

# FOOD & CULTURE

## views & patterns of nutrition in CUBA



### CUBA

The island of Cuba lies in the northern Caribbean. Spanish is the official language of Cuba inhabited by roughly 11 million citizens. This communist nation offers universal health care to care for its citizens. Cuban cuisine is a fusion of Spanish and Caribbean spices and techniques. Cuisine, culture and health can shed light onto life in Cuba and integration of Cubans into U.S. culture.<sup>1</sup>

### TRADITIONAL FOODS

Cuban foods and meals center around meat. While seafood is abundant on the island of Cuba, Cubans prefer beef, pork and occasionally chicken. White rice and beans accompany meats. Meals also include *viandas* or starchy vegetables. *Frituras*, fried snacks, are frequently enjoyed along with sugary beverages.<sup>2-4</sup>

- Beef
- Suckling pig & pork
- Chicken
- Rice & beans
- Starchy vegetables: yucca root, taro root, sweet potatoes, plantains
- Saffron
- Processed foods
- Fried snacks
- Sugary drinks
- Cuban sandwich

Cuban diets and dishes are influenced by the cultures of Spain, Africa, Haiti & the United States.<sup>4</sup> The United States has had significant influence introducing fast food. American fast food restaurants are popular along with local restaurants and processed foods.

After the Cuban Revolution in 1960, Cuba was under **strict food rationing**. Despite rationing obesity rates **increased** especially between 1990-1995. Processed and energy dense foods can be attributed to this increase.<sup>5</sup>

### CLASSIC DISHES<sup>2,3</sup>

#### *Ajiaco*

Cuban stew made with meat, root vegetables and corn. Recipes vary by region and family.

#### *Lechon asado con mojo*

Roasted suckling pig with “magic powder” as a marinade or sauce.

#### *Ropa vieja*

Shredded beef stew with vegetables. The dish resembles its name “*old clothes*” as a heap of colorful rags.



## EATING PATTERNS

### MEAL-TIME = FAMILY TIME

Meals are highly valued as time with family. Families are kept as high importance in daily Cuban life.

Division of labor has women cooking most meals. Women take pride in the food they prepare for their families. Food is a way to exhibit creativity, develop family recipes and establish a personal identity through the dishes they prepare with ingredients that are available. Kitchens also tell stories of class and power.<sup>3</sup>

## HEALTH BELIEFS

Cuba provides universal health care for its citizens. The health care system has made great progress decreasing rates of illness.

### OLD HEALTH WIVES TALES<sup>7</sup>

- *Never go barefoot*: the feet were thought to be portholes for germs.
- *Don't go to bed with wet hair*: the cold night air is called the “demon of disease and destruction”.
- *Cover up if there is a breeze in the air*: the breeze brings on illness, the back and chest should be covered to ward off getting sick.

## NUTRITION GOALS

The *Instituto de Nutrición e Higiene de los Alimentos* (INHA), is Cuba's main nutrition agency, has made addressing *over nutrition* as its main focus due to energy dense foods. They are promoting healthy eating with the emphasis on increasing consumption of vegetables, fruits and whole grains.<sup>2,5</sup>

## CUBA meets the U.S.

Little Havana in Miami, FL is a hub of Cuban culture in the U.S. An influx of Cuban immigrants, especially, in Florida, have integrated their rich culture and cuisine. Contributions to the U.S. culture includes traditional foods, coffee, rum, cigars and dance. Even with assimilation to American culture, Cuban immigrants maintain pride and practice of their own heritage.<sup>3,7,9</sup>

## NUTRITION CONCERNS<sup>2,6</sup>

Cuba has a rich food heritage and traditional dishes. However modern cultures have altered traditional patterns with the addition and increase of processed and fast foods. This is developing the concern for **INCREASED**:

- Cholesterol
- Saturated fat
- Sugar
- Calories

## HEALTH STATISTICS SNAPSHOT

### CUBAN-AMERICANS

- **9%** Type 2 Diabetes (T2D)<sup>6</sup>
- **2x higher** death rates due to T2D than non-Hispanic Americans<sup>8</sup>
- **25%** Hypertension (HTN)<sup>6</sup>



### REFERENCES:

1. Cuba. U.S. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ci/bgn/2886.htm>. Published November 8, 2017. Accessed February 1, 2018.
2. Fuster M. Comparative analysis of dietary guidelines in the Spanish-Speaking Caribbean. *Public Health Nutr.* 2015;19(04):607-615. doi:10.1017/s1368980015002153.
3. Alfonso ID. We are what we now eat: food and identity in the Cuban diaspora. *Can J Lat Am Caribb Stud.* 2012;37(74):173-206.
4. Henken T. *Cuba: a global studies handbook*. ABC-CLIO, LLC; 2007.
5. Rodriguez-Martin BC, Innamorati M, Imperatori C, et al. Eating behaviors in Cuban adults: results from an exploratory transcultural study. *Front Psychol.* 2016;7. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01455.
6. Pabon-Nau LP, Cohen A, Meigs JB, Grant RW. Hypertension and diabetes prevalence among U.S. Hispanics by country of origin: the national health interview survey 2000-2005. *J Gen Intern Med.* 2010;25(8):847-852. doi:10.1007/s11606-010-1335-8.
7. de la Fuente A, ed. *Cuban studies 44*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press; 2016.
8. Huffman FG, Zarini GG, Mcnamara E, Nagarajan A. The Healthy Eating Index and the Alternate Healthy Eating Index as predictors of 10-year CHD risk in Cuban Americans with and without type 2 diabetes. *Public Health Nutrition.* 2011;14(11):2006-2014. doi:10.1017/s1368980011001054.
9. Creamer C. In Miami, Cuban culture, no passport required. *New York Times*. April 7, 2016.