

In the 1957 musical *West Side Story* Anita sings about the joys of America as opposed to Puerto Rico's disappointments. However, if Anita had been able to dine as well in San Juan back then as locals and visitors can dine there now she may never have left her island!

Fine dining on the island of Puerto Rico is making huge leaps forward and culinary travelers are starting to slowly notice. The island's traditional cuisine is a flavorful combination of the original inhabitants' (the Tainos) cooking culture influenced by other Caribbean and African and European cuisines and pork and seafood play a central role when it comes to choosing a protein. No longer is rice and beans the hallmark of Puerto Rican cuisine. Chefs across the island have been building on their heritage, reaching for local ingredients and picking up techniques and styles from their mainland colleagues to create an amazing breadth of menus. Noted Puerto Rican Chef, Carmen

Gonzalez, says, "I have seen such a change in cuisine in Puerto Rico from the days when the only thing you had were French and Austrian chefs cooking in the hotels and mom and pop joints across the island. Now people are really exploring Puerto Rican cuisine and ingredients. I do think the food has changed tremendously; not only the way it has been cooked but down to the new influences on the menus, like how Roberto Treviño combines Asian tastes with Puerto Rican favorites."

When in San Juan there are a wide variety of places to choose from for your dining pleasure; simple local owned and beloved spots like La Bombonera which has been around since the early 1900s to the elegant and artful cuisine of Wilo Benet's Pikayo in the San Juan Museum of Art. Chefs like Linton Romero at Koco, and Michael Bartemes at El Convento's Patio del Nispero are making a grand showing that ensures your dining experience in Puerto Rico is world class.

THE BEST OF SAN JUAN

By Francine Cohen



PATIO DEL NISPERO

– Escape from the hustle and bustle of downtown San Juan restaurants and slip into the sunny, yet cool garden oasis that is Nispero. Situated in the courtyard of the exquisite boutique hotel which

was formerly a convent (hence the name, El Convento), Nispero is a respite for your soul and the perfect way to feed your hunger. Chef Michael Bartemes is perhaps one of this town's unsung kitchen heroes. Which is good news for diners who want to get a lunchtime table to sample his refreshing Sinless Watermelon Soup. If you insist on a salad then the El Convento Salad with spinach, pears, blue cheese and a pistachio-bacon vinaigrette is a must try. Whatever you eat here you'll be blessing the chef for his talent.



LA BOMBONERA

– When you want to truly go native the only place to go is La Bombonera, a fixture in San Juan since 1902. The best time to grab a seat here at the linoleum counter with the crackled stools that date

way back is just as they open. Stop in early in the morning as many locals do and have your morning coffee with a mallorca, the local sweet bread, or sip a fruit batida with a meat or cheese filled turnover if that suits your fancy. It's quite possible that nothing has changed here since they opened in the last century; the waiters still possess that slightly gruff old school charm, the window quickly fills with all sorts of delightful pastries and everyone from infants to the elderly gather at tables for a typical luncheonette meal and some great conversation.

BUDATAI – Walk in and you'd think you'd stepped into the hottest new restaurants in New York or L.A. What a scene here in the hip Condado section of town. The driving music keeps the attractive crowd moving through the bar as they sip tasty fashionable cocktails and nibble on Chef Roberto Treviño's Asian inspired menu that also incorporates Latin and Caribbean flavors. Sit upstairs in the dining room, on a terrace or at the sushi bar or communal table to enjoy sensational dishes like Treviño's spicy tuna rolls with pegao (the delicious crunchy rice everyone covets from the bottom of the pot) or a perfectly grilled churrasco steak and chow fun like noodles. Wines are paired expertly and Treviño and partner Francesco De Juan have created a destination setting that's more than just a delicious meal, it is as desirable a reservation as you might find in any great dining city.



KOCO – Tucked into the newly renovated El San Juan hotel this hot new restaurant marries a sexy hipster factor to the syncopated beat that carries through this landmark hotel. Soothing blue shades evoke the nearby sea and the low lighting helps create an intimate setting at each table. And that is just the décor. The food is head and shoulders above what you'd expect to get at

a hotel restaurant, especially a hotel like this one which has been around so long (though notably lovingly restored and upgraded beautifully by its owner LXR). Chef Linton Romero, a native Californian, and his co-chef Sylva Senat who recently trained in France, put together an exquisite menu that is a blend of bistro favorites with island influences. Ceviches are standouts, as is the entire selection, but truly notable is a coconut risotto which is surprisingly savory and a favorite dish of both the chef and his diners.



PIKAYO – Wilo Benet's Pikayo is a destination where diners will enjoy the edible art on their plate as much as the art hanging on the walls in the museum just outside the dining room doors. A modern, sleek chic look permeates the dining room and the food is poised to match. Nothing but a truffle is as evocative of tasteful decadence and Benet's delicious root vegetable and black truffle soup is richly satisfying and liquid elegance in a bowl.