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Kitchen Diva

Puerto Rico meets the American South

by ANGELA SHELF MEDEARIS

My choice for the perfect Mother's Day gift is a copy of "Coconut and Collards," a beautifully written and photographed new memoir and cookbook by Von Diaz. It has all the elements of my favorite type of cookbook, part heart-warming memoir and part innovative recipe collection.

"Coconuts and Collards" is a sensory journey into Von Diaz's world of food. She captures the sights and sounds of her beloved childhood home in Puerto Rico and her life there with her grandmother (called Tata), her mother and her sisters; her soulful roots in the South; and her new life in New York as a writer and radio producer. Diaz has taken the flavors and aromas from each place and created a new type of unique, flavor-infused cuisine that also is satisfying for vegetarians.

"Coconuts and Collards" celebrates the best ingredients, spice blends and techniques from Puerto Rico and mixed them with the best of the American South. There are several delicious examples of Diaz's cross-cultural creations in each chapter. My favorites are the recipes that celebrate the African-influences on Puerto Rican cuisine. I also love her use of traditional Puerto Rican spice blends and island ingredients to create new versions of American recipes.

Diaz liberally uses adobo -- a mixture of garlic, oregano, olive oil and lemon juice -- as a marinade for her recipe for fried chicken; oven-roasted pork ribs are slathered with a barbecue sauce made with guava; plantain chips are crushed and used as a crust for broiled shrimp; chayote squash is added to a green bean salad; and fresh Brussels sprouts are combined with chorizo and sofrito, a mixture of peppers, garlic, onion and the herbs culantro and cilantro.

When asked about her favorite recipe in the book, Diaz replied, "I love collards and, like all other greens, want them to be a bright color and have some texture. My Coconut-Braised Collards is a quick, simple recipe that highlights the strong collard funkiness and tastes deceptively rich for a vegetarian dish."

Make Mother's Day extra special and serve these delicious recipes for Pescado en Escabeche (White Fish Escabeche) and Coconut-Braised Collards.



Photo credit:
Cybelle Codish

White Fish Escabeche (Pescado en Escabeche)

Marinade

- 1 cup olive oil
- 1/2 cup white vinegar
- 1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 large white onions, sliced into thin rounds

Fish

- 1 1/2 pounds grouper steaks
- 1/4 cup fresh lemon juice (about 1 large lemon)
- 2 teaspoons salt, or to taste
- 1/4 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 cup olive oil

1. Combine the marinade ingredients in a large bowl.
2. Line a large plate with paper towels and set it aside.
3. Rinse the fish well and pat dry with paper towels. Place the fish in a large bowl and pour the lemon juice over it. Sprinkle with the salt and toss well.

4. Pour the flour onto a large plate. One by one, dredge each fish steak in flour and transfer them to a separate plate.

5. Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat until just simmering, about 1 minute. Do not overheat the oil, or it will burn and turn bitter. Reduce the heat to medium, add the fish steaks and fry for 10 minutes, turning every 2 minutes or so to make sure they brown evenly.

6. Transfer the fish to the prepared plate and let sit for 5 minutes to drain excess oil, then transfer the fish to a large casserole dish with a lid.

7. Pour the marinade over the fish, cover and refrigerate overnight. Taste, add more salt if needed, and serve chilled. Serves 4.

COCONUT-BRAISED COLLARDS

- 1 large bunch collards, rinsed well in several changes of water
- 1 bunch scallions
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter (optional: to make the recipe vegan, omit the butter and double the coconut oil)
- 1 tablespoon coconut oil
- 1 1/2 cups coconut milk, fresh or canned
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 1/2 teaspoon salt, or to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper

1. Cut off the bottoms of the collard stalks, then coarsely chop the leaves and stems and set aside.

2. Cut off the bottoms of the scallions, then thinly slice the whites and greens.

3. Melt the butter with the oil in a large wok or skillet over medium-high heat. Add the scallions and saute for 1 minute.

4. Add greens and saute for another minute, stirring well to incorporate, then add the coconut milk and soy sauce and bring to a simmer.

5. Lower the heat to medium-low and simmer, uncovered, stirring frequently, until the collards reach your desired doneness, 7 to 10 minutes, or longer if you like your greens more tender. Season with salt and pepper and serve. Serves 4 as a side.

Recipes from "Coconuts and Collards: Recipes and Stories from Puerto Rico to the Deep South" by Von Diaz (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017). Reprinted by permission of the University Press of Florida.

Angela Shelf Medearis is an award-winning children's author, culinary historian and the author of seven cookbooks. Her new cookbook is "The Kitchen Diva's Diabetic Cookbook." Her website is www.divapro.com. To see how-to videos, recipes and much, much more, Like Angela Shelf Medearis, The Kitchen Diva! on Facebook. Recipes may not be reprinted without permission from Angela Shelf Medearis.

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