

Dishes from Bluefields, Nicaragua

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Though Nicaragua is a large and fascinating country, I unfortunately am compelled to limit my discussion here to the Southern Autonomous Region of the Atlantic (RAAS) in general, and to Garifuna and Creole dishes in particular.

RAAS (which has an area of approximately 10,689 sq. miles) accounts for 21% of the National territory but only 7% of the total population. It includes the municipalities of **Bluefields**, *Nueva Guinea* (New Guinea), **Laguna de Perlas** (Pearl Lagoon), La Cruz del Río Grande, Rama, Muelle de los Bueyes, Bocana de Paiwas, El Tortuguero, Kukra Hill, and Desembocadura del Río Grande. The region thus extends from the Grande de Matagalpa in the north to Indian River in the south. It is bordered on the east by the Caribbean sea and on the west by the Departments of Boaco, Chontales, and San Juan.

It should be noted that the population of RAAS is said to be “totally distinct” from the rest of the country. For historical reasons (i.e. prior English domination) as well as “Atlantic influences” (i.e. the presence of many peoples of Afro-Caribbean origin) this region is touted as being complex, dynamic, and multilingual with six clearly identifiable ethnic groups that are symbolically represented by the statue in Bluefields’ main park. Two of these groups are predominantly indigenous (Ramas and Sumos); two are predominantly Black (Creoles and Garífunas); a fifth group (the Miskitos) is said to be a mixture of Blacks and Indians with Indian blood being dominant; and the sixth group is the Mestizo (a mixture of Spanish and Indian) the country’s dominant population.

Although there are no “typical restaurants” in the region, the dishes of the coast - with their reliance on coconut milk as a principal ingredient - are quite different from those of the interior. Some of the more common coastal plates are: *pan de coco* (bread made with coconut milk); *la fruta de pan* (breadfruit); *rondón* (a tuber stew made with coconut milk and fish or dried meat); *gallo pinto con coco* (beans and rice prepared with coconut milk); *queques* (cakes made from banana, *quequisque*, or yucca); and johnny cake (a kind of cracker typically distributed at wakes with ginger tea or coffee).

Though the Garífuna managed to retain their unique Garífuna language in Honduras they seem to have completely lost knowledge of it in Nicaragua by the year 1940. This was said to be due to cultural pressure from other ethnic groups and increased exposure to English which they learned in school. As a result they now have chosen to communicate with their neighbors and one another in English Creole - the linguistic product of the necessity for Englishmen and Africans to communicate for purposes of trade some 350 years ago. The initial language was called pidgin; but the institute of slavery increased its use and it became the language the enslaved mothers passed on to their children - subsequently transforming the pidgin into a Creole.

One of the most popular of the Garifuna and Creole populations is *rondón*, a succulent preparation which I describe in the following two sections:

(1)

Rondón in Pointeen

In Bluefields you can eat fresh shrimp and lobster at relatively low prices; but give me *rondón* - the local coastal dish - any time! As I was walking to the port to see when I could catch the “Hardway” to Orinoco, I met Hemley and a group of Garífuna girls who informed me that the Hardway had a problem and would not be leaving for Orinoco until the following morning. This was sad because I had nothing programmed other than my trip and I asked Hemley if it would be possible to prepare a *rondón* for me at his home if I were to purchase all the ingredients.

After a bit of reflection, he agreed and - together with his friend Cito (Hubert Henry Johnson) - we went to the market to purchase the necessary ingredients (i.e. bananas, plantains, cassava, dasheen, cucumber, *chocho*, onions, coconut, maggi cubes, smoked meat, etc.).

After our purchase, we then headed to the kitchen of the home of Irene Gonzalez in Pointeen where Cito and Hemley began the arduous task of preparing this succulent coastal dish. Irene, by the way, just happens to be the sister of Gretel (the owner of the hotel I’d be staying at in Orinoco).

The first thing they did was boil the dry meat in a large covered pot. They then remove the coconut from its shell for grating and after the meat was boiled, the water was thrown out - to get rid of the smoke - so that the meat could be cooked again in coconut milk. To prepare the coconut milk, Cito grated the coconut on a metal *hibise*. The grated coconut was then mixed with two dippers of water and was then squeezed over a strainer into another pan. The liquid that passed through the strainer is what is known as the “milk” of the coconut.

While all this was going on, someone else washed and peeled the bananas, cassava, dasheen, cucumbers, *chocho* and *coco* (another kind of tuber). The boiled smoked meat was then removed from its water and placed in a big pot with the tubers. The coconut milk was then added along with onions, consommé, black pepper, and - for some inexplicable reason - a packet of 3-minute noodles. This concoction was then boiled for about one hour before it was ready to be served in large plastic buckets.

Rondón - they said - could also be made with fish (placed at top of the pot after boiling), pork, chicken, dry shrimp, or wet shrimp. If the coconut milk is not added - they said - the dish is called “boil up”.

Creole Rondón

On another day, after my return from Laguna de Perlas, I happened to run into three Creole youths, Jason, Charles and Eric who came to our hotel to solicit money for the inscription of their basketball team - “The Hill Boyz”. They, too, claimed to know how to make *rondón* and - like their Garífuna counterparts before them - they accepted my offer to purchase the ingredients for a “team feast”.

After purchasing the ingredients in the market, we went to Jason's house. Jason, we soon learned, was born in 1983 and has one older and one younger brother. The three boys - with help from one of Jason's brothers - then set about preparing a *rondón* with *robalo* (snook fish), green banana, plantain, yucca, dasheen, breadfruit, red pepper, spices (salt, black pepper, lime), etc. all cooked in coconut milk that turned out to be even more mouth-watering than the one we had with dried meat.

The preparation was truly a team effort. As Jason cleaned the fish and seasoned it, one of the other boys grated the coconut and squeezed out the milk. Eric helped to peel and wash the tubers and then put them in a big pot of water to boil with the coconut milk. Then some grated banana and cassava was added. When the tubers got soft - after about a half hour - the seasoned fish was laid on the top of the boiling tubers. Red pepper was then added and the concoction was allowed to cook another half hour before it was ready to be served.

It is here in Pointe, too, that I got to see another version of the May pole dance. I was amazed at the similarities between this Creole culture and that of the Garífuna and asked how they learned how to make Garífuna *rondón*. Eric's response somewhat surprised me when he said: "What makes you think that the Garífunas are the only ones who know how to make this?"

Indeed, upon reflection, I came to understand that the Creoles and Garífuna - their respective histories aside - now have much in common and that they are both living in one giant coastal melting pot in which the language, religion, customs, and cuisine are pretty much the same.

Upon returning again to the main park where the stately mahogany trees and statue of the men representing the six ethnic groups of the Atlantic Coast stand, no one among us seemed to be able to tell me which of the two Black statues represented the Creole and which represented the Garífuna.