

FOOD AND CULTURE

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Photography by Ali Waxman

The word rice comes from Arabic meaning “Ar-ruzz,” and it is the seed of the plant *Oryza sativa*. It is a cereal that, in many cultures and countries, is considered the basic food, especially in Asia. It’s interesting how certain grains are the main food in different parts of the world. Before the arrival of the Spanish to America, corn was the prevailing food. In North America, wild rice was water grass, and it was a very important source of protein.

Rice is the second most produced cereal in the world, after corn. Corn is a grain that is utilized for other consumptions that are not necessarily for humans, and because of this, you can say that rice is the most important cereal for feeding human beings, contributing in a very effective manner to caloric consumption. It is said that rice contributes one-fifth of the calories consumed in the world.

Rice has always been seen as a symbol of prosperity and health, and it is for this reason that it is thrown at weddings to the newlyweds to calm the bad spirits and not to bother them. Throwing rice is a sign of fertility, happiness, wealth and prosperity for weddings, and it is something that is seen throughout the world. In China, the girls are asked to eat each grain of rice on their plate, because each grain represents an acne scar on the face of her future husband. In Indonesia, there is a belief that you should avoid eating rice in a small dish because this will cause close relations to leave you.

I have always been interested in the basic, uncomplicated food in each culture, food that is not expensive, like bread, rice or beans. People have always had the creativity and knowledge to make the correct combinations of food to nourish their people the best way. There are vegetable proteins that, when mixed together, form a complete protein, like meat. Rice and beans (and other legumes) are nutritious, and when mixed, they are nutritional complements, forming a complete protein with the whole profile of amino acids. Other examples of this are garbanzos (hummus) with pita (wheat) bread or the tortilla (maize) with beans.

In Latin America, even though we have a language and other things in common, there are many words and customs that vary in each country. What something means in Mexico, means something else in Guatemala, and so on. In Mexico, the word “coche” means “car,” and in Guatemala, it means “pig.” In Mexico, you use the word “cuate” to refer to a friend, whereas in Venezuela you say “pana.”

But, one of its common denominators is that many of these countries have a version of the rice-and-bean combination, each one has its own very particular way of preparation as well as its particular name, as seen in the following examples.



- **La Morisqueta** is eaten in Mexico, and it’s made with cooked rice and beans, red sauce and cheese. It is served with meat or pork and accompanies the main dish.

- **Moros and Cristianos** are eaten in Cuba. To me, the name is charming, as if it means to represent the mix between the Moros, black beans (the people of African origin, the moros is how they call them) with the Christians, white rice. The rice is cooked in the water with the beans, adding onion and garlic. It is eaten in everyday cooking, at family reunions and it is said that it is good luck to bring in the New Year.

- **Casamiento** (which means marriage) is eaten in El Salvador and Honduras. Beans and rice, already cooked separately, are combined with cilantro, onion, pepper and other spices. It is eaten at any time of the day with fried bananas, cream and pupusas.

- **Casados** (married) are eaten in Guatemala and prepared with rice, beans, coco milk and fried bananas.

- **Gallo Pinto** (colored rooster) is eaten in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. More rice than black or red beans is used. Fried onion and toasted garlic is added to the rice and beans. It is eaten for breakfast, lunch or dinner with coffee, bread or tortillas.

- **Tacu Tacu** is eaten in Peru, which consists of rice and beans. It is mixed with the left-over food from the day before, and it’s formed into a mass that is fried in oil. It is eaten with banana, fried egg and sometimes with shellfish.

I invite you to prepare one of these delicious dishes that unite all our Latin brothers, and to remember the wise men of our countries for having created such simple and delicious dishes. The most interesting thing for me is that without having had such complex studies in nutrition, our ancestors knew the body and its necessities perfectly well to have chosen the combination of these two proteins that by themselves are good, but mixed are complete and spectacular. ♦