

Cuisine Rica



Arroz con Pollo, ensalada, papas fritas (Rice with chicken, salad, french fries) - first authentic meal in San Jose, Costa Rica

When life sends you to Costa Rica, you go for a week-ah! I just returned from an unforgettable group tour to 4 different cities in Costa Rica including the capital city (San Jose), a small town (La Fortuna near the Arenal volcano), the mountains (Monteverde where coffee grows abundantly), and the beach (Quepos/Manuel Antonio National Park). All of these cities had such different feels and landscapes, but they were all inland or near the Pacific coast. I didn't make it to the Eastern Caribbean coast, so the food was still tropical, just lacked Jamaican flavors like spice (Jerk flavor), and coconut IN dishes (versus in drinks and solo that we found on the beach). It was my first experience with Costa Rican food and drink so I thought I'd provide an overview of what to expect if you find yourself in "The Happiest Country in the World" (this is clearly posted near the arrival area of the San Jose airport and a survey confirmed this just yesterday!) or decide to throw a dinner party to pretend you're on vacation.

Arroz con pollo - pictured above. This reminds me of a small paella, as it is rice-based, and becomes heartier with fish or meat mixed in.

Papas fritos - French fries were muy popular on the side of many dishes (and ketchup is easy to find too for dipping)

Gallo Pinto - Not to be confused with pico de gallo (tomato, pepper, and onion mixture commonly found in Mexican food), this is a mixture of white rice and black beans, often served alongside eggs for breakfast.

Casado - The casado is a traditional dish found on most menus in the country and typically includes a fish or meat, a vegetable or salad, gallo pinto, and a starch like fried plantains (my favorite!!) or french fries. It's a fairly filling and balanced meal.

Beer/Drinks - If you go to Costa Rica, drink Imperial. Just do it. It's delicious, and refreshing in the humid heat, doesn't leave a bitter taste in your mouth, and good times will be had by all if you follow these instructions. (*Please drink responsibly). Note: Not a beer person? I'm not either so try it anyway. If you're looking for a different beverage, Cacique is a rum-like liquor that is poured into native cocktails like a new take on a Caipirinha or order the Guaro Sour (club soda, cacique, grenadine).



Me and Imperial - two beers in a pod.

Guess who already found it in Central Market (Austin, Texas)?



Imperial Costa Rican beer spotted at Central Market North Lamar.

5. **Coffee/Cafe** - We were fortunate enough to visit a coffee plantation tour in the mountains of Monteverde, the greenest place I've ever visited. I learned all about the coffee growing, peeling, drying, roasting, and brewing processes of the caffeinated beans, and about how the soil is so nutrient-rich, it absolutely impacts the distinctive properties of coffee grown in the Rich Coast (Costa Rica).



Cafe at Gran Hotel Costa Rica in San Jose



Roasted Coffee Beans at El Trapiche Coffee & Sugar Cane plantation in Monteverde

6. **Sugar Cane** - And what do you use to sweeten that coffee? Sugar cane is also processed in the rich soils of Costa Rica. We got to see a plantation. The plants look like bamboo, but the inside is white, and sweet (we got to taste it)!



Fresh sugar cane is grown, harvested, and processed in Costa Rica

7. Pastries from Musmanni - I found my favorite local cafeteria-style bakery in two cities - La Fortuna and Quepos. I just discovered they have 180 locations (I think all in Costa Rica but was hard to tell from the list)! It was delicious, with pastries filled with or dipped in chocolate, pineapple (pina), apple, mango, and more.



Chocolate croissant from Musmanni in La Fortuna, Costa Rica.

8. Tropical Fruits - Costa Rica's lush land abounds with tropical fruits - everywhere in sight. Pineapples, mangos, coconuts, papayas, and even starfruit! When you visit Costa Rica (the more populous cities are safer for eating produce), indulge in the sweet and juicy fruits of the rainforest to soak in local nutrients.



Starfruit - tasted like an sweet, yet unripened nectarine.

9. Plantains - Plantains, or larger banana-like fruits are more tart than the 'naner we know and eat often. When cooked, they get soft, sweet, and get a caramelized glaze on the outside that is just too tough to resist. Plantain chips are a common and delicious (and healthy snack for your travels), and fried (panfried) plantains are a often a side dish on casados (above) or other menu items. In this case, we indulged in plantain crepes with chocolate and coffee ice cream - um, muy delicious! (Can you believe I was afraid there wouldn't be dessert in Costa Rica?! WRONG!)



Plantain Crepes with chocolate and coffee ice cream ordered from and devoured at an adorable Peruvian restaurant in Monteverde.

There's the gist of what you may need to know on a trip to Costa Rica.

Where can we get the fresh, healthy, and vibrant flavors of this cuisine in Austin? I haven't yet found an entirely Costa Rican restaurant but here are some options that serve Caribbean or Latin American flavors and similar components like plantains (or chips):

- Cafe Josie (Venezuelan and Caribbean)
- Casa Columbia (Colombian, fried plantains, arroz con pollo, empanadas)
- Costa del Sol (Salvadorian or Honduran)
- Habana (Cuban)
- Rio's Brazilian (Brazilian)
- Texas Cuban (Serve Mariquitas or fried plantain chips)
- Pachamama's Peruvian Creole (they have amazing ceviche)

Anyone have any other great Costa Rican-influenced restaurants in Austin? I must get another taste of the happiest country in the world...