at my mother-in-law's house was Abuela's kitchen. Jorge, my mother-in-law and I would squeeze around her rickety kitchen table and feast.

In the Tampa heat, we always started with steaming *Sopa de Pollo* (chicken soup). Next followed *lechón* (roasted pork), *Moros y Cristianos* (black beans and rice) and *Plátanos Maduros* (fried ripe plantains).

Though she refused many presents, she adored giving the gift of herself through her cooking and her sewing (despite being legally blind). She lived to serve.

Before we returned to St. Louis, Abuela would pack plastic bags full of her frozen Croquetas (croquettes) and *Bistec Empanizado* (breaded steak) to sustain Jorge until he returned. Then it was a mad dash to the plane and home to the freezer.

PLEASE SEE LEGACY | L4

Blanca Sánchez Llanes



Sopa de Pollo (chicken soup)



Picadillo (beef and pork hash)



Natilla (sweet custard)



SEE RECIPES ON L4



Abuela's Croquetas, a Cuban delicacy, are made with ham and chicken. Karen Elshout

ABUELA'S CROQUETAS

Yield: About 20 croquettes

5 ounces cooked ham	1 cup milk
5 ounces cooked chicken	½ medium onion, minced
1 tablespoon white wine (see note)	1 tablespoon dried parsley
1 tablespoon lemon juice	Hot sauce
¼ teaspoon salt	1 tablespoon butter
¼ teaspoon ground cumin	1 egg, beaten
1 cup all-purpose flour	½ cup plain dry bread crumbs
	Olive oil, for frying

In a food processor, pulse together ham and chicken until minced. Transfer to a small bowl; stir in wine and lemon juice. Set aside.

In a medium bowl, mix together salt, cumin, flour, milk, onion, parsley and several drops of hot sauce or to taste. Stir in ham mixture until well combined.

Melt butter in a skillet over medium heat. Add ham mixture; stir until it reaches the consistency of paste, about 5 to 7 minutes. Transfer to a bowl; refrigerate until cold.

Dampen hands slightly with water; form the mixture into golf-ball-size balls. Roll each into a cylinder about 3 inches long and about ¼ inch in diameter. Roll each cylinder in egg and then in bread crumbs.

Coat the bottom of a large skillet with oil; place over medium heat. Fry croquettes in batches until golden brown on all sides, adding oil as needed. Let drain on paper towels; serve warm as an entree or as an appetizer.

Per serving: 120 calories; 7g fat (53 percent calories from fat); 1.5g saturated fat; 26mg cholesterol; 6g protein; 8g carbohydrate; 1g sugar; 0.5g fiber; 422mg sodium; 24.5mg calcium; 86mg potassium.

Note: Edmundo's Vino Seco (see resources) is best in this recipe, but any dry white wine may be substituted.

Resources

You can find many Cuban ingredients, including Edmundo's Vino Seco and Sazon Goya with saffron, at La Tropicana Market, 5001 Lindenwood Avenue, St. Louis; 314-353-7328.

Badia Mojo marinade is available from www.cubanfoodmarket.com, 1-877-999-9945, and www.cubanfoodguy.com, 1-877-584-1177.

LEGACY | FROM L1

Learning to cook Cuban foods was an act of love

Abuela spoke only Spanish, and her Cuban version is likely the fastest form of Spanish on the planet. I spoke enough of the language to get myself in trouble, but I understand so little that it causes only trouble.

So when I asked Abuela to teach me how to make some of my husband's favorite dishes, I was unsure how we would communicate. But for us, La Escuela de Cocinar de Abuela was more than just Abuela's Cooking School. It was her way of ensuring that her love for her only grandchild would endure.

For me, creating my husband's favorite foods was a way to show him how much I loved him. It was also a second chance.

I had learned only to make chicken and dumplings from my

own grandmother, Mama Ruth, before she died in 1998. Rufus, as I called her, was so much like Abuela it was startling. Both were short, round women with fiery personalities and an inspired gift for cooking. I missed Rufus, but luckily, I had Abuela.

So we cooked. We cooked in that tiny, sweltering kitchen in Tampa and in my larger kitchen in University City. Neither Rufus nor Abuela wrote down recipes; they cooked by instinct that had been honed through generations of shared knowledge.

Abuela taught me to make Jorge's cherished Croquetas, meat-filled empanadas and chicken soup. Breaded steaks would have been next, but we ran out of time. Abuela succumbed to liver cancer on Nov. 6, 2002.

My mother-in-law, Sylvia Sánchez, now cooks whenever we go to Tampa or she comes to St. Louis. Soon, I'll ask her to teach me the secrets of her Arroz con Pollo. Chicken and yellow rice like that is a priceless inheritance.

I suspect I'll teach the recipe to my daughter, Merya, someday. At age 3, she already loves to help in the kitchen.

NATILLA

(Sweet Custard)
Yield: 6 to 8 servings

8 large egg yolks
4 cups milk, divided
¼ cup cornstarch

In a bowl, mix egg yolks with 1 cup milk.

In another bowl, mix cornstarch with 1 cup milk. Stir until smooth, then add sugar and the remaining 2 cups milk. Strain the egg mixture with a fine strainer into the cornstarch mixture; stir to combine well. Transfer to a heavy medium saucepan.

Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until thickened, about 20 minutes. Remove from heat, add vanilla, and stir to blend.

Pour into a serving bowl or custard cups. Let cool to room temperature, then cover and refrigerate 2 hours or overnight. Before serving, dust with cinnamon.

Per serving (based on 8 servings): 238 calories; 8g fat (30 percent calories from fat); 4g saturated fat; 217mg cholesterol; 6.5g protein; 35g carbohydrate; 30.5g sugar; no fiber; 57 mg sodium; 160mg calcium; 194mg potassium.

Adapted from "Memories of a Cuban Kitchen," by Mary Urrutia Randelman and Joan Schwartz (Wiley, 1992).

Cooking school continues to expand. My statesmanlike father-in-law has imparted the ways of his heavenly picadillo, and he doesn't know it yet, but the master work of all Spanish cuisine — paella — is next.

So for my husband on Valentine's Day, I love you; eat well. Buen provecho.

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1 cup granulated sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla
Ground cinnamon

PICADILLO A LA RIOPEDE

(Beef and Pork Hash)
Yield: 6 to 8 servings

¾ pound lean ground beef
½ pound lean ground pork
1 (14½-ounce) can whole tomatoes, undrained
1 cup finely chopped onions
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
1 cup dry red wine
½ cup mojo marinade (see note)
1 tablespoon capers
3 medium potatoes, peeled and diced
1 (4-ounce) jar pimientos, drained and chopped

½ cup blanched silvered almonds, toasted
3 cloves garlic, peeled and finely minced
1 (6-ounce) can tomato paste
½ cup seedless raisins
¼ cup pimiento-stuffed sliced manzanilla olives
1 teaspoon chopped fresh oregano or ½ teaspoon dried oregano
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley
Salt
Ground black pepper
Hot cooked white rice

Sauté beef and pork over medium heat, breaking the meat into small pieces as it cooks. Drain excess fat. Add 1 cup water; simmer about 30 minutes.

Stir in tomatoes and their juice, onions, Worcestershire sauce, wine, mojo marinade, capers, potatoes, pimientos, almonds, garlic, tomato paste, raisins, olives, oregano, cumin, parsley and salt and pepper to taste. Return to a simmer; cook until potatoes are tender, about 1 hour. Serve over rice.

Per serving (based on 8 servings): 332 calories; 11g fat (30 percent calories from fat); 2.5g saturated fat; 41mg cholesterol; 18g protein; 35g carbohydrate; 14g sugar; 5g fiber; 371mg sodium; 68mg calcium; 619mg potassium.

Note: Mojo, also known as mojo criollo, is a garlicky citrus marinade that is available in Latin markets. Badia Mojo (see resources) is best in this recipe.

ABUELA'S SOPA DE POLLO

(Chicken Soup)
Yield: 6 servings

12 chicken wings
½ green bell pepper, cut into large chunks
1 tomato, cut in half
6 cloves garlic, peeled and smashed
2 potatoes, peeled and cut into large chunks

3 carrots, peeled and sliced into rounds
1 medium onion, cut in 8 wedges
1 package Sazon Goya with saffron (azafrán; see note)
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1½ tablespoons salt
½ cup fine egg noodles

Place chicken wings in a Dutch oven; cover with water. Bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce to a simmer; skim off scum. Cover and simmer until wings are done, about 30 minutes.

Add green pepper, tomato, garlic, potatoes, carrots, onion, Sazon Goya, cumin and salt; cook until potatoes are tender, about 30 minutes.

Remove and discard onion, green peppers, tomato and garlic. Add egg noodles; cook until tender, about 15 minutes. Ladle into bowls, including a chicken wing or two in each portion.

Per serving: 270 calories; 14g fat (47 percent calories from fat); 3.5g saturated fat; 59mg cholesterol; 20g protein; 16g carbohydrate; 2g sugar; 2g fiber; 1,992mg sodium; 28mg calcium; 408mg potassium.

Note: Sazon Goya is a seasoning blend marketed by Goya. The Spanish word for saffron is azafrán. You can find the seasoning at Latin markets; see resources for details.