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# On the Market

There's a place in San Juan where local culture comes alive—where criollo cuisine is king and all its ingredients lay freshly picked right before your eyes. It's among the most colorful Puerto Rican experiences within city limits—and yet most tourists never see it.

Welcome to the Santurce marketplace. Set in the middle of San Juan's most populous barrio, the Plaza del Mercado de Santurce is the island's cultural melting pot. Here, among buildings dating back centuries, shoppers, people-watchers and farmers from all across Puerto Rico gather to trade, eat and celebrate the island lifestyle.

"Santurce is mostly a residential area," says Raul Bustamante, a San Juan native and general manager of the nearby Condado Plaza Hotel & Casino, "but it also has theaters, restaurants and cafés."

Locals gather here in search of homegrown produce with a hearty helping of culture, making the market one place sure to satisfy tourists with a craving for authentic Puerto Rican flavor.

But take note—this is no typical tourist trap. Bustamante recommends the marketplace to “people who are looking for a particular type of entertainment”—meaning adventurous travelers willing to rub elbows, share cuisine and even shake a leg with the locals.

During the day, the market is a place of business, where shoppers haggle over the price of veggies and return home with all the necessary ingredients for traditional Puerto Rican dishes. Local artisans also sell lace, wood-carvings and other crafts, satisfying hotel-residing shoppers who don't have kitchens in their rooms. But visit the market plaza on a weekend night, and you'll find a very different experience: a casual block party, usually with music from local bands and plenty of drinking and dancing.

Day or night, restaurants around the plaza offer front-row seats to the energetic meele. Traditional cuisine reigns at family-run restaurants like **El Popular** (787-722-4653); you'll know it from the Puerto Rican flags decorating its interior, as well as the scent of traditional island dishes like *chicharrones de pollo* (fried chicken) and *la olla Española* (seven-meat soup).

The culture doesn't stop at the market plaza. This is also where you'll find the **Luis A. Ferre Performing Arts Center** ([www.cba.gobierno.pr](http://www.cba.gobierno.pr)), and the new **Puerto Rico Conservatory of Music** ([www.cmpr.edu/eng](http://www.cmpr.edu/eng)) is just steps away in the adjacent barrio of Miramar. With restaurants, museums and a bustling scene, why isn't Santurce a more prominent part of the Caribbean's most cosmopolitan city?

Decades ago, it was actually exactly that. Just across the way from the hotel-heavy Condado strip, Plaza del Mercado de Santurce was once regarded as the heart of the city. Bustamante describes it as “an area of prime importance” from the 1940s to the 1960s, a gathering place for city dwellers to enjoy an authentic meal, sip some locally distilled rum



## Market Meals

Want to recreate some of Puerto Rico's traditional dishes? Here's how the locals put these market favorites to use:

**Plantains:** Shown above, these aren't just baby bananas. *Tostones*, or fried green plantains, are a favorite traditional dish, as is *mofongo*, mashed plantains served with meat or seafood in a garlic-and-tomato sauce.



**Culantro:** As its name suggests, this citrusy herb is related to cilantro, though this strain is native to Latin America and the Caribbean. You'll find culantro in any variety of dishes, including *sancocho*, a meat and vegetable soup.



**Cassava:** This starchy root is to Puerto Rico what potatoes are to the US mainland. They're a filling, flavor-absorbent, low-calorie food used to bulk up meals like soup. Look for them in traditional soups like *sancocho*, or in ground-up form in *pasteles*, rectangular meat-filled pockets similar to Mexican tamales.



**Star fruit:** Puerto Ricans tend to be purists when it comes to their fruit; they'll eat it raw, or not at all. Star fruit, which comes from the carambola tree, is no exception, though sometimes you can also find it in rum cocktails.



**Shrimp:** You haven't had coconut shrimp until you've had it made with locally grown coconuts and shrimp freshly harvested from El Yunque River. Shrimp stew is also common.





or coffee, and party the night away. But with the rise of Old San Juan and the Condado hotel strip, attention shifted from the quaint marketplace to the flashy new constructions that rose up across the lagoon. And, until recently, that's where the focus has stayed.

Thanks to local support, however, Santurce is enjoying a revival. "In the last two years, the government has been making a big effort to revitalize Santurce because it's an important area of the city," Bustamante says. "The whole area is [enjoying] a lot of interest in the [last] few months."

Nearby buildings like the Conservatory of Music and Performing Arts Center play into the strategy to aim the spotlight once again at Santurce. But the most attractive parts of this area are the authentic aspects: quaint and quirky street art like the monumental statue of avocados standing in the market plaza; 18th-century buildings surrounding the plaza, which house restaurants and cafés; and, of course, the marketplace itself, the true heart of this once and future San Juan centerpiece.