

BRAZILIAN FOOD

Last Saturday I was invited to a Brazilian barbecue. One of the hosts was Brazilian, and he was making feijoada, which is Brazil's national dish, made with sausage, beans and barbecued pork, served over rice and topped with farofa de manteiga, which is buttered manioc meal. And the guests were asked to each bring a Brazilian dish.

I know next to nothing about Brazilian food, but fortunately the internet came to the rescue. I thought about making a moqueca de camarao, which is a shrimp stew, but I finally settled on a salada de chu chu and a bowl of mugunza.

Salada de chu chu, or chu chu salad, is made from chayote. Chayote, which you can get at your local supermarket, is a pear-shaped and apple-green tropical form of summer squash, with a large flat center seed, similar to a mango seed and a mild flavor.

Peel four or five chayote, rinsing both the chayote and your hands under running water, as there is a slightly sticky substance just under the skin of the chayote which rinses off and disappears in cooking. Slice the chayote lengthwise parallel to the center in two slices on each side of the center seed. Then cut those slices in half crosswise. Put the slices in a saucepan of cold water with a pinch of salt and bring it to the boil. Once the water boils, the chayote only needs to cook for another 5 to 10 minutes—it should be soft, but not mushy.

Drain the cooked chayote in a colander and put it in some ice water to stop the cooking process. Drain the cooled chayote, put it in a large bowl, and add a few tablespoons of a vinaigrette dressing. I made a citrus vinaigrette with some lime juice, some orange juice, a little tiny splash of white wine vinegar, and some canola oil. Then add some chopped green onion or chopped cilantro or both, and serve. This will serve six to eight people.

I also brought a dessert, called mugunza. Basically it's hominy, cooked with whole milk, coconut milk, sweetened condensed milk, and ground peanuts. I know, it sounds really weird, but it actually turned out to be very tasty. Thoroughly rinse and drain two 15-ounce cans of white hominy. Dump the hominy in a saucepan, add 1 ½ cups of whole milk, and cook, partially covered, over low heat for 30 to 40 minutes, until the hominy is soft, stirring occasionally.

While the hominy is cooking, take ¾ of a cup of roasted but unsalted peanuts and grind them in your food processor. Be careful not to overgrind, otherwise you'll end up with peanut butter. After the hominy has softened, to your saucepan add ¾ of a can of sweetened condensed milk, 1 cup of canned coconut milk, (which you can also find at the supermarket), mixed well before adding, and the ground peanuts. Stir well, and simmer uncovered for another 10 to 15 minutes or so until the mixture starts to thicken. You'll need to stir with a spatula quite often to keep the mixture from sticking to the bottom of the pan and possibly scorching. Transfer the mixture to a serving bowl, chill and dust with a little cinnamon just before serving. It's very rich, so a little goes a long way!

My Brazilian host was delighted with the mugunza, which he hadn't seen in years, and said that in Brazil it was also often eaten for breakfast. Well, we eat grits in this country, so mugunza for breakfast isn't that much stranger!

They also served hard-boiled quails eggs, which were dipped in a little thousand island dressing, hearts of palm salad, and barbecued marinated chicken hearts and a sweet lime pie for dessert. Caipirinhas, made with cachaca, were served for cocktails. Cachaca is Brazil's national liquor, and like rum, is distilled from sugar cane, although it's quite a bit sweeter. Mixed with a squeeze of lime (and the lime wedge is smashed a bit in the glass with a long spoon handle to release some of the oil from the skin), plus a little more sugar to taste, and served on the rocks, it's called a caipirinha and is a potent but tasty way to start the party.