

parkdale liberty

the view from Parkdale, Liberty and Roncesvalles Village

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FOOD

This food has history

Brazilian culture is part of its cuisine

By Steve McKinley

When Mario Cassini trotted out his tasting menu at Caju last month, it wasn't just about exposing his customers to Brazilian food – it was a move designed to share his Brazilian culture.

"I find that there are not that many people that know much about Brazilian cuisine or Brazilian culture," he says. "And it came to my mind that the tasting menu is one way to give people a chance to explore that, to find out more."

Cassini's tasting menu is divided into three regions of Brazil, each showcasing the characteristic flavours – and culture – of the region.

Brazilian food, says Cassini, is the sum of all its cultural parts.

Fundamentally, Brazilian cuisine is built upon three major influences: the Brazilian natives – primarily the Tupi and the Guarani tribes – the Portuguese colonists and the African slaves they later brought.

The first Portuguese colonists brought their own food with them. But over time, their food imports dwindled and it became necessary to adapt to local cuisine.

Brazilian natives habitually cooked over open fires. They wrapped foods in banana leaves to cook in those fires. They used cassava as a food staple – for flour, for bread and as a side starch dish.

The Portuguese learned all this from the natives, including how to prepare cassava – poisonous in its raw form. In return they introduced cooking in stone pots – something the natives had never done. That led the way to the cooking of stews. They also introduced domesticated animals – beef and pork – to the evolving Brazilian cuisine.

The Portuguese also imported African slaves to work in their fields. They put some of them to work in their kitchens, where the Africans cooked the Portuguese food, but added their own influences.

In those kitchens, the Brazilian cuisine gained its big flavours. The Africans introduced ginger and malagueta peppers and began cooking in coconut milk and dende (palm) oil.

All these influences show their faces in the Brazilian national dish, the feijoada.

Ostensibly a bean stew, the feijoada (pronounced fey-sha-wa-da) shows its Portuguese background in the pot-cooked stew and the pork and beef that are used to stew with those black beans. Its native Brazilian lineage is apparent in some of the trimmings that come with the stew, most notably the farofa, a lightly roasted cassava flour, or the deep-fried banana or cassava.

The African touch in the feijoada is in the peppers, and the transition from white beans to black turtle beans.

Because it takes several hours to prepare, the cooking of feijoada is a social event in Brazil, where family and friends take samples from the pot, eat some of the side dishes and wash it down with drinks while swapping the stories of their lives.

It becomes something of a comfort food, says Cassini, and that is one of the delights of the Brazilian cuisine.

"If you go back to the roots of the food, you see the culture there," says Cassini. "This beautiful food that we have now in Brazil is thanks to these influences. And so is the culture."

Caju is located at 922 Queen St.

FEIJOADA RECIPE

- 1 lb dry black turtle beans
- 1 lb beef sirloin cut in 1/2 cubes
- 1 lb pork tenderloin cut in cubes
- 1 lb smoked sausage or chorizo (1/2 inch)
- 1/2 cup chopped onions/celery/leeks
- 1/2 cup chopped carrots
- 3 bay leaves
- 1 tsp ground cumin
- 1 tsp ground nutmeg
- 2 oz chopped garlic
- 3 cups beef or veal stock
- 1/2 cup red wine
- Hot pepper of your choice
- Salt to taste
- 1 oz olive oil
- 1 bunch of chopped green onions or parsley

Method

Soak dry black turtle beans, one night before cooking (you can use pre-cooked black beans from the can, if you prefer, and then you can skip the soaking).

Season or marinate pork and beef with dry herbs and your choice of spices (ie. paprika, black pepper, salt, thyme) and wine, 1 day before, or at minimum, 1 hour before cooking.

Pre-heat pot and use olive oil to sear all the meat until golden brown.

Remove the meat from the pot and reserve aside. Add remaining olive oil to pot and add chopped carrot, celery, onions and leeks and sauté until soft. Add chopped garlic last.

Add wine and stir with wooden spoon to deglaze the pot. Add the pre-soaked or pre-cooked black beans and stir for approximately 3 minutes.

Add 2 cups beef stock, bay leaf, cumin, nutmeg, peppers and pinch of salt. Let simmer for 10 minutes until liquid reduces.

Add the meat and remaining stock, if needed. Bring the pot to simmer and then transfer pot to pre-heated oven on low heat and let it cook for 1 1/2 to 2 hours or until meat and beans are cooked to your liking. Correct seasoning, if necessary. Add chopped green onions or parsley before serving.

Serves 4 portions. Serve with long grain white rice and sautéed spinach or collard greens.

Prepared by: Mario Cassini, Chef and Owner, Caju Restaurant