



Eating Venezuelan Style

Folks from the parish often ask me, “What is the most typical meal in Minnesota?” “That depends,” I tell them, “on the occasion”. Most families have long-standing traditions for dinners on Thanksgiving and Christmas, and many a 4th of July celebration would be incomplete without chicken or hamburgers and brats on the grill, baked beans, chips, potato salad, and ice cream. For you families with young kids, how often have pizza or hot dogs or spaghetti been on the menu in the past year? Those three are among kids’ favorites here as well, although hot dogs from a street vendor will usually come smothered with shredded onions, cabbage, carrots, cheese, shoestring potatoes, and special sauce. Venezuelans tend to eat a lot of rice and noodles, chicken if they can afford it, and fruits like bananas, mangos and papaya that grow so well in this hot climate.

The typical Venezuelan diet, however, includes an array of foods you probably don’t eat back in Minnesota. The single most common item is the **arepa**, a fried or baked cornmeal patty the shape and size of a large hamburger. They cut it in two and fill it with cheese, scrambled eggs, ham, or whatever else they have on their plate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Next are **empanadas**, deep-fried sweet dough cornmeal turnovers filled with shredded meat (I like chicken the best), cheese or seafood. They are popular with Mexicans as well and would make an ideal State Fair food back in Minnesota.

My personal favorites are **cachapas**, Venezuelan corn pancakes. Strip the kernels from fresh ears of corn, grind them and add milk, eggs, a bit of oil and sugar to your taste. Fry them up and top them with butter and shredded white cheese with pork or sausage on the side. Oh my, now that is heaven on earth! If you’re going to make them in Minnesota you need to use field corn instead of sweet corn so the window of opportunity is limited to a few weeks at the end of August into September. Farmers can raise corn year round here so cachapas are frequently on the menu, thank God!

With December in Minnesota come Christmas cookies, fruit bread, and other holiday favorites washed down with apple cider or hot chocolate (although the hot chocolate here is thicker and much tastier, made from homegrown cacao beans). Venezuelans have special Christmas treats as well. The **hallaca**, as with Mexican tamales, is made from diced meats mixed with green peppers, onion, garlic, tomatoes, raisins, olives and spices, stuffed in cornmeal dough, wrapped in banana leaves, and boiled. Venezuelans love to tell a joke about a gringo eating hallacas for the first time. “How did you like them?” he is asked to which he replies, “They were tasty, but the lettuce wrapping was pretty tough.” The other Christmas treat is **pan de jamón**. Ham, raisins and olives are rolled into bread dough and baked in long loaves. In a more typical non-covid year, Venezuelans prepare for Christmas with an octave of pre-dawn “Aguinaldo” Masses, after which pan de jamón is always served as a reward for getting up early.

Many countries have a meal typical to the culture and food grown there. In Venezuela that meal is called **Pabellón Criollo** and consists of pulled beef mixed with vegetables and spices, black beans, rice, and fried plantain. I don’t know how it got its name since “pabellón” in Spanish means a pavilion or ornate covering, but I sure do like the meal.

Don’t forget dessert! My favorite is **torta de tres leches** or three-milk cake, also popular in Mexico, although Mexicans call cake “pastel” and their “torta” is a sandwich on a big bun. Start with a white cake with the egg whites whipped into a merengue and folded into the batter to make it soft and spongy. When the cake cools, mix condensed, evaporated and regular milk, punch holes in the cake with a fork, and saturate it with the “tres leches”. Top it with whipped cream and fresh fruit. Wow, is your mouth watering right now like mine?

Points to ponder

What are your favorite foods? Do you like trying new foods? Which of these Venezuelan foods would you like to check out? What foods from other cultures around the world have you tried?

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These “Did you know?” papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofst dominic.org or 651-368-7324.



cachapa



hallaca



pan de jamón



pabellón criollo