

# Costa Rica

## Phase I Interview

Costa Rica, which means "Rich Coast", lies at the heart of the Central American, is an ideal tropical paradise for living or just your vacation. Almost 95% of the Costa Rican population is of Spanish or Mestizo (mixed) heritage, heavily influencing the country's cooking style (*globalgourmet.com*). While doing my research about Costa Rican's food and diet, I had an interview with a Costa Rica native Alejandro Sapriza. He was born in Costa Rica and is the first people to migrate to the U.S. among his family. Compare to the family or friends in Costa Rica have a close relationship to the Catholic Church [Because it was a Spanish colony, today, more than 90% of Costa Ricans consider themselves Catholics. (*Margaret Kelly, P18*)], Alejandro does not have any religious affiliation. Beans, rice, potatoes and coffee are what he mentioned regarding as foods that are indicative of Costa Rica culture and also use for meal cooking. Normally, Costa Ricans have three meals every day: breakfast, lunch and dinner. They are prepared in the kitchen by women in the family, usually the mother. Alejandro usually has coffee, muffin as a snack between lunch and dinner. Back at home, when he had dinner with his family, every member of the family sits and eats together around the same table. All dishes are set on the center of the table; everybody help themselves to enjoy the meal. Plates, forks, knives, bowls, spoons, glasses are used for meal.

In American culture, today, we have taken time away from enjoying food and eating with family, which is due to the lack of time. Ever since Alejandro moved to this country, his food habits are slightly changed. He surprisingly finds himself has not touched a plate of rice and beans for a while due to tight time schedule that

makes him no enough time for cooking at home. He has no choice but tends to choose more pre-cooked meals which he would never have eaten in his home country. However, in a Costa Rica way of eating, people eat beans and rice almost every day and encourage eating with company.

When being asked about any symbolic meanings of food known to his culture, Alejandro said, “I cannot really think of something that is seen as “symbolic” but there are certain foods that remind me of certain holidays such as homemade *relleno* (stuffing) that is made for Christmas.” He also said, “I can’t seem to think of any specific food taboos except being catholic we do not eat meat on some specific Fridays. In addition, we definitely do not eat things such as cockroaches.”

Christmas, Semana Santa, Mother’s Day and Independence Day are some of the major holidays that Alejandro believes are important for Costa Rican to celebrate during the year. During the holiday season, Alejandro’s mum makes some special foods like *relleno* (stuffing) as well as a kind of delicious rice made with some sort of thin noodle for family. Alejandro does not fast. However, he points that there are some people who do sustain from eating meat and such foods for religious reasons.

Every culture has their certain ways to do or certain food to consume to improve strength, endurance. Alejandro likes to drink *caldo do* vegetables (a kind of vegetables soup) and consume some meat as well for getting more energy. Vegetables and vitamins are essential to prevent illness. Also, consuming enough fruits, vegetables and water will help to stay health. Personally, Alejandro tries to avoid too much carbohydrate and adds some good proteins like fish in his daily meal.

Alejandro said he still remember his mother fed him concentrated chicken soup when he was sick and he ascertains that this would cure anything. Besides, a kind of fish oil called *bacalao* will be taken to help for recovery. One traditional therapy is using vapor rub on particular body part to help relieve pain, even rubbing it on chest to help stop a cough.

Few years after Alejandro settled down in the America, his cultural habits and traditions have been influenced by American culture. “Living in the US has influenced my eating habits very much because they do not necessarily sell the foods I like eating in “fast food” areas”. Advertisements have gradually changed his way he chose what to eat every day. However, food in Costa Rica is more natural and healthier that have no so many preservatives and condiments in them. When living in Costa Rica, Alejandro did not visit fast food restaurant as many as he does now. He spent most of his dinner time with his family at home and ate healthier there. In the end of the interview, Alejandro restates that, as he know, people who ever had a chance to visit Costa Rica are all love the food, culture, people from that “rich coast”.

I have also interviewed someone who belongs to my cultural group, my friend—Amy Liu. She migrates to the U.S. with her family from China when she was twenties. She is a Buddhist.

Flour and rice are the two main food staples in Chinese cuisine. In general, rice is the major food source for people from rice farming areas in southern China. In wheat farming areas in Northern China, people largely rely on flour based foods such as noodles, dumplings and steamed buns. Vegetables, meats, seafood, rice or flour are needed to make a meal in a typical Chinese cuisine. Three meals are prepared every day no matter

southern or northern China. They are breakfast (7-9am), lunch (11-1pm), dinner (6-8pm). We don't usually snack between meals. Daily meals are served in a family style. Everyone sit around the table to share food with family by placing all the dishes on the table and individual serve themselves using bowls (for rice or soup) and chopsticks and spoon. Plates are not for individual use. Before Amy moved to SF from LA, her other does most cooking in the kitchen. Now Amy has to cook for herself and her husband. Since both of them have to work, most time, Amy only cooks and has dinner with her husband during the weekday or sometimes order dinner from restaurant. She has some oatmeal as breakfast or omits it if has no time in the morning and eats lunch at office. As to the food habits differ from her family norms, she said, "if only me and my husband at home, we dish out whatever the portion we need into our plate and sit usually in the couch so we can watch TV while we are having food or wherever the place we want. The severing and eating style is more individual like...Compared to have meal with our family; you need to respect the table manner".

Chinese celebrate many traditional holidays and festivals during the year, almost each holiday have its special food with specific meaning respectively. Noodles eating on one's birthday are symbolic of long life and good health according to Chinese tradition. *Moon cake* is eaten during mid-autumn festival (celebrated on the 15th day of the eighth month) is a symbol of family reunion. During the Spring Festival (the most important holiday to Chinese), people will make and eat sticky cake (also known as *nian gao* or *New Year cake*). Eating *nian gao* has the symbolism of raising oneself higher in each coming year, also means prosperous in their life in the following year. Lantern Festival (15th of the 1st month), we have *Tang Yuan* ---ball-shaped boiled sweet rice dumplings with delicious stuffing, the symbolism of family reunion. As to food taboos, Amy told me that

she knows there are some food taboos during women's pregnancy if those count. For example, watermelon, any cold drink. She does not fast.

Fresh chicken soup is given when people feel weak. Amy said she loves the fish soup her mum made for helping her get energy back. Now, she still believes some traditional therapies that she learns from Chinese culture would benefit her body's health. Like, she would cook pork meat soup for with some traditional Chinese herb (like medlar, yam etc.) for her husband when he feels exhausted from work. Ginseng is acknowledged as a magic herb that is used for strengthening your immune system. Same as TCM, Chinese consume different kinds of fresh vegetables and fruits to stay healthy and prevent disease. Amy boils and drinks some ginger soup or even has a hot ginger water bath in winter time to prevent catching a cold. Definitely do not have any cold drinks or have greasy food when you have a stomach problem. Having some plain porridge, bland non-grassy food would help you feel better sooner.

Amy states that even if she knew the traditional Chinese way of the diet is healthier, however, it costs a lot of time for preparing and cooking. Amy claims that American culture has influenced a lot about her cultural habits and traditions. "American culture makes me lazy. I buy more half-prepared products. More bread, French fries instead of rice, more meat instead of balancing meal with more vegetables, more beverage less soup. Back to my country, a KFC or McDonald's meal is more expensive than a regular Chinese meal, I seldom had these fast foods ...also we drink soup more other than coke with meal..." Furthermore, she learned to drink coffee while she would never have had back in China) and start snack. In addition, she found herself start getting used to the sweetness that American desserts have which she ever complained about at the beginning. However, there is

bright side of things. Since the diversity of the American culture, Amy said she has more chance compare to people in her hometown to take a try different kind of foods from other cultures even learn how to make it. Also, “I eat more salad instead of stir fried vegetables which I think it is healthier because high temperature would make nutrients lose if cook them in Chinese style”. One advantage of these impacts is that she enjoys combining and modifying western & Eastern cooking style gain more flavor. Like, when cooking spaghetti, she will add different kinds of vegetables and meat just like when she cooks Chinese noodles.

Due to the high numbers and proportion of ethnic Chinese in San Francisco, you can easily find a restaurant serving more native-style Chinese cuisines around your neighborhood. Many of Amy’s friends from other esthetic group enjoy Chinese food, most of them know how to use chopstick very well, and some of them even know how to cook Chinese dishes. Amy believes that Chinese culture habits and tradition have influenced American culture in many aspects.

As I compare two interviews, I find that there are some similarities and also differences between Costa Rica and Chinese culture. First, rice is one basic element in every day meals for both cultures. Beside this, Flour to Chinese and bean & potatoes and coffee to Costa Rican are also important. Second, both of them have same food service style, a family style---all shared three meals every day with family around dinner table and individual serve themselves. Meals are prepared by woman in the kitchen in both cultures. Both of them use plates, bowls, and spoons except plates are used for different function in two culture, and also Chinese do not use knives & forks while Costa Rican do not use chopsticks. Third, Chinese and Costa Rica both have special traditional foods serve in their holiday. However, they are totally different concerning what major holidays they

celebrate in either group with Christmas for Costa Rican and Spring Festival for Chinese. Forth, having chicken soup to improve strength and eating more vegetables and fruits in daily meals to stay healthy are accepted in both groups. But there are some particular foods or traditional therapies from each culture for curing illness. For instance, Amy drinks ginger soup for curing a cold; Alejandro uses vapor rub on body stop a cough. Last, Both Amy and Alejandro agree that American culture have left them a great impact on either consumption of foods or cultural habits. It is hard for both of them to keep their culture habits and traditions while been inevitably assimilated into American culture. Meanwhile, they are all happy to find out that their country's culture is accepted by more and more American.

## **Phrase II**

### **I. Data collection**

Costa Rica traditional cuisine is an interesting product of its cultural diversity, where North and South American flavors meet Spanish and Caribbean culinary styles, producing a range of mouthwatering dishes. Costa Rican food is generally quite healthy when coupled with an active lifestyle. Fruit, fresh vegetables, rice and beans, beef and abundant salads are the trademarks of Ticos' cooking. The meals are very well rounded and generally low in fat, rich in protein and high in fiber. Cheese and other dairy products are rarely utilized.

Costa Rica's traditionally mild, not over-spiced cuisine usually features rice and beans (core foods), which are also the main ingredients in the national recipe (*globalgourmet.com*). *Galo pinto* (literally, painted rooster), this simple, standard dish, is the backbone of Costa Rican cuisine. It is rice and black beans mixed with

seasonings including onion, cilantro, garlic and finely chopped bell pepper. Rural Costa Ricans eat *gallo pinto* three times daily (Paul Murphy, p108). *Casado* is another feature meal, the name referring to the eternal "marriage" of its components. Consisting of rice and beans, meat or fish, fried plantains, and a carrot, tomato, and cabbage salad, this basic and well-rounded meal strikes a good nutritional balance.

Fruits and vegetables make their secondary foods. Vegetables are mostly utilized in making soups and stews or as side dish with of a *casado* meal, fresh cabbage, tomatoes, and carrots make up the typical salad. Corn is one of the most favored vegetables, and it is usually prepared in the form of tortillas and corn pancakes. Corn turnovers filled with beans, cheese, and maybe potatoes and meat to make *Empanadas*. Fried mashed plantains with a liberal sprinkling of salt makes up *Patacones*. Fruits found in Costa Rica are delicious and in abundance, especially tropical delights like mangoes, passion fruits and papaya. Many of these can be served plain but most Ticos prefer them blended as a juice like a *refresco*, a blended drink with ice.

As to peripheral foods, they include cheese and other dairy products like sour cream or chili peppers, yet most Ticos do not like very spicy food. Costa Ricans do snack, one of the quintessential Ticos snack is the plantain, or *plátano*, is probably. It has the appearance of a large banana, but cannot be eaten raw. It is sweet and delicious when fried or baked, and will often accompany most meals. When sliced thinly and deep fried, the plantain becomes a crunchy snack like the potato chip ([vivacostarica.com](http://vivacostarica.com)).

Mostly, food is prepared and cooked by women, mainly the mother, in a traditional Costa Rican family in the kitchen of their house. Sometimes, the grandmother prepares meals for the families and children when parents have to work.



As we know from the interview, three meals (breakfast, lunch, and dinner) are prepared and eaten every day. Ticos make lunch the main meal of the day. In addition, two coffee breaks are prepared by the women of the household. At meal time, all family members sit together around a dinner table with the father usually sitting at the head of the table. All dishes are placed on the centre of the table and individuals serve themselves. Table appointments applied for each dinner usually include plates, glasses (for beverage like beer), forks, knives (for meats), bowls (for soup) and napkins.

Ticos are gentle, friendly and very polite. All people in Costa Rica are treated with the same amount of respect. Respect for older people is of utmost importance, always place Don or Dona before an older person's name. When greeting someone you know, young or old, kiss the person once, on the right cheek (except if it's two men greeting each other- a firm handshake is expected). Costa Ricans are always very conscious about looking presentable and tidy when they go out. (*Larissa Banting P66*) Family is also very important, and it is considered polite to ask about how their family is doing. If you are invited to someone's home, take a hostess gift such as flowers, chocolates or something special from your home country. If you are offered food, try to eat it even if you are not hungry. Costa Ricans don't like to say no and will avoid answering no, just saying "gracias" ([www.costaricantrails.com](http://www.costaricantrails.com)). When you sit down to eat, it is polite to say "Buenos dias", it means good day, good morning, to people you might be sharing a table with. If you're eating with a group of locals, it's polite to say "buen provecho" (bon appétit) ---it means enjoy your meal just like we say help yourself at the start of the meal. (*Mara Vorhees, p85*) In addition, being excessively drunk in public can be seen as impolite and people might think you are not a trustworthy person. ([www.culturecrossing.net](http://www.culturecrossing.net))

There aren't much food taboos except one that relate to Ticos' religion (Approximately 69% of the country's population is Roman Catholic), thus, Catholic Church's prohibition on eating red meat during Lent. Wine and bread are consumed at the communion have their symbolic meaning with bread that represents the body of Christ and the wine which represents the blood of Christ (*Costa Rica by Rowland Mead, p31*). Furthermore, no alcohol is served throughout the country during the Easter week (*Costa Rica by Joe Fullman, Nicola Mainwood p79*).

Costa Rica's year sees a whole host of events taking place, many celebrations are religious in origin, or are at least based on the Christian calendar. Christmas and Easter are strictly observed. Other main holidays are New Years Day, Semana Santa ,Feast of Saint Joseph, Anniversary of the battle of Rivas. Traditional food tamale is served during Christmas. Tamales are savory rather than spicy and are served wrapped in banana leaves. Each packet (they are usually served in twos) contains the masa (corn meal) that is their base; a little piece of roast pork or chicken; slices of carrot; red pepper. The whole family may be enlisted to help in the long and complicated process of assembling dozens and dozens of tamales.

Also, a popular remedy for ingestion and heart burn is a mixture of milk, aloe gel, and honey. It is a great way to sooth the any acidity or ingestion problems in the body. Wine is not very popular in Costa Rica because it is usually imported and expensive; therefore, most Ticos prefer to drink beer.

Costa Rica has many natural remedies and interesting solutions to common and rarer medical complaints just as any country or culture. There are least 270 medicinal plants in Costa Rica, and many treat more than one ailment. It's not uncommon to find medicinal plants and herbs at the plant nurseries or growing

in backyards and along the roadside. Costa Ricans, especially those who live in more rural areas are often firm believers in natural cures. Many markets will stock plants, herbs and leaves which are believed to have medical benefits with the wide selection of fruit and vegetables. Here are some common ones: *Noni*, also called the great morinda or Indian mulberry, grows abundantly in Costa Rica, is one of the rainforest's most valuable fruits. This miracle plant, often referred to as "nature's cure," has been found beneficial in cases of cancer, digestive problems, gout, high cholesterol, hypertension, infections, lung disease, pain relief, and Type II diabetes. (*Costa Rica's Natural Remedies*, by Emma). Wine is too expensive in Costa Rica. Therefore, Wine is only used for communion and Ticos prefer to drink beer or local fruit juice instead. *Fever grass* is commonly found growing and is a long spiked grass plant. It is boiled as a tea to bring down fevers. *Sorosi* is a green leaved climbing plant which is used for 'blood cleaning'. Drinking tea from the boiled plant is thought to clean your circulation if it is drunk two or three times a week, but not more. It is also frequently used to obtain relief from mosquito bites. The plant is simply crushed into cold water and applied to the bites. It should then be left to soak in and provide the patient with relief from itching and swelling (*Costa Rica Homeopathic Cures*).

## II

In comparison with the information I attained from the interview, research works give me an opportunity to have a comprehensive point of view of Costa Rican's culture, custom, tradition. Conversely, the information given through the interview confirms what I acquired from the research which helps to emphasize what I have learned from this project. Because the interview is just an individual case, it doesn't cover all the information. Such as, Alejandro only mentioned about core food (beans and rice) and secondary food (vegetables and fruits).

He did not covered peripheral foods in his food consumptions. Additionally, he seemed have no idea about food taboos and symbolic meaning of food due to his irreligious background. One of the most interesting parts of Costa Rican culture for me is about their traditional therapies. Even though, Alejandro only gave very little information about this part. It is much enough for just raising my curiosity to discover the mysterious world of Costa Rica's natural remedies. One motivation could derive from the relevant part in my own culture. In china, we also have plenty of traditional therapies inherited from our ancestor. Many of them have even been carried on from hundreds or thousand years ago. These invaluable heritages should be cherished by any of us today. It once again shows us the great power of nature.

### III

Before this project, I know little about Costa Rica, not even where it exactly located on the map. With the exploration of this country, I find out the existence of the similarities in Costa Rican and Chinese culture that sort of build a connection in two counties.

Every member in this group is responsible for one part of the research that is direct related to the questions listed in the project guide. We have about five times group meetings. Whoever once done her parts will send her works to others for further suggestions.

In oral presentation part, as we are first group for giving the presentation. We don't know we should repeat the multiple choices questions and answers in the presentation. We thought we just need to make sure cover the answers in our speech. I was nervous but the technique that learnt from my speech class helps me manage it. I am surprised that I didn't look at the cards I prepared for speech.

In general, all members in the group are willing and also able to finish work that assigned them. I have a good experience to work in this team to make the project done.

I also learn that how planning is importance for successful completing a project on time. I have learned my lesson through my delay to finish writing the report before due day. It takes much more time than I was expected and planned before. This is probable a longest paper I have ever finished in my life. Good thing is I have finally made through with it.

### **Phrase III**

The menu I create below is for group of six people who spend their vacation in Costa Rica for a short visit and wish to sample local cuisine. All the dishes will be served as family style too, placed on the table and everyone is given equal chance to try all different dishes on the table and individual served themselves. The menu includes:

- Two main dishes: casado and Arroz Pollo/ Gabas
- Two kinds of soups Olla Podrida and sopa negra (made with black beans, onions, cilantro and hard-boiled eggs).
- Dessert:
  1. Cajeta De Coco (also known as Costa Rican Coconut Fudge, is fudge made of coconut, tapa dulce, and orange peel Cono).

2. Tres Leche, one of the most common desserts in Costa Rica. It is a three layered custard flan. Soaking with condensed milk, evaporated milk, and whole milk and then topped with icing. Tres Leche is also the feature national dessert.

- Drink:

1. guaro (a sugar-cane alcoholic drink is favorite local tipples)
2. Refrescos, (made of blended fruit and ice, are very popular refreshments, and are available at most corner stores and restaurants)
3. horchata (a sweet and spicy drink that is made of roasted ground rice and cinnamon).

### Casado

This dish is not only the most popular and typical Costa Rica meal that you can easily find out in almost any local restaurant but also it is always a filling and economic meal for a tight budget. As I have explained before, this dish consists of roasted pork served with black beans and rice, fried plantains, and fresh salad that make up with cabbage, carrot, and tomato.

Wine Pairings: California- Mirassou Pinot Noir

Old World- Joseph Faiveley 2004 Pinot Noir Bourgogne

(Pinot Noir is a versatile food wine, great with meat and vegetables which all we can find in this dishes *casado*).

### Olla Podrida

The *Olla Podrida* is the great-grandparent of the soup the people in Costa Rica loves the most. What gives the distinct flavor to the Costa Rican version is the mixture of vegetables cooked in it: yucca, green plantain, sweet potato, tannia, tacacos, taro, pumpkin, carrot, cho-cho, onion, cabbage.

Wine Pairings: California- 2007 Banshee Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon

Old World- Cotes du Rhone

### Arroz Pollo/ Gabas

Arroz is a dish of fried rice which may be offered with chicken (pollo) or shrimp (gambas, also served with black beans, roasted corn on the cob, and cabbage, carrot, tomato salad.

Wine Pairings: California- 2008 Sonoma County St. Francis Chardonnay (good match for the meat chicken in the dish)

Old World- 2007 Zind-Humbrecht Vin de Table Francais Zind

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