Cruz Miguel Ortíz Cuadra


_Eating Puerto Rico_, a historical feast about food production, distribution, and consumption (as well as cultural negotiations), is significant not only for Puerto Rican research but for the entire Caribbean, as many of the food staples discussed are at the base of Caribbean regional cuisine. The book joins Barry Higman’s _Jamaican Food_1 to become a foundational reference work for the nascent field of Hispanic Caribbean food studies. Ortíz Cuadra could be considered the foremost food scholar in Puerto Rico; his publications are a must reference for researchers interested in food histories of the Hispanic Caribbean. In his more informal publications (such as short essays in _80 Grados_, the hub for Puerto Rican popular culture analysis), he continues his well-documented and accessible discussions on the significance of Puerto Rican foodways.

This English edition of _Puerto Rico en la Olla: Somos aún lo que comimos?_ (Madrid: Ediciones Doce Calles, 2006) does justice to the original (except for lacking certain poetics of the vernacular, which is expected); it remains as robust a reference work as the Spanish original. Well researched, with an accessible organization, engaging writing, and plenty of data, it will be useful for food scholars, educated audiences, and lay readers. It includes an excellent glossary, extensive notes, references, and an index. I was disappointed not to find images (given the visual and sensual nature of food); these would have been welcomed by readers unfamiliar with many of the materials discussed. The ample use of tables is helpful and compensates to some extent for the absence of images.

The three main framings for the book’s data are the formation of a Caribbean national cuisine in Puerto Rico, the social history of selected food staples, and the effects of European colonization of the Americas on global food production. Focus is on the way certain food staples (including bacalao and rice) became part of the Puerto Rican diet, and how these specific circumstances contributed to the formation of national and regional cuisine. Chapters 1–6 deal with particular staples (rice, beans, cornmeal, codfish, _viandas_ [tubers], and meat). Chapters 7 and 8 then address the implications of the social history and global production of these colonial foods to show major transformations in Puerto Rican diet and foodways. Ortíz Cuadra pays particular attention to plan-

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tation slavery and later to changes after the 1898 U.S. occupation and colonization of the Island. He brings attention to major changes during U.S.-sponsored industrialization, urbanization, and uneven modernization of the 1950s, after the status change from territory to “an associated free state” (Estado Libre Asociado). Discussion of this wider context of food in Puerto Rican geopolitics contributes to cultural and political debates that have remained at the forefront of the Island’s cultural nationalism struggles.

Following a short discussion of the cultural meanings attached to “traditional” Puerto Rican cuisine (like many other national cuisines in the Caribbean, initially considered as slave, peasant, poor cuisines), the book gives an update of the major fast-food franchises that have “invaded” the island and the changes in food choices within the population. The flooding of the public food markets in Puerto Rico with fast-food franchises had an effect on the practices and meanings of preparing traditional foods at home. Ortíz Cuadra closes by addressing the main question posed in the introduction: Are Puerto Ricans still what they eat? Not wanting to spoil the punch line for readers, I will not reveal the answer proposed. However, it is important to point out that a more in-depth analysis of the intersection of gender, race, and class would have been beneficial to understand changes and continuity in food consumption, since “cuisine” by itself is a vague concept, a site of diverse and contested Puerto Rican national belonging narratives. These points of discussion would have helped to clarify how radical material changes are only one way to understand a people’s cultural histories. Place-specific memory-work (as reinvention of traditions) and ideological visions of who people wish to become (through the plate) are also at the core of survival agendas.

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