

**M**exico has tacos. Italy has pasta. Colombia has...

Before I traveled to Colombia, I would've come up blank. My husband Mark and I spent two weeks traveling through Colombia for our 20th anniversary. We might not have traveled there for the food, but we managed to gain a few pounds eating it all the same. And we'd happily go back just to gain more.

Because Colombia enjoys both mountain and seascapes—it sits nestled between the Pacific and the Caribbean—its fare ranges from fresh seafood to hearty stews. Along both coasts you can indulge in the freshest seafood cooked in bright, piquant Afro-Caribbean spices and wash it all down with locally made rums. And in the middle of the country, where the climate is cooler, the hearty Spanish stews full of chorizo and beans keep you warm on chilly nights.

Below, learn about South America's most underappreciated food.

### When in Colombia, Don't Skip the Street Food

Cautious *gringos* might be cautious about eating street food. But while street fare may not be the healthiest of bites, it's worth the calories when served fresh... and it can be a gateway to the culinary soul of a country.

Most Colombian street food comes from small "shops"—usually food carts manned by one or two people—specializing in a handful of related dishes (think five types of *arepas*, or three kinds of *empanadas*).

Sometimes there's a tiny bar to eat at. Other times, it's standing room only on the street.

No matter which type you come across, do your best to order what everyone else ordered before you. Colombians are wonderfully friendly, and many speak English, so you can always ask a neighbor for help.

Otherwise, pointing to whatever looks good will do you wonders.

### Arepas

Some countries have bread, others have tortillas. Colombians have *arepas*, a thick, doughy corn flour disc.



Colombian arepas are doughy, delicious, and stuffed with meat, cheese, and salsa.

## From Arepas to Fritanga: A Guide to Colombian Cuisine

Kirsten Raccuia

*Arepas* are dished out with breakfast and, when served alone, aren't that exciting. It's when you start dressing them up that everything changes.

At restaurants, you can find them elevated with additions like lobster salad or caramelized sweet plantains with salty feta and honey.

But on the street, they're made for chowing down and getting messy... pork-juice-running-down-your-face kind of messy.

An *arepa* by any other name is still an *arepa*. But it's often called by what's inside.

So an *arepa* stuffed with cheese is an *arepa de queso*. Chicken? *Arepa con pollo*. Some stores, like **Arepitas Pa Mama**, name their different *arepas*.

We started our night in the **Poblado** neighborhood in [Medellín](#). In fact, that's the best area to stay and to eat in. It's where all the best restaurants, street food, and nightlife are found.

Our first *arepa*, from **Arepitas Pa Mama**, was called the *Colombiana* and was stuffed with chicken, chicharrones,

fried ripe plantains, cheese, and *hogao*, a Colombian salsa made with scallions, tomatoes, garlic, and cumin.

The *arepa* was small, but overflowing with flavor. So I completely ignored my (ingenious) plan to share it with Mark and ate the whole thing in seconds. Sorry. Not sorry.

Another *arepa* option, *arepa de queso*, is stuffed with melty mozzarella cheese. That may sound basic... until it's drizzled with saccharine-sweet condensed milk. Then it becomes a hot, gooey, salty-sweet treat.

Then, there's the open-faced *arepa de choclo*.

It's made from sweet corn and tastes and feels like cornbread. Colombians slather it with butter, slap it on the flat-top grill, and top it with a fresh cow's milk farmer's cheese called *quesito*.

Head to Las Chachas to sample both of these.

Tired of *arepas* yet? Me neither.

Last one: The *arepa de huevo* is deep-fried with an egg inside. The *arepa* gets crispy on the outside and the egg is—if you're lucky—runny on the inside.

One of the more traditional *arepas*, it's

**"Street food is the culinary gateway to a country."**

been around for over 200 years. There's even an annual **Arepa de Huevo Festival** held in Luruaco in June to preserve the traditional treat for future generations.

We tried this one in a tiny place on **Calle de Las Sombrillas** in the Getsemani neighborhood of Cartagena. The family-run stand has no name, but you'll see people standing around eating them. Be sure to try their hot salsa with it.

### **Buñuelos:**

*Buñuelos* are essentially giant donut holes.

Made with cassava flour and deep fried until perfectly golden, they're best eaten right out of the deep fryer.

Traditionally, they're stuffed with *costeño* cheese, a local semi-hard salty cheese. When we spotted some at **Sr. Buñuelo**, we had to try.

I was expecting a cheese gusher. I was wrong. *Costeño* blends with the dough, so no need to worry about scalding your face on gooey cheese.

*Buñuelos* have a hint of sweetness due to the sugar in the dough. You can find the best ones at specialty *Buñuelos* shops and stalls in Medellín, where they are stuffed with guava jam, chocolate, and *arequipe*—a Colombian version of *dulce de leche*.

### **Empanadas**

*Empanadas* are deep-fried, half-moon-shaped pockets stuffed with chicken, beef, cheese, or potatoes.

Unlike the *empanadas* you find in Mexico, these are made with a yellow corn meal flour providing extra crunch. They're found on every city block in Colombia, but they're a particularly popular snack after a night at the bars.

If you see locals lined up at their favorite stand, join them. It's a good sign.

One thing I learned while eating my way through Colombia: It's all about the salsas.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with a deep-fried pocket of flavor on its own.

But add in homemade salsa, and bingo, you've just hit the umami-layered jackpot.

The shop we went to, **Empanadas La Propia Colombiana**, offered three types of *empanadas* and 10 salsas. After tasting them all, the clear winners were the creamy garlic and the smoky-spicy chipotle.

### **Hormigas Culonas**

This delicacy isn't for the weak-kneed. *Hormigas culonas* literally translates to big-ass ants.

Let me explain.

*Hormigas culonas* are large, fat-bellied female leaf-cutter ants fried or roasted in salt. They're plump because they're only harvested when full of eggs.

Am I selling you yet?

They're cooked alive, dissolving their legs and wings and leaving only their burgundy bodies, ready to be snacked on like peanuts.

You can buy them from vendors and even convenience stores. I suggest the roasted ones. The fried ones get soggy... just like cold French fries.

No matter how you choose to eat them, they still look like large ants. The silver lining? They're super nutritious. But in reality, most Colombians eat them because they are an aphrodisiac. (Who cares about protein?)

I'll stick with oysters, thanks.

### **Perros Calientes**

*Perros calientes* translates to hot dogs, but these aren't your typical NYC street dogs. At **Los Perrines** food stall, forget the ketchup and mustard.

These babies are loaded with things

**“Find the best *buñuelos* at specialty shops or stalls.”**

### **Colombian Cuisine, Elevated**

Sometimes, you just want to sit down with a local adult beverage and relax over a meal. While street food provides and authentic and vibrant experience

with chances to interact with the locals over quick budget-bites, restaurants have more diverse options, and not everything is fried.

That doesn't mean it's healthy, though—I'm looking at you, *bandeja paisa*.

### **Bandeja Paisa**

*Bandeja paisa*: the signature dish of Medellín (some might argue, the country) and the first one we tried after arriving. We went to **Mondongo's**, which has been serving this hearty dish since 1976.

You've got to come hungry when you order this plate because it's a whopper. *Bandeja* literally means tray, because it's often served in one. And a *paisa* is a person from the region of Antioquia, where Medellín is. (Nowadays, it's often used to refer to the local people, food, and culture.)

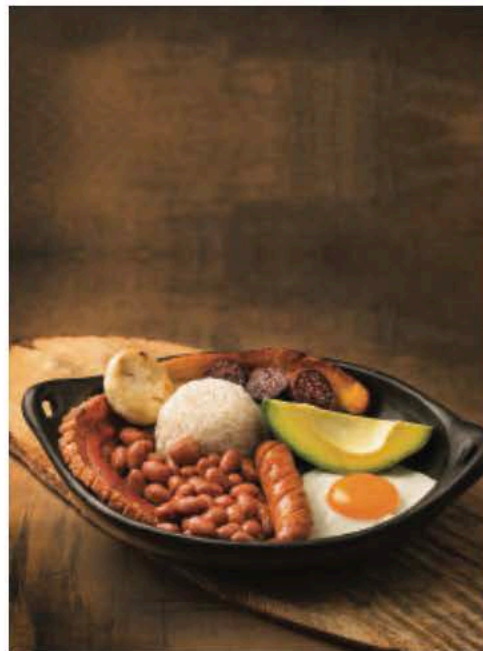
A *bandeja paisa* includes chorizo, pork with cracklings, blood sausage, extra-dehydrated beef (so finely minced it looks like dust), a fried egg, red beans, rice, plantains, avocado—and it wouldn't be a Colombian dish without *arepas*.

I recommend splitting it as a main dish.

### **Ajiaco**

Part Grandma's chicken soup and part hearty potato soup, *ajiaco* is a bowl of yum.

Usually, there are white, red, and Andean potatoes called *papas criollas*, which break down and thicken the soup as it cooks, along with corn—and a side



**The most important meal of the day: breakfast. Make it a Colombian one (above).**

of rice, for those carb-loading days. Salty capers and tangy sour cream add a little pep to the soup.

But what really sets *ajiaco* apart is the Colombian herb *guascas*.

In nearby countries it's considered a weed, but in Colombia, it's an essential part of this dish, giving it a slightly earthy, bittersweet kick.

### Cazuela de Mariscos

Although *cazuela de mariscos* literally translates to "seafood casserole," there is nothing casserole-ish about it. It's like a seafood bouillabaisse, but with a base of coconut milk and fish broth.

The fish or seafood depends on where you are and what's caught that day by the local fisherman trawling the oceans. Additions can range from lobster and clams to various types of hearty white fish like snapper, sea bass, or grouper.

Sometimes, a little wine, or a handful of veggies, are added for flavor.

But no matter the combination, you'll enjoy the balance of sweetness from the coconut milk and saltiness from the brine of the seafood.

[La Pescadería](#) is the best place in town for it.

### Ceviche and Cocteles

*Ceviche* is one of my favorite dishes. In **Puerto Vallarta**, Mexico, where we live, *ceviche* is made by throwing finely diced fish (often mahi mahi) into lime juice with onions, cilantro, and tomatoes. The lime cures the fish, *et voilà*: It's ready in minutes.

On the coasts of Colombia, the fish in *ceviche* is chopped in larger cubes, like a barely-cured poke. Then it's tossed into lime, and sometimes orange and lemon join the party before finely diced onions and a good pinch of cilantro are mixed in. No tomatoes. No fuss. Just deliciousness.

*Coctel* is another cured fish dish. Its ingredients range from fresh octopus and shrimp to the day's fish catch. The base is similar to shrimp cocktail sauce, but thinner, made of ketchup, hot sauce, mayo, and of course, limes, onion, and cilantro.

While restaurants specializing in these dishes are widespread, it's just as easy to find *coctel* and *ceviche* at street carts, ladled into plastic or Styrofoam cups.

Both styles are served with saltines or *patacones*, smashed and fried unripe plantains.

We went crazy over our *ceviche* at [La](#)

**"We went crazy over *ceviche* at La Cevichería in Cartagena."**

[Cevichería](#) in Cartagena, a hopping spot that Anthony Bourdain touted.

### Fritanga

Like *bandeja paisa*, this is another hearty dish. *Fritanga*, also called *picada*, is meant to be shared with family and friends.

Essentially, it's a platter of grilled and fried meats—chicken, beef, a couple types of sausage, pork crackling—served with corn, *arepas*, plantains, and potatoes.

The ingredients differ depending on what's available at that moment. It's found prevalently in **Bogotá** on the weekends, when people gather at home, markets, or restaurants for barbecues.

We had it at [La Matriarca](#) in Medellín and needed a nap afterward, we were so full.

But no matter your location, it's served family style. You'll get a fork or a cocktail stick to stab a bite as you sit around chatting with a cold *Poker* (local beer) and a shot of *aguardiente*, the local hooch.

Colombia has a wealth of delicious dishes that this beginner's guide only skims... but hopefully, it's whetted your appetite. These dishes are my favorites—the ones I'd go back to Colombia just to try again.

They say the way to a person's heart is through their stomach. Colombia's won mine. ■



You can find Colombian sweets and pastries, including *buñuelos*, displayed at stalls on busy city streets.

# Don't Give Papaya: Street-Smart Tips for Traveling

In Colombia, there's a well-known saying: *No dar papaya*.

Translated literally, it means “don't give papaya,” but it has nothing to do with the sweet local fruit. Instead, it's a reminder shared among locals: don't make yourself an easy target.

The saying originates from Colombians' love of papaya. If you put out a plate of papaya, it disappears quickly. The same can be said for your valuables if you make yourself low-hanging fruit.

And that's a handy guide for travelers and expats the world over. Below, I've collected my top tips for staying street-smart, no matter where you are.

## 1. **Keep to the inside of sidewalks.**

Stand too close to a street corner, and a crook can come whizzing by on a motorcycle and swipe your phone from your hand.

Be especially cautious of this while waiting for rides.

Tourists checking their Uber's license plate number (as they should!) often ignore their surroundings.

2. **Snap your pics quickly.** As travelers, we often have our expensive cell phones glued to our hands, ready to take a photo of tourist sites and scenery. But phones are the easiest thing for a pickpocket to steal.

Look around before taking your snapshot, then put your phone away—preferably somewhere hidden, like an under-the-shirt belt.

## 3. **Leave your jewelry and cash at**



**Walk on the inside of sidewalks when traveling in an unfamiliar locale.**

**home.** Or, better yet, in a safe. Robbers are opportunistic and on the lookout for wealthy tourists. Don't become their target by wearing a watch that screams “I have money.”

If you need cash during your travels, split it up into a few different places—a pocket and a purse, for example—so if you do get pickpocketed, they don't get it all.

4. **Follow the lead of locals.** While traveling, I often notice locals frequently sliding their phone away, or switching their backpacks to wear them on their front.

That's because they're more attuned to

their city's red flags—which plaza is prone to pickpockets, or who's subtly eyeing your shiny earrings. If they're exercising caution, you should, too

## 5. **Meet up with fellow travelers.**

Traveling solo can be a great way to make new friends and gain insider know-how. Reach out on expat Facebook groups before you go.

On your first day in an unfamiliar locale, I recommend joining tours so you'll be in a group of fellow travelers.

Most cities offer free ones, and I loved the [Real City Tour](#) in Medellín. —Kirsten Raccuia