

The Diversity That Only One Ingredient Can Represent

By Seena Chriti

In this article, I would like to emphasize the importance of how Latin Americans are united during these unsettling times. Even though every Latin-American country has cultural differences, such as culinary preparations, customs, different significance of the Spanish language usages, in this country, we all are grouped together as Latinos. In general, it is not important which country you come from, what you eat, what is celebrated or the significance of our words and expressions. The only thing that is important to the people is that we are Latin Americans.

This is a disadvantage and a very superficial point of view, but it can also be a strong attribute. At times, I don't think of myself as only part of my Mexican friends in the United States, but rather as a part of a Latin-American group of friends from many different Latin countries. We feel comfortable with these differences, with those who speak Spanish with many different accents and we feel happy when we eat Puerto Rican or Colombian food because we can appreciate and understand the subtleness and refinement of their preparations.

After this introduction, I want to talk to you about a food that is found in almost all Latin-American countries – the plantain banana, or platano macho, which is the Mexican way of describing it, guineo in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and parts of Nicaragua, Salvador, Colombia and Ecuador. In Venezuela, it is called cambur.

For me, it is the perfect representation of the diversity and cultural complexity of our nations. A food that is so simple has many ways of naming it, even though it is spoken in the same language. It is prepared in many ways in each country, and one of the most interesting things is that it can be used totally green, such as in the preparation of the tostones, which are fried guineos, then flattened forming discs or baskets depending on how they are to be used and then fried again. They can also be used totally ripe, almost black on the outside, to be fried or baked and then served as a side dish to Cuban dishes, such as rice and beans, among others.

So, we have a dish that is said differently in many countries, that uses green or ripe plantains and that is prepared in many ways.

There is one that seems particularly delicious and interesting that is the Puerto Rican Mofongo, which is made with fried green guineos and then mashed with salt,



garlic and oil, then made into little balls with pieces of fried pork skin or bacon in pieces. These plantain balls are served in chicken or meat soup.

The mofongo comes from the Fufu of East Africa, mixed with Spanish influences, made with different starchy vegetables, which were introduced by Africans who came from Spanish colonies, such as Cuba where the plantain was called fufu, and from the Dominican Republic, where it was called mangu.

In Puerto Rico, Spanish ingredients are commonly used, such as garlic, pork and olive oil. The method of frying came from its African origin, which is used much more than in other parts of the Caribbean. The soup is made with chicken and other fried food, such as fruits, vegetables and herbs.

This could be an endless article about the many preparations that we can have with plantain, but let's just sit and enjoy each other's company and always appreciate our differences and our diversity. Happy beginning of the year. •