



Food historian celebrates holidays, heritage through cooking

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Food historian celebrates holidays, heritage through cooking

In 2013, Von Diaz, determined to connect with her grandmother who was ill and unable to cook, decided to make her way through "Cocina Criolla," a popular cookbook given to Puerto Rican brides. She used her grandmother's copy of the book, reading the handwritten notes scribbled throughout. The experience launched Diaz into the food history industry, a parallel career to hers in the media.

"As much as I loved the cooking part," Diaz says, "I became a bit more fascinated in what I was reading in the recipes. Recipes are these incredible archives of information. Ingredients tell stories, techniques tell stories, finished product tell stories."

Diaz spent her first five years in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico, before moving with her family to the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. Her summers were spent in Puerto Rico with her grandmother, learning to cook. Whether holidays, from Thanksgiving through Three Kings Day, were celebrated in Puerto Rico or in Georgia with other Puerto Rican families in the community, food and cultural traditions were always honored. Music and salsa dancing were enjoyed along with roast pork, pork shoulder, pasteles (root vegetable tamale stuffed with pork and vegetables), Arroz Con Gandules (rice and pigeon peas with spices) and the traditional coquito (a coconut-milk eggnog).

Diaz shares her personal journey in her first book, published in 2018, "[Coconuts and Collards: Recipes and Stories From Puerto Rico to the Deep South](#)." She released her second book in 2024: "[Islas: A Celebration of Tropical Cooking](#)." Diaz has contributed to several books, most recently, "When Southern Women Cook," a project by James Beard Foundation award-winning Chef Tony Tipton Martin.

When Diaz is not traveling for cooking demonstrations, lectures or hosting dinners for corporate and nonprofit events, she's in Durham, North Carolina, working as the senior producer for [StoryCore](#), a nonprofit dedicated to telling stories, for media outlets such as NPR's "Morning Edition."



"Ingredients tell stories, techniques tell stories, finished product tell stories," says author and historian Von Diaz. Photo by Cybelle Codish

PUERTO RICAN COCONUT RUM PUNCH (COQUITO)

Ingredients

- 1 1/4 cups water
- 3 cinnamon sticks
- 8 large egg yolks
- 1 (13.5-ounce) can coconut milk
- 1 (14-ounce) can sweetened condensed milk
- 1 (15-ounce) can cream of coconut, such as Coco Lopez
- 1/2 teaspoon finely grated lime zest
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt
- 1 liter white rum

Directions

1. Place the water and cinnamon sticks in a small saucepan and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat as needed and simmer while you prepare the remaining ingredients.
2. Place the egg yolks in a large blender and blend on high until they thicken into a cream, about 3 minutes.
3. Add the coconut milk and blend for 1 minute. Add the condensed milk and cream of coconut and blend until thickened, about 3 minutes.
4. Remove the cinnamon sticks from the water and set aside. Pour the cinnamon water into the blender. Add the zest, vanilla and salt, and pulse once to incorporate. Pour into bottles or a pitcher.
5. Pour in the rum to desired taste and add the reserved cinnamon sticks. Refrigerate until chilled before serving. Stir well with a spoon to incorporate before serving.

Adapted from "[Coconuts and Collards: Recipes and Stories from Puerto Rico to the Deep South](#)" by Von Diaz (University Press of Florida, 2018)

On the cover: A version of traditional coquito. Article by Vanessa Infanzon. Published eight times per year, *Unity* is exclusively distributed to clients of Thompson Hospitality and Compass Group, both world leaders in foodservice. To contact us, send an email to marketing@thompsonhospitalityjv.com. ©2024 Thompson Hospitality and Compass Group. Produced by [Content Spectrum](#).

