

## Taino Cooking in the Dominican Republic

By Beverly Cox & Martin Jacobs

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Some 4,000 years ago groups of Arawak-speaking peoples began a migration from the Orinoco Basin of South America. Traveling in wooden canoes that carried 70 to 80 passengers, these intrepid seamen rowed through the Caribbean. They established settlements and mixed with other Native Americans who had arrived in earlier migrations from the Yucatan Peninsula and the coast of Florida. Their descendants would become the Taino.

The Taino of Hispaniola (modern Haiti and the Dominican Republic), had lived on the island, for hundreds of years before the arrival of the Spanish in 1492. Theirs was a peaceful, highly organized, maternal society. The island was divided into 5 chiefdoms, each lead by a *cacique* (chief), who was paid a tribute by its citizens to govern. Tainos practiced poligamy, with men having 2 to 3 wives and caciques sometimes having as many as 30 wives. Ordinary citizens lived in large round communal houses with roofs and walls made from palm fronds and straw, called *bohios*. A large *bohio* might house 10 to 15 men and their families. Caciques and their wives and children lived in rectangular thatched houses with front porches.

Men were generally naked, and married women sometimes wore short cotton aprons, called *nagua*. For special ceremonial occasions, both sexes adorned their bodies with feathers, *bija* (annatto) seed coloring, sea shells and other decorations

The Taino lived by fishing and farming, their most important food crops were bitter and sweet varieties of yuca (cassava), corn, squash, sweet potatoes, peanuts, pineapples and hot chiles. Bitter yuca, which must be prepared carefully because its juices are toxic, was used to make *casabe*, a cracker-like flat bread that was and continues to be a Taino staple. Sweet (non-toxic) yuca root was peeled, boiled and eaten as a vegetable. The Taino also grew cotton, to weave into hammocks, fish nets and naguas, annatto seed, for body paint and food coloring, and tobacco which they used ceremonially.

In his journals, Christopher Columbus described the Taino, the first Native People he encountered in the New World, as " Naked innocence and quick response to the influences of kindness rather than acts of force... They are

gentle, without knowing what evil is, without killing, without stealing” After waxing poetic about these kind and hospitable people, the Spanish, greedy for gold and pearls, enslaved them. In 1507, the native population of the island of Hispaniola, estimated by anthropologists to have been at least 300,000 when the Spanish arrived, had shrunk to 60,000 and by 1531 to 600. Soon the Taino were declared extinct.

When he was a small child growing up in New York City, Jorge (pronounced George) Estevez was told that all of the Indians in the Caribbean died hundreds of years ago. Jorge was perplexed, because when he saw paintings of the Taino’s everyday lives, he noticed that they were doing things he was accustomed to doing in his home. He also noticed, that though they never emphasized it, his grandmother, Olympia, and mother, Luz, would sometimes say things in passing, about it being “our way” when they prepared *casabe*, the Taino cracker-bread that remains a favorite Dominican food.

An school outing to the National Museum of the American Indian in lower Manhattan sparked Jorge’s interest in tracing his Native American roots. The youngster became a regular visitor to the museum, and the more he learned, the more he recognized the continuing influence of the Taino in modern Caribbean culture. Jorge realized that the Taino had never really disappeared. He saw their faces in his family and in the faces of many other Dominicans, Cubans and Puerto Ricans. In order to survive, the few who remained, had kept a low profile. They adopted Spanish customs, and often intermarried with the Spanish and later with runaway African slaves. Their customs and beliefs were not forgotten, however: There are, for example, over 800 Taino words incorporated into the Spanish currently spoken in the Caribbean.

Jorge Estevez is a cultural specialist and writer on Caribbean topics. As an adult, he works at the museum he loved as a child, teaching visitors about the Native civilizations of the Caribbean. Many thanks, to Jorge and his mom, Luz Patria Estevez for sharing with us their knowledge of Taino food and culture.

## **Ajiaco**

### **(Taino Shellfish Stew)**

2 tablespoons olive or vegetable oil

1 1/2 to 2 teaspoons bijol (ground annatto seed seasoning)

1 pound Florida lobster tails, in the shell, cut into segments

1 pound shrimp or river crawfish, in the shell, or 1/2 pound of each

1/2 pound crabmeat or 4 whole blue crabs, cleaned and quartered

2 Anaheim chiles, seeded and diced

1 1/4 cups finely chopped ripe plum tomatoes (4 to 5)

2 to 3 ears fresh sweet corn, cut into 1/2-inch thick rounds

1 can, 25-ounces, coconut milk

Salt to taste

Juice of 1 to 3 Key limes, to taste

Hot red pepper sauce, to taste, optional

Place the oil in a Dutch oven, over medium-high heat. Stir in the bijol. Add the lobster, shrimp, crab (if quartered), and the diced chiles. Cook, stirring, for 4 to 5 minutes until the shells turn red. Stir in the crab meat (if using), tomato, coconut milk and enough water to cover. Bring liquid to a boil. Reduce heat to low. Cover and simmer for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add the corn and season to taste with salt. Simmer an additional 5 to 10 minutes, until the corn is tender. Add lime juice and season to taste with pepper sauce.

Serves 4 to 6

### **Pastelon de Yuca con Queso, Doña Luz**

#### **(Yuca and Cheese Pie, Doña Luz)**

2 pounds firm, unblemished, yuca roots

Salt to taste

1/4 to 1/2 cup hot milk

2 to 5 tablespoons, butter or margarine

1 container 15-ounces ricotta cheese

1 cup shredded mild cheese

Cut the yuca in half lengthwise and remove the fibrous core that runs down the center. With a vegetable peeler, remove both the waxed outer peel and rosy underpeel. Place peeled yuca in a large pot of lightly salted boiling water. Boil gently until tender, 20 to 30 minutes. Drain and mash the yuca with enough milk and butter to make a smooth, but firm puree. Season to taste with salt.

Preheat oven to 350 F. Butter an 8-inch square, shallow baking dish. Spread half of the mashed yuca into the pan.

In a blender or food processor, process ricotta until smooth. Spread ricotta, over the yuca and top with remaining yuca.

Sprinkle the top with shredded cheese and drizzle with a little milk. Bake 35 to 45 minutes until the panetòn is lightly browned on top. Cut into squares and serve.

Serves 4 to 6