

A FARMING RENAISSANCE IN PUERTO RICO

After Hurricane Maria, the island's farmers have made growing diverse produce—and sharing it with local chefs—their mission.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL SHAPIRO



COURTESY 1919



Look at this purslane,” says Daniella Rodríguez Besosa, on her farm in a mountainous region about a 90-minute drive southwest of Puerto Rico’s capital, San Juan. Pointing to the stubby green succulent, she says: “Most people consider this a weed and pull it out.” On her 6-acre farm in Aibonito, its air sweetened with birdsong and its fields buzzing with life as honeybees flit from bright red cosmos to burgundy-veined translucent lanterns of tomatillos, Rodríguez Besosa cultivates it for one of San Juan’s top restaurants, 1919, in the Condado Vanderbilt hotel.

When I ask what else she grows, she says in rapid-fire staccato: “basil, arugula, radishes, beets, peppers, eggplant, carrots, and, over there in the corner, green beans, cilantro, sweet peppers. With winter coming we’ll plant cabbage, bok choy, pineapple, tarragon, passionfruit, dragonfruit, and breadfruit.” And that’s just a partial inventory. The plantain and banana trees are toward the back of the property, to make the fruit harder to steal. And there are tomatoes, though when I’m there, “it’s really not tomato season,” she says. “We shouldn’t be planting tomatoes, but we like pushing boundaries.” Her rescue dog, a muscular mutt named Coa, bounds between the rows when Rodríguez Besosa calls.

This idyll belies what has been a difficult year for Rodríguez Besosa, 33, and most other Puerto Rican farmers. Slender and strong, with penetrating eyes, she has been working relentlessly since Hurricane Maria made landfall on the island in September 2017. “Everything was vaporized,” she says. Yet, assisted by grants from relief agencies, she has started over. She calls her new farm *Siembra Tres Vidas*, a garden with three lives.

Rodríguez Besosa’s approach is emblematic of a new mentality on the island that’s gained momentum since the hurricane. For the past century, Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory, has

grown crops primarily for export, such as coffee and sugar, and its residents relied heavily on food shipped to the island. “We don’t need to be exporting products,” she says. “We need to be producing a huge diversity of food for our people.”

In San Juan, I dine at chef Juan Jose Cuevas’ restaurant, 1919. Cuevas, a Puerto Rican native who oversaw the kitchens of Michelin-starred restaurants including New York’s Blue Hill, organized daily meals for thousands of hurricane survivors in the months after Maria. At 1919, amid amber tones and elegant décor, he presents a contemporary menu that features mostly local fish and vegetables. One of his star dishes is wahoo with purslane, the succulent grown on Rodríguez Besosa’s farm.

In the first months after the hurricane, not much fresh produce was available, Cuevas says, but “what I am getting now is 10 times better, in quality and diversity, than what I got before Maria.” Cuevas and other chefs are partnering with farmers, agreeing to buy their produce in advance of planting, giving the farmers some financial security. While local farmers still grow Puerto Rican staples, such as yuca and casava—“the diet of our ancestors,” Cuevas says—they’re also planting more carrots, beets, kale, and collard greens, in part based on what chefs want for their restaurants. “Chefs can have a huge impact on the economy of Puerto Rico, now more than ever,” he says. “We have the power to support farmers so they can continue growing.”

Noting that the island imports more than 80 percent of its food, Cuevas says, “We cannot depend so much on importing stuff. We can grow items ourselves, and we can be sustainable if another disaster happens.” The crisis has provided the opportunity to experiment, he says, which is precisely what the wife-and-husband team of Angelie Martinez and Efen Robles are doing on a half-acre farm, called *Frutos del Guacabo*, near Manatí on Puerto Rico’s north coast.

FARM FRESH

(Left) A salad made from local produce at 1919, one of San Juan’s best restaurants. (Above) Farmer Daniella Rodríguez Besosa on her 6-acre farm.



Arriving on a dirt driveway lined with tomato plants, I see goats in a corral with a crowing rooster perched on a post. The scents of lemon basil and oregano blend in the air, and the sound of flowing water rises from a hydroponic network of white PVC pipes. Robles warmly greets me and introduces me to something I've never tasted, a Brazilian flower called a lemon drop that sets my tongue tingling with a sour citrus flavor. Before starting the farm in 2010, Robles worked as a mechanic; Martínez as a chemist. They grow some plants in the earth, others in water carefully monitored for pH to produce the highest quality produce, using organic practices and shunning pesticides. The property abuts a craggy limestone slope and most of the goats, which provide milk to make cheese, are free to climb it.

The diversity of plants grown on this tiny plot is staggering: bok choy, cherry tomatoes, passionfruit, and microgreens that are sent live in tiny trays to San Juan's top chefs. The farm is helping to popularize the Habanada pepper, a sweet version of the hot Habanero pepper. "We look for products that are in demand," Robles says. *Frutos del Guacabo* is also a distribution center for more than 50 of the region's growers, and a model for what can be done with little land. But Martínez and Robles haven't forgotten their traditions. "We sell jams of papaya or pineapple," Robles says. "We make hot sauce with the skin of pineapple fermented with peppers; that's the way our grandmothers used to do it."

After the hurricane, it took 177 days to rebuild the farm and get back on the road delivering food, Robles says. If he and his wife can turn half an acre into an Eden-like garden, he believes anyone can—and that the future of the island depends on it. "We are trying to educate people that food self-sufficiency is viable; that they can start farming," Robles says. "Our role is to show people this can be done. It's not only economic but social; you need to grow your own food—it's that simple."

Chef Peter Schintler of San Juan's esteemed Marmalade restaurant is awed by what Martínez and Robles accomplish at *Frutos del Guacabo*. "It almost looks like a Jurassic garden," he says. "The amount of passion and love ... you can taste it in their product."

At True Leaf Farm in Palomas, about an hour south of San Juan, Gabriel Mejía shows that attentiveness can produce tiny bursts of flavor in edible flowers, herbs, and microgreens. Mejía, 29, studied horticulture at the University of Puerto Rico. After the hurricane, which toppled his greenhouses, he rebuilt his battered farm. Top chefs, such as Jose Santaella, eagerly buy his peppermint tops, mini cilantro, micro basil, baby radishes, and zucchini blossoms. Mejía cultivates what chefs ask him to grow. "It's their last detail," he says. "The level of attention and care this requires is humongous. If you're not passionate, you're not going to deliver a product they'll put on their plate."

As I bid Mejía farewell, he loads a large white cooler of freshly harvested produce into his dented Toyota sedan and drives down the vertiginous hills to San Juan. That night at the popular Santaella restaurant in San Juan's Santurce District, I meet Erin Schrode, operations director of Jose Andres' food relief group Chefs for Puerto Rico. We order malanga fritters with local avocados. When the appetizer arrives, Schrode tells me the fritters are topped by microgreens grown by Mejía. The tiny cilantro leaves are the perfect touch.

Schrode notes that many of the young growers seeking to change the way Puerto Ricans farm are women and says Rodríguez Besosa's vegetables and fruits are among the best on the island. "Daniella's produce is of a quality that's so exquisite. She's amazing, her passion," Schrode says. That passion is reflected in Rodríguez Besosa's commitment to her farm, her community, her island. More than 150,000 people fled Puerto Rico in the first six months after the 2017 hurricane and haven't returned. Asked if she ever considered leaving, Rodríguez Besosa emphatically says, "Never. I'm staying put. It's conviction. We stay where we're needed." ❖

Michael Shapiro's 2016 story for *Inspirato* on Vancouver chefs won the *Explore Canada Award of Excellence*.

ISLAND BOUNTY

(Left) Husband-and-wife Efrén Robles and Angélie Martínez on their Frutos del Guacabo farm. (Right) Edible flowers grown at Gabriel Mejía's True Leaf Farm.



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