



A Peruvian family's holiday tradition

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In Lima, Peru, where Mauricio Huarcaya grew up, his family celebrated holiday events with picarones, a traditional Peruvian fried doughnut. With his mother and grandmother at the helm, he and his cousins formed the dough with their hands. They competed to see who could make the perfectly shaped, crispiest picarón. As the youngest cousin, Huarcaya never won.



Renato Huarcaya, left, and Mauricio Huarcaya in front of their foodtruck, Gusta Peruano. Photo by Tom Calhoun Photography

"Picarones are a fried doughnut made of a sweet potato and squash dough," Huarcaya says. "You make a syrup with chancaca (unrefined cane sugar). It's sweet; it's bright, airy, fluffy. It smells like holiday."

Huarcaya moved with his family to Miami, Florida, when he was 9, and five years later to Wilmington, North Carolina. In 2010, a year after graduating from high school, he attended culinary classes and gained restaurant experience in Charlotte. In 2017, Huarcaya headed to Charleston, South Carolina, to work at Fig, a James Beard Foundation-recognized restaurant. He returned to Wilmington in 2021 to be closer to family.

Full circle

In 2022, Huarcaya and his brother Renato Huarcaya opened Gusta Peruano (flavors of Peru), a pop-up restaurant in Wilmington. By August 2025, the brothers decided they had nothing to lose and launched a food truck, by the same name, serving Peruvian-inspired dishes.

"We specialize in Peruvian street food," Mauricio says. "We go to breweries, events, weddings, private parties and do in-home dinners and cooking classes."

Gusta Peruano received the North Carolina Restaurant and Lodging Association's People's Choice Award in 2024 and 2025. Mauricio was named chef of the year at NCRLA's 2025 Chef Showdown, an annual competition highlighting chefs, pastry chefs, mixologists and distillers in the state.

"It was such a big deal for us," Mauricio says. "We came here at such a young age and now we're finding out what we love to do and how to do things."

Picarones

Servings: 5

Ingredients

Dough

- 1 cup sweet potato, peeled and cut in cubes
- 1 cup butternut squash, peeled and cut in cubes
- 1 cup water
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 3 tablespoons fresh yeast

Syrup

- 1 cup water
- 1/4 cup chancaca
- 1 tablespoon anise seeds
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 3 cloves
- 2 orange peels
- 2 fig leaves
- 1/4 of a pineapple

Frying

- 1 pinch salt
- 3 quarts vegetable oil for frying in a 6-quart pot

Directions

For the dough, place the sweet potato and squash in a pot. Add 1 cup water and the cinnamon stick, then simmer until tender. Drain, reserving the cooking liquid, and mash the sweet potato and squash into a smooth puree.

Gradually add the flour to the puree and mix to combine.

In a separate bowl, combine the reserved cooking liquid with the sugar. Add the yeast and stir until dissolved. Add the yeast mixture to the dough and work until combined.

Cover and let the dough rest for about 2 hours. Stir or knead again, then cover and let rest for at least 3 more hours, until airy and expanded.

For the syrup, bring the water to a boil in a pot. Add the chancaca, anise seeds, cinnamon, cloves, orange peels, fig leaves and pineapple. Simmer for about 45 minutes. Strain and cool.

Heat the oil for frying.

Place the water and salt in a small bowl. Wet your hands with the salt water, then scoop up a golf ball-size piece of dough. Stretch the dough and make a hole in the center to form a ring. Carefully place it in the hot oil.

When the dough floats, turn each picarón using a wooden stick. Fry until golden brown on both sides, then remove and rest on the stick or a rack to drain excess oil.

Serve warm, drizzled with syrup.

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