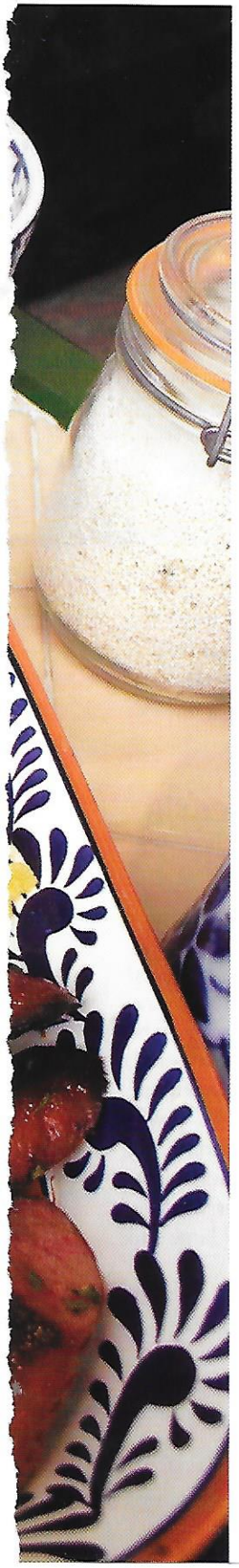

brasil

A culinary wonderland

BY MICHELE MCMURRY

Most people are lured by Brazil as a land of exotic beaches and sultry samba, where not wearing a bikini garners stares. Soccer, the Amazonian Rainforest and carnival also come to mind. But rarely does food. Not until churrascarias began popping up across the U.S. did many Americans give thought to what defines quintessential Brazilian cuisine.

Though churrasco is in fact the barbecue of the Amazon and the most recognized food from Brazil, it represents one slice of a vast culinary landscape with unbounded resources — a product of cultural diversity seen few places in the world. The biggest misconception about what Brazilians eat comes from grouping the foods of Brazil with those of Latin America. Unlike its South American neighbors, Brazil was first claimed by Portugal. Its cuisine thus mirrors the blending of indigenous and European customs, and also African influences as a result of colonization and the importation of slaves. This multiplicity of cultural legacies is as notable in the faces of Brazilians as in the bread they break.

A true melting pot

Native Indians shared styles for cooking fish and the cultivation of *cassava,* the tuberous starchy root vegetable known in present day kitchens as yucca or manioc, the bloodline of Brazilian cuisine. Manioc flour becomes a side dish called *Farofa* when toasted. *Povilho doce*, or manioc starch (similar to tapioca flour) as well as *povilho azedo* (sour manioc starch), lend the gooey texture to *Pao de Queijo* and other baked goods. The journey from woody shrub to delicate, refined carbohydrate is arduous. Larger yucca roots used in the production of flour are soaked and fermented to remove natural toxins. The pulp is squeezed over a bucket to extract the starch, which is then dried and sifted.

Much of Brazil's culinary quilt was sewn during colonial times when slaves were imported from Africa to work in sugar cane fields. They brought with them *azeite de dendê*, an oil milled by hand from the fruit pulp of the dendê palm tree and a mainstay ingredient of Salvador da Bahia along Brazil's northern coast. *Moqueca de Peixe*, a coconut fish stew, remains one of the area's iconic dishes showcasing dendê oil with mackerel, mahi-mahi and other white fish plentiful along the Atlantic coastline.

During a recent demonstration at The Culinary Institute of America, San Antonio, Latin Cuisine Specialist Elizabeth Johnson-Kossick prepared a moqueca with cod, "which makes it very Portuguese and European," she says. It's the dendê oil that imparts the dish's unique color and flavor and speaks to the African roots of Northeast Brazil. The traditional accompaniment, *Farofa de Dendê*, is simply manioc flour toasted with the oil and salt.

The preparation of moquecas, like many dishes, varies between Brazil's numerous culinary regions, a result of waves of immigration in the 19th and early 20th centuries that followed Brazil's claiming of independence and surge in coffee production. Today's Brazil is made up of sizeable communities of Ital-

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Prawns, straight from the fishermen, are a popular street food when grilled with olive oil and oregano. Photo by Pauline Stevens.

ian, German, Middle Eastern and Asian descendents, including a large number of Japanese who crossed over the Andes into São Paulo. This explains the emergence of Arab "fast food" restaurants and how sushi and tabouleh showed up on churrascaria salad bars.

"You can't buy a tomato in Brazil that wasn't grown by a Japanese farmer," says Marcia Weiss, a native Brazilian who lives in San Antonio. In fact, Brazil's Japanese population is second only to Japan's. Middle Eastern cuisine has also prevailed due to migration in the northeast. "Tabouleh and falafel — every Brazilian knows how to make these," she says.

"In São Paulo, due to the extremely fierce competition between churrascarias, many years ago some churrascaria owners decided that adding sushi to their salad areas would give them some leverage," says Evandro Caregnato, culinary director for Texas de Brazil. Actually, the churrasco style of cooking has little oriental influence, he says. Sushi merely exemplifies the eclectic culinary influences found all over Brazil.

Likewise, in Brazilian steakhouses you'll see cheeses from France and Spain, Portuguese sausage, and Italian polenta, served fried in the Brazilian method. Norwegian Vikings introduced drying methods for salt cod, enjoyed in fritters and other dishes.

Each of these cultures has helped shape Brazil's culinary regions. From churrasco (spit fire barbecue) found in the cattle-rich prairie lands of the south to street food traditions of Rio de Janeiro, each bailiwick is unique in its use of ingredients, and also in the mindset behind preparing food.

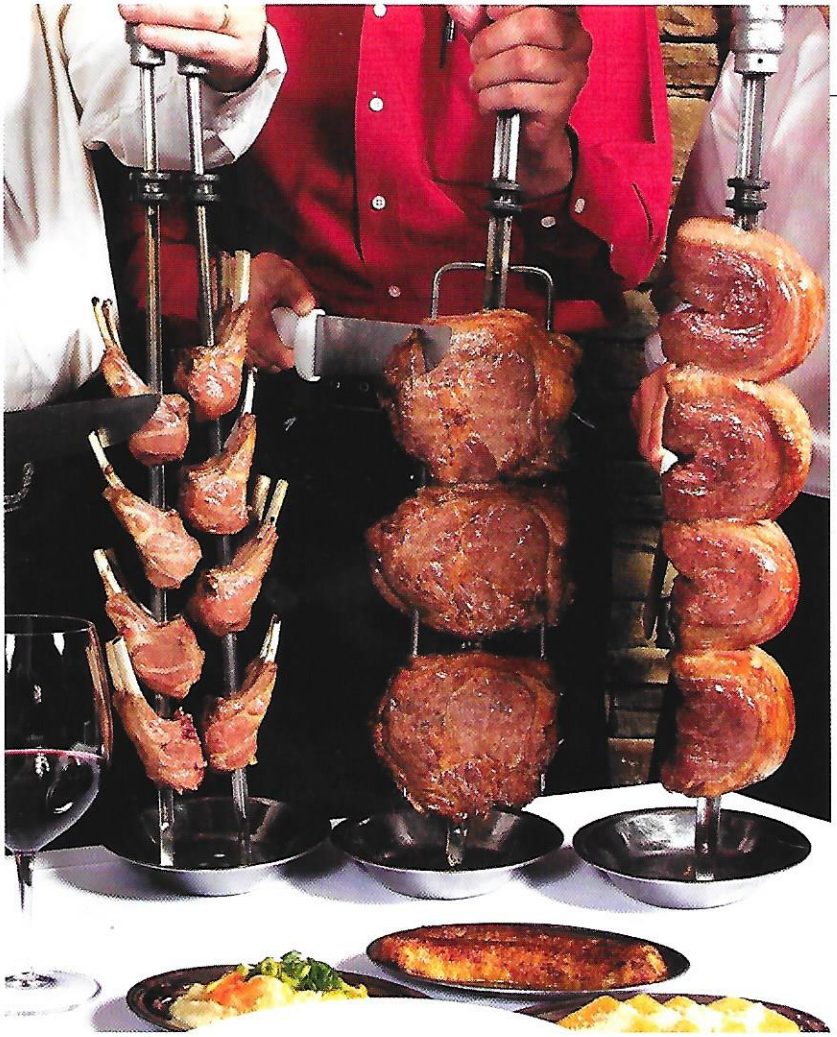
In the Northeast, from where the African-inspired moqueca hails "everything is slow," Chef Johnson-Kossick says. "There is a sacredness about foods, and that's why you take your time."

Farofa, prepared in the African tradition in this area, might see the adding of caramelized onions, clarified butter, bacon and parsley in the Southeast, which encompasses São Paulo, the most populated, and thus most diverse, part of Brazil.

The churrascaria movement

Brazil was first in South America to raise cattle. Unlike the coastal, tropical areas, the highland Pampas region of Southern Brazil is known for its gauchos, who for centuries have slow-roasted, with great pride and tradition, the best of the herd for family gatherings and celebrations. The cooking style and techniques reflect the region's cooler weather, abundance of beef and large European settlement.

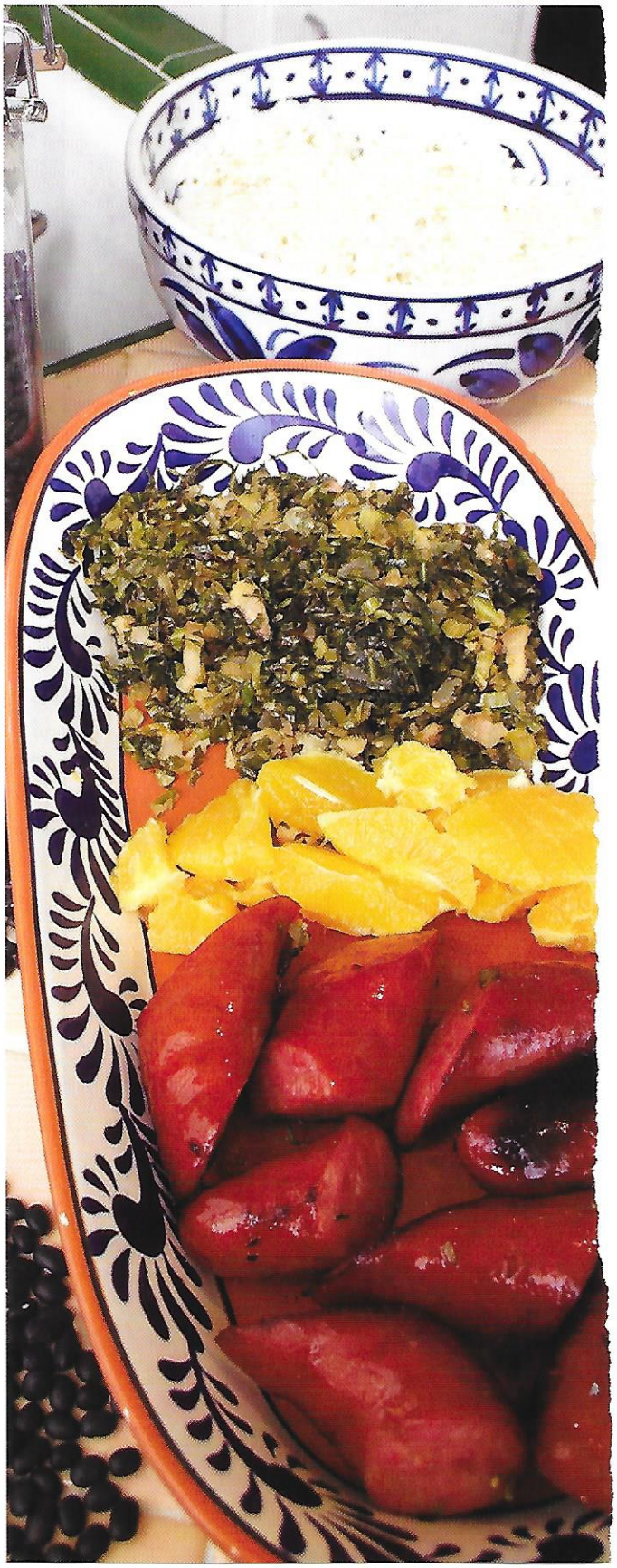
North America is now seeing its share of *rodízio de churrasco*, Brazil's all-you-can-eat barbecue. Three churrascarias in San Anto-



▲ Chama Gaucha serves traditional *rodizio de churrasco* for local Brazilians missing a taste of home. All meats are carved in house according to custom and tradition. Photo by Janet Rogers.

▲ Dendê oil, the lifeline of Bahian cuisine, gives *Moqueca de Peixe* its orange hue and African Heritage. Photo by Pauline Stevens.

▼ *Feijoada* , the national dish of black beans, rice, *linguiça* and collard greens. Photo by Janet Rogers.



▲ **Basic *Moqueca de Peixe*, the iconic Bahian fish stew, is prepared with firm, white fish, coconut milk, onion, tomato, bell pepper, garlic, lime and cilantro. The idea is to "sandwich," not sauté, the ingredients in the pan and let simmer until fish is just cooked and chunky. Photo by Pauline Stevens.**

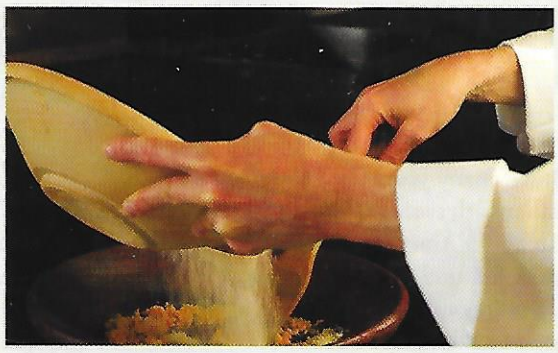
The right ingredients

Las Americas Latin Market carries many of the ingredients used in Brazilian cooking including fresh and frozen yucca, grains and oils, guava paste and some dessert items. Chef Elizabeth Johnson-Kossick recommends Asian markets for spices. Las Americas Latin Market, 6623 San Pedro, 210-340-2747.

"Manioc flour is the bread of Brazil and one of the essentials of Brazilian cooking."

— Elizabeth Johnson-Kossick

Chef Elizabeth Johnson-Kossick, Latin cuisine specialist at The Culinary Institute of America, San Antonio's Center for Food of the Americas. Johnson-Kossick's earliest exposure to Brazilian cuisine came by way of maternal grandparents from Southern Brazil.



Farofa de Dendê, a traditional accompaniment to seafood moquecas, is stirred continually during cooking to prevent burning.

Pão de Queijo, a delectable cheese bread made from soured tapioca starch, is gluten-free. Photos by Pauline Stevens.

nio, steered by true gauchos, speaks to our city's hunger for ethnic cuisine, and also for meat.

"Churrasco is a ritual," Weiss says. "It's about being together and celebrating, and food has been central to that."

"Local Brazilians come here to get authentic dishes because they can't get particular cuts of meat in the marketplace," says Long Phu, Chama Gaucha's general manager. Meats are butchered in house and carved "according to art form and tradition so that you don't change the texture of the meat."

Texas de Brazil uses an old-style marinade of fresh oregano, rosemary, sage, garlic and "a lot of good red wine" from Caregnato's hometown of Rio Grande do Sul.

"When we opened our first Texas de Brazil many years ago, I was not very familiar with corn fed beef," Caregnato says. "In South America, almost all beef will be grass fed and it was challenging learning about the nuances and different regions of American beef." Because not all American beef is the same, Caregnato says the restaurant buys from only specific areas of the country. "We age our beef in-house for a couple of weeks; it makes a big difference."

Though not on the menu, many churrascarias will serve farofa upon request.

Rio de Janeiro native Marcia Weiss managed the Collector's Corner sales gallery at the Toledo Museum of Art before moving to San Antonio a year ago. She now works for the McNay Art Museum. Photo by Janet Rogers.

The local face of Brazil

Marcia Weiss was 19 when she first moved to the United States to study design, psychology and French, her second language, at Brigham Young University. She would again live in her native Rio de Janeiro on two occasions, viewing the country she refers to as "Beland" through mature eyes. "Brazil is like Belgium and England in one country," she says. "There's a lot of contrast."

Weiss' paternal lineage goes back 400 years in Rio. Her maiden name, Oliveira, which means "olive tree," causes her to ponder Jewish ancestry. "During the Inquisition, German Jews changed their names to precious metals and Portuguese Jews changed theirs to trees and animals," she says.

One thing that's certain is her way around a Brazilian kitchen. "My cooking is from helping a mom who worked," she says. "Americans had no concept of black beans," she recalls of serving them to her friends 25 years ago. "Is that mud?" they asked? "Now, they're everywhere."

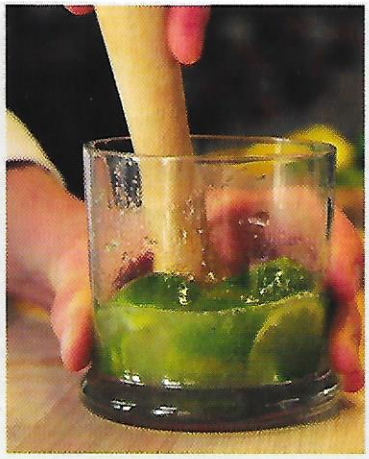
Preparing beans, the basis of the everyday meal, begins with the mirepoix of Brazilian cooking: garlic, olive oil and onion. "There's a little olive oil and garlic in everything we do," Weiss says. Adding bay leaves to the pot is also unique to Brazil. "Brazilian food is not hot, just well-seasoned."

A savory stew of beans lays the groundwork for *Feijoada*, a lunch standard at restaurants in Rio on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Beans are served with white rice, Portuguese sausage, collard greens and orange slices. "The peasant way to serve is with the beans (the basics) on the bottom with the rice on top; some serve them side by side" Weiss says. "The orange helps the body retain protein from the beans."

Lunch is always the main meal, and dinner is a lighter fare, Weiss says. "We'll wait until everyone is home, to eat to-

THE CAIPIRINHA

The national caipirinha cocktail is a mixture of lime, mashed with sugar and combined with ice and cachaça, a rum-like liquor distilled from sugarcane juice. The muller is an essential tool for releasing the lime's natural oils. Kiwi is a popular substitution for limes, rendering the "textured crunch of the seeds" and a sweeter drink. A Japanese variation calls for Sake. Garnish with star fruit. Photos by Pauline Stevens.



gether. Meals are more of a celebration. It brings family together."

RECIPES

Moqueca De Peixe
Bahian Coconut Fish Stew

2 pounds Sea Bass or Halibut, skin and bones removed (mussels, clams, scallops, octopus or shrimp can be added or substituted)
1 teaspoon sea salt, plus additional to taste
2 cloves garlic
⅓ cup plus ½ cup dendê oil
1 yellow onion, julienne
1 yellow bell pepper, peeled, seeded and sliced
1 green bell pepper, peeled, seeded and sliced
2 tomatoes, sliced
3 sprigs cilantro
2 ½ cups fresh coconut milk
Juice of 1 lime, freshly squeezed
For serving:

2 cups white rice
1 cup farofa de dendê

Mash garlic cloves with 1 teaspoon of sea salt to form a paste. Season the cleaned fish with the garlic and salt mixture. Reserve.

In a Dutch oven or clay pot, sauté onions and peppers in ⅓ cup of dendê oil over medium heat until translucent. Add the fish tomatoes, coconut milk and remaining ½ cup of dendê oil. Bring mixture to a boil. Add the cilantro and cook 5 minutes or until fish is cooked through (taking care not to overcook). Season to taste with salt and freshly squeezed lime juice. Serve hot with white rice and farofa de dendê.

Yield: 4 portions

Courtesy CIA, San Antonio: Endinho "Edson" Engel, as presented at the 2009 Worlds of Flavor International Conference and Festival.

Farofa de Dendê
Dendê Seasoned Manioc Flour

3 cups farinha (manioc flour)
¼ cup dendê oil
Salt to taste

Heat dendê oil in a sauté pan. Add manioc flour and stir constantly over medium-low heat. Gently toast 3-4 minutes. Season with salt to taste and serve with the moqueca of your choice.

Yield: 3 cups

Courtesy CIA, San Antonio

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