

ST. AUGUSTINE'S MINORCAN FLAVORS

by Cheryl Rodewig



BETTER KNOWN FOR cobblestone streets and stone forts, St. Augustine has a little-known cultural enclave serving up a fascinating food scene—if you know where to look for it.

Transported from the balmy Spanish island of Menorca 250 years ago, Minorcan cuisine has evolved through the generations into something unique to Northeast Florida. It's the only place in the world you can savor Minorcan clam chowder, a tomato-based version that's thinner, spicier and just as hearty as its New England cousin. It's also where you'll find *fromajardis*, a traditional cheese pastry prepared the night before Easter, symbolically cut with a cross for the cheese to rise through.

When the Minorcans first arrived, they came as indentured servants to a colony farther south, New Smyrna. After years of harsh treatment, they fled to St. Augustine, where they settled, and, for the most part, stayed. Today, some 20,000 or more descendants live in St. Johns County. They pass down tradi-

tions like mullet net-making and the *Fromajardis* Serenade, a sort of Easter-themed caroling that still happens each year in parts of St. Augustine. And they pass down recipes. A favorite is pilau (pronounced *perlo*), a rice entrée with myriad variations but one common ingredient: datil peppers. The locally grown peppers are an ingredient Minorcans have been enthusiastically adding to their cuisine for centuries.

"You have to understand a Minorcan pilau is a spicy dish. It gets its flavor from the datil pepper. No other pepper will do," says Timmy Colee, cook at O'Steen's Restaurant, a laid-back eatery that opened in 1965 and one of a handful of places in St. Augustine that regularly serves pilau. Colee, who grows some of the datil peppers the restaurant uses, says a ripe pepper should be green and hard, not yellow. It delivers a slow burn, slightly milder than a habanero.

Colee shares a classic shrimp pilau, available at O'Steen's every third Friday. If you're brave, add some extra datil pepper hot sauce to pep up your pilau even more.

"This recipe has been in my family for generations," says Colee, Minorcan on his dad's side. "You can use this base to make a sausage, chicken or pork pilau. When done right, it is to die for."

MINORCAN SHRIMP PILAU

SERVES 4

- 1 (28-ounce) can diced tomatoes
- 1 onion, diced
- 1 to 2 chopped datil peppers
- Salt and pepper
- 1 pound shrimp, peeled, deveined, tails off
- 2½ cups water
- 1¼ cups uncooked rice

1. In a large pot over medium heat, cook tomatoes, onion and datil peppers until tomato juice is almost a paste. Season to taste with salt and pepper.
2. Add shrimp and water; bring to a boil.
3. Stir in rice, reduce heat to low, cover and cook until water is almost absorbed. Remove from heat and let rest for 10 to 15 minutes. Serve hot.