

Discovering the delight of empanadas

A culinary journey through Latin America

By LUIS SANCHEZ

When planning a trip to Latin America or contemplating a meal at a Latin American restaurant, one culinary image that immediately springs to mind — alongside the classic ceviche — is the beloved empanada.

These delightful pockets of flavor vary beautifully from country to country, showcasing a vibrant array of options. From the spicy empanadas of Mexico that tantalize the taste buds with bold flavors to the hearty versions found in Argentina, and the exquisite baked varieties from Peru, each has its own distinct personality and charm.

Empanadas represent more than just a meal; they embody the rich cultural heritage and traditions of Latin America, inviting food lovers to connect with the diverse regions of these countries. As a testament to the essence of adaptability in the Latin American culinary repertoire, the term "empanada" comes from the Spanish verb "empanar," meaning "to wrap or coat in bread," which forms the foundation of these delightful creations.

The flexibility in fillings and preparation methods allows chefs to express their creativity, resulting in dishes that reflect local ingredients and culinary practices. Ultimately, enjoying empanadas is a celebration of the essence of Latin American cuisine, offering a delicious way to explore the flavors and culture of this vibrant region, where each bite tells a story steeped in history and community.

Empanadas are nothing if not versatile, with a range of protein options including beef, chicken, cheese and innovative vegetarian choices. This flexibility in fillings allows empanadas to be tailored with nearly limitless combinations, each offering distinct health benefits. The varied ingredients not only satisfy the palate but also provide nutritional advantages, depending on your selection. Whether incorporating lean meats, nutrient-rich vegetables or plant-based proteins, empanadas can be crafted to meet diverse dietary needs while delivering a delicious and healthful experience.

In Latin America, empanadas have become a beloved culinary staple, each country offering its own interpretation. While empanadas in Argentina often feature savory beef or chicken fillings accompanied by spices, boiled eggs and olives, resulting in a deliciously fried pocket with a crispy exterior, other countries have their own takes as well. For example, Chilean empanadas may present a sweeter profile, incorporating raisins into their rich fillings, while Colombian empanadas often include comforting potatoes and rice for a satisfying meal-in-one option.

It is the baked varieties from Peru that truly shine in the empanada landscape. These exquisite pastries are baked to a splendid orange-brown hue and arrive at your table bursting with bold flavors and a rich array of fresh fillings. At Amaru Gourmet, we take great pride in exclusively offering these Peruvian baked empanadas, crafted with authentic ingredients and techniques that celebrate the depth of our culinary heritage. Each



PHOTO PROVIDED BY AMARU GOURMET

Empanadas are versatile, with a range of protein options including beef (pictured), chicken, cheese and innovative vegetarian choices.

empanada is a delicious representation of Peru's vibrant culture, making them an experience not to be missed.

Moving to the Caribbean, empanadas might surprise you with their vibrant flavors, often brightly colored with achote and flavored with scotch bonnet peppers. Each country tailors its empanada recipes to its local tastes, utilizing ingredients that are readily available and culturally significant, making every bite a delicious representation of its culinary heritage.

Join me as we explore the numerous benefits of these delectable treats. Discover the different filling options available, each crafted to enhance both flavor and nutrition. And at the end of this culinary journey, I'll share one of our secret recipes for crafting a delicious, colorful empanada that many have declared among the best in the region.

THE ART OF BAKING EMPANADAS IN PERU

Peruvian empanadas are a culinary treasure, distinguished by their baking method that sets them apart from their fried counterparts. This technique yields a delicate, flaky crust that perfectly complements the richness of the fillings within. Embracing a healthier approach, this baking tradition not only enhances flavor but also aligns with health-conscious preferences by utilizing less oil.

At Amaru Gourmet, we celebrate this cherished tradition, placing a strong emphasis on quality and authentic Peruvian flavors. What makes Peruvian empanadas truly remarkable is their harmonious blend of diverse ingredients and the craftsmanship involved in their preparation. One of the secrets to achieving the perfect empanada is making our own dough from scratch rather than purchasing it. Each empanada is crafted with a medley of flavors; the "empanada clásica," for instance, incorporates flamed beef, boiled eggs, black olives, raisins, fresh cilantro and aji Amarillo for that distinctive Peruvian kick. A light dusting of powdered sugar on the outside creates an exquisite balance between sweet and savory, elevating them to one of the best empanadas in the region, as noted by several clients of Amaru Gourmet.

Ultimately, it's the careful selection of ingredients and a pinch of love that make our empanadas truly special.

FILLING OPTIONS: ENDLESS CREATIVITY

While the beef empanada remains a classic favorite, the possibilities for fillings are virtually limitless. Imagine savoring beef sautéed with

flavorful spices, or delighting in chicken empanadas marinated with aji Amarillo.

Cheese lovers can indulge in empanadas filled with melted queso fresco, while vegetarian options abound, featuring ingredients such as sautéed mushrooms, vibrant bell peppers or a medley of seasonal vegetables that create a colorful and flavorful experience.

The creativity doesn't stop there — modern culinary innovations have led to exciting new fillings inspired by international flavors. Picture an empanada filled with aji de Gallina, a beloved Peruvian dish from Lima, or a Mediterranean-inspired version brimming with feta cheese and sun-dried tomatoes.

Even spinach and queso fresco empanadas showcase the flexibility of this dish, making it a perfect canvas for both traditional and contemporary interpretations.

This adaptability not only satisfies diverse palates but also provides multiple health benefits based on the ingredients used. Each empanada serves as a testament to the rich culinary heritage of Peru, inviting diners to explore the delightful flavors and creative possibilities that await them.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF EMPANADAS: EXPLORING THE NUTRITIOUS FILLINGS

Empanadas are not just a delightful culinary experience. They also offer a range of health benefits depending on their fillings.

Here are eight popular empanada fillings, along with their nutritional advantages:

BEEF EMPANADA

Benefit: High in protein
Details: Ground or minced beef is an excellent source of protein, essential for muscle growth, repair, and overall bodily function. Consuming high-protein foods helps build and maintain muscle mass, which is particularly important for active individuals. Additionally, protein aids in satiety, helping to keep you feeling full longer. Beef is also rich in iron, a crucial mineral that supports oxygen transport in the blood and can enhance energy levels, making it a powerhouse choice for those on the go.

CHICKEN EMPANADA

Benefit: Lean source of protein
Details: Chicken is known for being a lean meat option, lower in fat compared to red meat. This makes chicken empanadas a heart-healthy choice, providing high protein without excessive saturated fat. Chicken is also rich in B vitamins, such as B6 and B12, which are vital for energy metabolism and brain health. The combination of protein and lower fat content makes

chicken empanadas a satisfying yet health-conscious option.

AJI DE GALLINA EMPANADA

Benefit: Rich in flavor and nutrients

Details: Aji de Gallina, a traditional Peruvian dish prepared with chicken, aji Amarillo peppers, walnuts and cheese, offers a distinct flavor and an abundance of nutrients. Chicken serves as an excellent source of lean protein, while essential vitamins and minerals, such as B vitamins, aid in energy production. The aji peppers contribute vitamins A and C, while walnuts add healthy omega-3 fatty acids. Used as a filling for empanadas, this dish not only satisfies taste cravings but also provides a nutrient-dense option that promotes overall health and heart wellness.

SPINACH EMPANADA

Benefit: Rich in iron and vitamins

Details: Spinach is a nutrient-dense leafy green packed with essential vitamins, particularly vitamins A, C and K, and is also a great source of iron. Iron is crucial for preventing fatigue and maintaining energy levels, while vitamin C enhances iron absorption in the body. The antioxidants found in spinach help protect against cellular damage, promoting overall health. Additionally, the fiber content supports digestive health, making spinach empanadas a well-rounded choice.

QUESO FRESCO EMPANADA

Benefit: Calcium for strong bones

Details: Queso fresco is a fresh cheese that provides a good source of calcium, necessary for maintaining strong bones and teeth. Calcium plays a critical role in muscle function and the blood clotting process. Additionally, queso fresco is typically lower in fat than many aged cheeses, making it a healthier option while still providing a creamy texture. The inclusion of queso fresco in empanadas adds not only flavor but also essential nutrients that support bone and dental health.

VEGETARIAN EMPANADA (E.G., MIXED VEGGIES)

Benefit: High in fiber
Details: Vegetarian empanadas often feature various vegetables, providing dietary fiber that is essential for a healthy digestive system. A high-fiber diet can help prevent constipation, regulate blood sugar levels and contribute to feelings of fullness, which aids in weight management. The diversity of vegetables used also ensures a wider range of vitamins and minerals, making vegetarian empanadas both

nutritious and delicious.

GLUTEN-FREE EMPANADA

Benefit: Safe for those with gluten sensitivity

Details: For individuals with gluten intolerance or celiac disease, gluten-free empanadas allow everyone to enjoy this delicious dish without worry. Using alternative flours such as rice flour, almond flour or gluten-free flour can provide the same delightful taste and texture that traditional empanadas offer. Additionally, gluten-free options can be rich in nutrients, often packed with healthy fats or lower in carbohydrates, making them a beneficial choice for those avoiding gluten.

RICE, BEANS AND MIXED VEGETABLES EMPANADA

Benefit: Complete protein source

Details: This empanada offers a nutritious blend of rice, beans and mixed vegetables, creating a complete protein source that contains all the essential amino acids needed for a balanced diet. This combination is not only filling but also provides substantial dietary fiber, which is beneficial for digestion and helps maintain healthy bowel movements. The addition of mixed vegetables enhances the nutrient profile, contributing vitamins and minerals while adding flavor and color. Furthermore, rice and beans are cost-effective and nutritionally dense, making them a staple in many cultures. Filling empanadas with this mixture is perfect for vegetarians seeking a hearty and nutritious meal option, ensuring a satisfying experience without compromising on flavor or health benefits.

CONCLUSION: EMPANADAS – A CULINARY BRIDGE ACROSS CULTURES

These delightful creations are more than just a meal; they represent a fusion of flavors enriched with numerous health benefits. Each empanada boasts high-quality protein essential for muscle growth and repair, while its wholesome ingredients provide vital vitamins and minerals, supporting energy levels and immune health. The inclusion of healthy fats contributes to heart wellness, and fiber-rich fillings promote digestive health and satisfaction. Understanding the diverse needs of today's diners, Amaru Gourmet and many modern eateries offer gluten-free empanadas, using alternative flours like rice or almond to ensure everyone can enjoy this delicious dish while maintaining satisfying texture and flavor.

Empanadas serve as a culinary bridge, connecting cultures through their shared love of this versatile dish. Whether baked or fried, filled with hearty beef or flavorful vegetarian options, they offer a comforting and familiar experience.

At Amaru Gourmet, we cherish the tradition of baking empanadas, celebrating the finest Peruvian flavors through our exquisite baked beef empanadas. Each bite invites diners on a journey through Peru's rich culinary landscape, nourishing both body and soul while celebrating the vibrant cultural heritage of Latin America.

Baked beef sauté Peruvian empanada

INGREDIENTS

First and most important: "The pinch of love"

Dough:

4 cups all-purpose flour
1 3/4 cups unsalted butter (approximately 3 sticks), at room temperature
1 egg
1/2 cup water, at room temperature
Pinch of salt
Pinch of sugar

Filling:

1 pound ground beef or minced meat
1 onion, finely chopped
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1 teaspoon paprika
Salt and pepper to taste
1/4 cup raisins
1/4 cup chopped black olives
1 tablespoon aji amarillo paste (optional for spice)

1 hard-boiled egg, chopped into quarters

Fresh cilantro, chopped

Finishing touch:

1 egg, beaten (for egg wash)

Powdered sugar for dusting

METHOD

Prepare the dough:

In a large bowl, combine the flour, salt and sugar. Cut in the room temperature butter until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs (approximately 3 minutes; using softened butter makes it easier to work with).

In a smaller bowl, whisk the egg, then add it to the larger bowl.

Gradually stir in the water at room temperature in parts, mixing until the mixture transforms into a dough. Adjust moisture as necessary to achieve the right consistency. Divide the dough into two portions, shape them into discs, wrap in plastic and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes.

Prepare the filling:

In a skillet, heat olive oil over medium heat. Sauté the onion and garlic until soft.

Add the ground beef or minced meat, cumin, and paprika, cooking until the meat is browned.

Stir in the raisins, black olives and aji Amarillo paste if using. Season with salt and pepper. Remove from heat, let cool slightly, and then add fresh cilantro.

Assemble the empanadas:

Preheat the oven to 375°F.

Roll out the dough on a lightly floured surface to about 1/8 inch thick. Cut into 5-inch circles.

Place a spoonful of the filling (making sure to remove excess liquid) in the center of each circle, and add the boiled egg cut into quarters.

Fold the dough over the filling to form a half-moon shape. Crimp the edges with a fork to seal.

Place the empanadas on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper.

Bake the empanadas:

Brush each empanada with the beaten egg for a golden finish. Bake in the preheated oven for 30 to 40 minutes or until golden brown. You can open the oven to check on them. If you notice some liquid escaping from the empanadas, that's OK, don't worry about it.

Add the finishing touch:

Once baked, lightly dust the empanadas with powdered sugar for a touch of sweetness that complements the savory filling. Enjoy your homemade Peruvian baked beef sauté empanadas!

Luis Sanchez is the owner of Amaru Gourmet in Brattleboro.