

# The Food and Culture of Haiti:

## A fact sheet



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### Introduction

Food is an important part of the Haitian culture.<sup>2</sup> Their cuisine is strongly influenced by African and French flavors.<sup>3-5</sup> There also is a presence of Spanish and Indian flavor.<sup>3-5</sup> Haitian food is vibrant and tasty.<sup>4,5</sup> Haitians may be reluctant to try new foods when in new countries.<sup>3</sup>

### Staple Foods<sup>4,6</sup>

- **Meat/Poultry/Fish:** beef, pork, goat, chicken, turkey, and a variety of fish
- **Eggs/Legumes:** chicken eggs; a variety of beans such as black beans, black-eyed peas, chickpeas, soybean, red beans
- **Cereals/Grains:** cassava, cornmeal, short-grain rice, wheat
- **Fruits:** akee, avocados, bananas and plantains, breadfruit, cashew apple, coconut, guava, soursop, jackfruit, lemons, limes, mangoes, papayas, pineapple
- **Vegetables:** arracacha, arrowroot, cabbage, calabaza, cassava, chiles, corn, djon-djon mushrooms, peppers, potatoes, squashes, sweet potatoes
- **Seasonings:** anise, annatto, bay leaf, chiles, cinnamon, coui, garlic, onions, pimento, recaon, thyme

### Meal Patterns<sup>3,4,7</sup>

Breakfast (dejne) is small; usually coffee, bread, fruit juice, and an egg.

Lunch (manje midi) is a large meal. Usually rice, beans, and meat.

Snacks are frequent and consist of fruit.

Evening meal (dine) is soup or hot cereal.

### Traditional Dishes<sup>4,5</sup>

**Black eyed peas and rice**

**Poulet rôti à la créole** (Banana-stuffed chicken)

**Barbecued goat with child peppers**

**Akasan** (Milky cornmeal beverage)

**Pikliz** (Spicy carrot and cabbage condiment)

**Citrus-marinated chicken with boiled cashews**

**Griot** (Fried pork cubes marinated in sour orange juice and garlic)

**Soup Joumou** (pumpkin soup)

### Drinks<sup>3,4</sup>

Coffee is most popular in the morning. Fruit juices and water are consumed throughout the day. Tea is only drunk when sick as it is thought to have a therapeutic value.

### Meal Preparation<sup>2,5,8,9</sup>

Traditional kitchens are often outdoors. Families do not always have running water or electricity. Meals can be made over charcoal stoves. Food is often fried and at low cost in curbside restaurants. Utensils are usually kept for guests, not the family unit. Utensils are frequently made from gourds. The gourd comes from the calabash tree and is a hard-shelled fruit.

## Symbolic/Holiday Foods<sup>3,4,10</sup>

The most celebrated food in Haitian culture is soup joumou (pumpkin soup). Joumou is eaten on New Year's day or Haiti's independence day. It is consumed as a celebration of freedom from slavery. The slaves were not allowed to eat joumou as it was considered superior.

## Traditional Health Beliefs<sup>3,4</sup>

Haitians believe in a hot and cold balance. Foods may also be light/heavy. Balance is necessary to be healthy; illness is due to imbalance. Heavy foods are reserved for the day and light foods are for night. The distinction is based on the ability to digest. Food preparation also defines whether food is heavy or light.

### Cold Foods<sup>3</sup>

Avocado  
Grapefruit  
Mango  
Cassava bread  
Banana  
Lime  
Orange juice  
Tomato

### Warm Foods<sup>3</sup>

Eggs  
Grapefruit juice  
Pigeon meat  
Cinnamon  
Coffee  
Nutmeg  
Raw rum

The Haitian culture also believes there are times when you should not eat 'hot' and 'cold' foods.<sup>3</sup> For example, diarrhea is considered a 'hot' illness that needs 'cold' foods. After vigorous activities, you should not consume 'cold' foods. This stems from a fear of imbalance in the body. Certain foods should also be avoided at different stages of life. Teens are not to drink excess orange or lemon juice for fear of acne. Tomatoes and white beans should be avoided after having a baby. It is thought they increase the risk of hemorrhage.<sup>3</sup>

The two most common religions in Haiti are Catholicism and Voodoo.<sup>4</sup> A part of Voodoo focuses on not wasting anything.<sup>2</sup> If there is a religious practice that involves an animal, every part of that animal will be used.<sup>2</sup>

## Current Trends and Habits

One concerning thought is the belief of obesity defining status.<sup>11</sup> An obese individual is thought to be able to afford energy-dense food. The poor do not have this same purchasing power.<sup>11</sup> With immigration to the United States, dietary changes became less healthy with increased length of stay.<sup>12</sup> Those who stay in Haiti face many hardships. Since the 2010 earthquake, Haiti has continued to struggle to recover.<sup>4</sup> There is an abundance of food insecurity, minimal clean water, and worsening of malnutrition.<sup>4</sup>

## Haiti's Nutrients of Concern<sup>4</sup>

Calcium  
Iron  
Iodine  
Vitamin A  
Vitamin B12  
Vitamin C

## Haiti Nutrition Profile

**3.6 Million People Food Insecure<sup>8</sup>**  
**53% of Haitians are Undernourished<sup>13</sup>**  
**59% Live on less than \$2.42 per day<sup>13</sup>**

## Life in the United States

Many Haitian Americans experience an improvement in finances.<sup>12</sup> Often this is coupled with an increase in time in the U.S. and progression towards obesity.<sup>11,12</sup> Haitian migrants must be mindful of the "obesogenic" environment of the U.S.<sup>11</sup> This environment is defined by readily available, inexpensive, and energy dense foods.<sup>11</sup>

The diet of an immigrant is based upon the influence of their new home culture.<sup>12</sup> There has been an increase in momentum for Haitian cuisine.<sup>5</sup> Haitian chefs are no longer fearful of saying "Haitian cuisine". They are discussing it with the same vibrant and proud attitude that defines their food culture.<sup>5</sup> Further making the United States a culturally diverse place to live, work, and play.

## References

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