

PUERTO



By Alexis Buxton-Collins

“That might look like a simple drink,” Pablo Garcia Smith tells me, “but you’re holding the story of the Caribbean in your hands right now.” Suddenly nervous lest I spill a drop of this precious history, I transfer my attention from the courtyard of a former Carmelite convent to my guide as he provides a brief rundown of Puerto Rico’s past five centuries.

He says that when the Spanish arrived in 1493, they decimated the thriving indigenous Taíno culture and turned the country’s most fertile land into giant sugar plantations worked by enslaved Africans. Rum distilled from molasses proved popular with the region’s sailors, while limes helped them ward off scurvy. Now the combination of those three ingredients, the Daiquiri, is helping me keep the heat at bay.

Next to my drink is a crisp croquette filled with arroz mamposteao, a thick mixture of stewed beans and rice that’s been cooking in spices and pork fat all day. “The name comes from *mamposteria*, which is the word for ‘masonry’ – some people say that’s because it’s so heavy you can use it as spackling,” explains Smith with a laugh. “But this is what workers ate after a long day in the fields so in a way, Puerto Rico was built on this dish.”

RICO



Like all the guides at the Spoon tour company (thespoonexperience.com), Smith (top right) was born and raised in Puerto Rico. As we pass between the grand colonial buildings on the narrow streets of Old San Juan, he illustrates how he earned the nickname WikiPablo. Everything from the tropical-pastel hues of the buildings to the blue patina of cobblestones cast from leftover slag is a launching pad for a fascinating anecdote. But while the architecture in this 500-year-old settlement, a four-hour flight from New York, speaks only of the Spanish colonisers, the food provides a more honest record of all the people who have called Puerto Rico home.

We stop to try local favourites like mofongo, a starchy cake of mashed green plantains that has a direct lineage to West African

fufu. Slow-roasted pork shoulder is flavoured with a fragrant mix of garlic, onion, peppers and spices, including annatto and culantro (a native coriander), and hints at a long tradition of communal meals; the word “barbecue” comes from the Taíno language.

At a hole-in-the-wall café, we taste delicate pour-over coffee from mountain plantations started by Corsican immigrants before graduating to a nearby bar for frothy Piña Coladas. The archetypal Caribbean drink was invented here in 1954 to slake the thirst of American tourists, who have been frequent visitors since Puerto Rico became a territory of the United States in 1898.

For Smith, it’s simply another chapter in this beguiling island’s rich story. “We’re part of the US but we have our own unique identity that continues to evolve.” ●