

EL SALVADOR

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OVERVIEW

El Salvador is one of seven countries residing in Central America, an isthmus (land bridge) between North and South America. El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America, sandwiched between Guatemala and Honduras, and the only one without an Atlantic coastline. The country was originally inhabited by Native Americans, specifically, the Pipil tribes. The Spanish came in control of the area from the 1500s until the 1821 revolt for independence.

Nearly 97% of the 7,185,218 population of El Salvador are mestizos, or a blend of Native American and Spanish descent. The remainder of the population is comprised of indigenous Americans, Africans, and Creoles, or people of unmixed European descent. There is a large income gap between the country's wealthiest and poorest citizens, with nearly 50% of the population subsisting below the national poverty line. The country survived a 12 year civil war that ended in 1992, which made a definite impact in Salvadoran cuisine as far as availability and division of cooking labor within the home.

VIGNETTE

Julia Garcia is a single Salvadoran mother raising her three children Jesus, Juanita, and Pedro in a rural town north of San Salvador, the capital, near the foothills of Mount Guazapa. The town is a new *comunidad* (community) given to the FMLN guerilla organization and their land poor families as part of the peace agreement signed to end the civil war in 1992. Julia was a guerilla with the FMLN during the war, and was rewarded with a small bit of land, materials and money to restart her life. Although rural and

surrounded by dirt roads, Julia has enough space in her 10 x 3 meter cement dwelling to house beds for herself, her children, and her mother and father, who also live with her and help run her milpa, or farm.

The Garcia farm grows corn, rice, beans, and raises the occasional chicken or cow. Not only does this provide income for the family, but also their daily food. The morning starts early for Julia, who wakes up at 6 a.m. to start grinding the maiz (corn) for the day's tortillas. Most meals in the Garcia household revolve around tortillas and beans. For breakfast, Julia fries up leftover beans and rice from the previous night's dinner into a dish called casamiento, which she serves to her family with still-warm from the griddle-tortillas and coffee.

Lunch is made of freshly cooked black beans with more warm tortillas, and slices of banana from her neighbor's milpa. Dinner is more beans and tortillas accompanied by sopa de pata, or a soup made with tripe, cow feet, corn and flavored with lemon and chile. The family recently butchered their cow, so the extra pieces that are not sold in the market are saved for family dinners. On the weekends, Julia's mother treats the family by making a semita, or a coffee cake filled with papaya jam.

MAJOR FOODSTUFFS

Indigenous American populations in El Salvador were mainly vegetarian pre-European settlement, cooking with little fat and eating meat on only special occasions. When the Spanish took control of the country in the 1500s, they brought along with them a variety of new cooking methods like frying, sautéing and ingredients like animal fat and rice that influenced the native cuisine.

The climate in El Salvador is tropical, with a rainy season between May and October, and a dry season between November and April. Mountains encompass most of the terrain, along with a central plateau region, as well as slender coastlines. The focus of food production in El Salvador revolves around coffee, rice, beans, corn, as well as grass-fed beef and shrimp. All of these ingredients figure into the average daily diet of a Salvadoran depending on their social class. For example, beef is highly prized, and part of at least one meal a day for middle and upper class families, but it remains a rare indulgence for the poor. Seafood, fish and pork are also eaten, and rural diets can be enhanced with cusuco, a breed of armadillo. Corn is used daily to make tortillas, pupusas (stuffed tortillas), tamales, drinks and desserts.

Volcanoes are all across Central America, and have made the soil incredibly rich in nutrients and ideal for growing many kinds of produce. This includes but is not limited to: mango, watermelon, papaya, guava, lettuce, coconut, tamarind, cabbage, banana, squash, yucca, pepper and tomato. The plantain is a staple starch in El Salvador, even more so than potatoes, and can be used unripe (green) in savory applications or ripe (black) in sweet applications.

An important ingredient in Salvadoran and Central American cooking is annatto seeds, which come from an indigenous tree known as achiote and was used by the indigenous population for special rituals, body and pottery painting, and even currency. Today, the seeds are ground into a paste with salt, pepper, lime or sour orange juice and vinegar to be used as a marinade for meats. Before refrigeration, achiote paste prevented the meat from spoiling, and although flavorless raw, the flavors are emphasized through the application of heat.

Salvadorans value fresh, seasonal produce, and prefer making food from scratch, so shopping at an open-air market is often a daily occurrence. Community market places are considered to be social venues where one can catch up with family and friends. Most Salvadoran culinary traditions are passed down orally, and the market place is where families share and trade cooking tips. For middle and upper class families that tend to have a family chef, one member of the family is assigned to help the chef cook the family's style of cooking, so the home kitchen is another place Salvadoran oral culinary history and traditions are passed along.

Purified drinking water is not available to the entire population, and tropical, sugary fruit juice drinks called aguas frescas are popular. Kolachampan is a sugarcane flavored soda, and ensaladas (salad) are blended mixed fruit juices. Corn is used to make several different drinks, including a warm glass of atole, a filling drink served salty or sweet, and chicha, an alcoholic indigenous beverage. Pilsner is the beer of choice in El Salvador.

Cooking

Corn is a popular Salvadoran ingredient, but it takes a great deal of work to make it usable. Dried corn is soaked in a lime-water solution until soft, then ground (with an appliance or by hand) into masa, a soft corn dough that is used as the base for tortillas, tamales, empanadas and more. To make tortillas, a small bit of dough is rolled or pressed out into a circle of the desired size, then quickly cooked on a hot griddle. The same dough can be made into tamale dough, filled with meat or cheese, then wrapped in banana leaves before being steamed or boiled.

Another well-liked Salvadoran dish that uses masa is the pupusa. Said to be created by the Pipil tribe which used to inhabit El Salvador, a pupusa is a stuffed tortilla, and a common street food. The method is similar to making tortillas, except that the dough is wrapped around a range of fillings including cheese, chicharrones (pork rinds), beans, squash, etc. before being griddled. It is served with curtido, a spicy pickled mix of cabbage, carrots and chile peppers that is said to enhance the pupusa's subtle flavors.

Cheese stuffed pupusas

Ingredients

Dough:

2 cup masa harina

1 cup of water

1 TB olive oil

S&p to taste

Filling:

½ cup crumbled queso fresco

½ cup white melting cheese, like Chihuahua

Method:

Mix the masa harina, water and olive oil in a bowl until combined into a soft dough.

Taste for flavor, and then adjust seasonings with salt and pepper to your preference.

Split the dough into eight evenly size balls, roughly 2 inches in diameter. Roll out each ball to have a 6 inch diameter. Sprinkle cheese evenly over the middle of the tortilla, then top with another rolled out tortilla, pinching the edges to seal the filling inside. Place the stuffed tortilla on a preheated ungreased griddle and cook on both sides until tortilla is crispy and cheese is melted and warm, a few minutes. Serve with spicy, room temperature curtido, recipe below.

Serves 4 people with one pupusa each.

Curtido

Ingredients

¼ head of red cabbage, thinly sliced

¼ head of green cabbage, thinly sliced

1 carrot, peeled, grated

2 scallions, thinly sliced

1 jalapeno pepper, minced

1 cup water

1 ½ cups apple cider vinegar

½ Tablespoon salt

½ teaspoon Mexican oregano

1 teaspoon brown sugar

Place the cabbage, carrots and scallions into a large bowl. Bring the water, hot pepper, vinegar, salt, sugar and oregano to a boil in a small pot. Pour the hot pickling liquid over the bowl of vegetables, and stir. Cover and let sit for at least 24 hours, then pack into a container and store in the refrigerator for 2 to 3 weeks. Let the curtido come to room temperature before serving with pupusas.

Rice is another important staple ingredient in Salvadoran cooking, and it is said that a cook is judged by the fluffiness of their rice. After the rice has been rinsed, the grains are browned in oil with some onion, which allows the rice to remain fluffy after it is cooked, and flavors it as well. Most meat is marinated in citrus juices, which helps to flavor and tenderize the meat, especially in dishes like carne asada.

Cooking was traditionally handled by the woman of the house, especially if the man of the house (if there was one) worked outside of the home. It wasn't until after the civil war ended in 1992 that women's rights became important cause in Central America. Women gained a right to education and began working out of the home. Another positive result of the war was that men started helping out more at home, especially in the kitchen. Fathers, husbands and sons are pitching in to assist with the daily corn grinding, helping to cook a family meal and even cleaning up, as the civil war emphasized an importance of all people, men and women, rich and poor, being considered equal.

TYPICAL MEALS

For breakfast, beans and tortillas are the most common and affordable breakfast dish in El Salvador. Tropical fruits are also served, such as bananas, papayas, and mangos. El huevos picados (scrambled eggs with vegetables) is a popular dish, along with cheese. Platanos fritos is another popular breakfast dish made from deep fried plantains, and can be served savory (unripe plantains) or sweet (ripe plantains).

For lunch and dinner, there are a variety of popular Salvadoran dishes that can be made or purchased, depending on the situation. Pupusas are stuffed tortillas and popular street food that is quick and cheap. Other popular street food includes empanadas (flour pastries stuffed with meats or vegetables) and tamales, which are stuffed with meat or sweet corn and wrapped in banana leaves before being steamed.

Sopa de pollo (Salvadoran chicken soup) is another common dish made from chicken, chickpeas, potatoes, yucca, cilantro, onions and lime. Beef is a standard meat for those who can afford it, and Salvadorans grill it in carne asada (grilled skirt steak) and cook it in bistec encebollado (beef simmered with onions). Since El Salvador is a coastal country, seafood and fish are commonly eaten, typically in stew or soup form. Snacks are often fried, like chicharron (pork rind) and yucca frita (fried yucca), and pacalla, or cornmeal breaded palm flowers fried and served with tomato sauce.

Hot chocolate and coffee are the most popular drinks in the country, along with refrescos, or fruit drinks. Common Salvadoran desserts include tres leches cake (cake soaked in three kinds of milk), arroz con leche (rice pudding), and semita (coffee-cake-type pastry filled with different jams or preserves). The Salvadoran quesadilla is another

famous dessert, essentially a sweet cheese pound cake flavored with sour cream, sesame seeds and queso fresco or Parmesan cheese.

EATING OUT

In major cities throughout El Salvador, fast food restaurants and more expensive, sit-down restaurants thrive. Subway, Pizza Hut, Burger King and several other American fast food chain restaurants have made their way down to major Salvadoran cities.

Outside of the cities, the most common style of restaurant are the comedores, which function like cafeterias with either a menu to order from or a buffet to choose from, and a waitress that brings the food to the table. Also, street food vendors are popular all over El Salvador, and sell items like pupusas with curtido for busy workers with no time to cook. Pupusas are also sold in pupuserias, or restaurants that specialize in making pupusas.

SPECIAL OCCASION

Much of El Salvador is Roman Catholic, so Christmas and Semana Santa, or Holy Week (week before Easter) are especially important occasions in the average Salvadoran life.

Tamales are one traditional food made for such celebrations, as are pupusas with curtido and panes con chumpe, or Salvadoran turkey sandwiches typically made on Christmas Eve or New Years Eve.

DIET AND HEALTH

The general diet of El Salvador, which consists of corn and beans supplemented with meat, dairy, and fresh produce, is healthy. Tortillas and beans provide more than enough complex protein for the body; beans provide fiber, magnesium and vitamin B among other nutrients, and tortillas gain zinc and iron from being ground in a grinding stone.

Tropical fruits that are native to El Salvador, such as mango, banana, sour orange and papaya, offer plenty of carotenoids and vitamin C.

With almost half of the population living below the national poverty level, financial distress often prevents families from getting a well-balanced, healthy diet in El Salvador. Fresh fruits and meats like beef and chicken are not affordable to all income levels, and the little meat purchased by the poor tends to be high in fat and low in nutrition, like sausages.

Food security in El Salvador has been threatened by natural disasters (including an earthquake and a mudslide), rising food prices, little education, lack of food production and financial hardship. 16% of rural families do not make enough money to buy food. A civil war in the eighties displaced rural communities relied on to produce cereal for the country, which has led to a reduced food supplies. Malnutrition in children under the age of five has led to increased stunted growth among Salvadoran children.

FURTHER READING

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