

# Traditional Food in Aruba: 21 Dishes You Need to Try | A Taste for Travel

By Susan Campbell

Discover what to eat in Aruba with our ultimate guide to the best traditional food in Aruba and where to find it.

By Sue Campbell

For such a tiny island, Aruba has a highly sophisticated culinary scene. It's an interesting kaleidoscope of international cuisine influenced by over 90 nationalities and served in over 200 fine dining restaurants, countless cafes and snack spots.



If you're headed to Aruba, you're in for a culinary treat! Photo Credit: Eat Local Aruba

However, there are some distinctly local flavours and dishes that are woven deep into the mosaic of daily life that truly set it apart from other Caribbean islands. Some dishes are steeped in tradition, others are seasonal, and some can be a tad difficult to find.

But it's well worth the effort to seek them out to truly discover how locals like to eat, drink and be merry on One Happy Island.

Here's a list of traditional local food you should try in Aruba and the best restaurants to find it at:

## Stobas (stews)

A popular hot comfort food in Aruba is stew (*stoba*), enjoyed by Arubans despite the tropical climate. It's typically made with beef or goat as its base, but *calco stoba* (conch stew) is also popular.



Enjoy a stoba, a traditional stew in Aruba Photo Credit: Aruba Experience

Though you typically had to go to a restaurant that specialized in *cominda local* (local cuisine) to find it, nowadays there are many new cafes and restaurants bringing it back to the forefront of mainstream cuisine and adding their own touches to make it look more appealing on a plate.

Eat Local Aruba is a treasure trove of resources for food fans interested in exploring local cuisine and supporting local producers. Check the [Eat Local Aruba Facebook Page](#) for updates.

One restaurant that's a must-visit for stobas and other traditional food in Aruba is the [Aruba Experience Café in Oranjestad](#).

## Pastechi

Pastechis are deep-fried pastry pockets stuffed with myriad types of goodies. Typically you'll find cheese, ham, beef, chicken or tuna inside a pastechi but you can sometimes find chop suey filling, thanks to the Asian influence on the island.

These half-moon shaped pastries are a popular grab-and-go breakfast staple for locals and you can see people lining up at their favourite take-out spots before the work day begins.

Though pastechis are sold just about everywhere, one of the best spots to try them fresh is the aptly-named [The Pastechi House](#) in downtown Oranjestad on Main Street behind the Renaissance Mall.

## Keshi Yena

Often called Aruba's national dish, this comfort food casserole was borne of necessity since it was created

entirely of leftovers baked into a hollow cheese rind!

Read about the history of Keshi Yena and get our [Recipe to Make Keshi Yena](#) at home.



Keshi Yena, a traditional food in Aruba Photo Credit: Eat Local Aruba

Though not as popular or easy to find as the meat-based version, seafood stuffed keshi yena is also a traditional dish and it's on the menu at [Gasparito Restaurant in Noord](#) near the high rise hotels on Palm Beach.

## Sopis (soups)

A top food in Aruba to try is soup. Arubans are big on hearty soups, especially fish soup (*sopi di pisca*) which will depend on the catch-of-the day for its base. And for the culinary adventurous there is also *sopi di mondongo* (tripe soup).

*Yambo* is the name for their Antillean style gumbo which features okra and gives it a slippery, stringy texture which garnered it the nickname “slimy soup” ...but don't worry, it tastes better than it sounds.

If you happen to see *sopi di pampuna* featured on a restaurant menu anywhere – grab it! This seriously delicious creamy pumpkin soup is enhanced with annatto seed and sometimes also contains bits of salted beef. Delicious!

## Pisca Hasa and Other Fresh Fish in Aruba

Of course, being an island, Aruba is blessed with a bounty of goodies from the sea, and scads of seafood and fish restaurants preparing it a myriad of ways. But when it comes to the traditional style of serving fresh fish, Arubans keep it very simple.

Pisca Hasa, simply translated, means fried fish. A typical Aruban catch-of-the-day meal would be a filet or whole

fish fried or grilled and topped with a rich red tomato-onion-peppers creole sauce and punctuated with spices like paprika and herbs like “yerbe di hole”- the island’s pungent local basil.



Enjoy grilled grouper with fresh mango salsa and sweet fried plantain at Cuba’s Cookin’ in Aruba

The best spot to enjoy fish so fresh you can watch fishermen bring them straight from the pier to the grill to your table is at Zeerovers in Savaneta. Read our post with everything you need to know about [eating at Zeerovers](#).

Another top restaurant for fresh fish is [Cuba’s Cookin’](#) where a must-try dish on the expansive lunch menu is Pescado a la Parrilla (grilled grouper), served with delectable sides of fresh mango salsa, black beans and caramelized plantain.

**Insider tip:** [Driftwood Restaurant](#) runs their own deep sea fishing charter, and if you book with them, they will cook your catch four ways and serve it communal style to you and your friends in their dining room.

## Keri Keri

Though originally made with shark, any firm whitefish will do to make this dish. It’s made by mixing flaked stewed or leftover fish with sautéed annatto powder (achiote), fresh basil, onion, celery, tomato and green pepper.



Keri Keri is a popular dish in Aruba Photo Credit: Taste My Aruba

It's most often served on its own or with a staple like rice.

## **Lobster, Shrimp and Prawns**

As for seafood, Caribbean (rock) lobster and jumbo shrimp/prawn dishes are also treated without much fuss. Try the jumbo fresh local steamed shrimps at legendary Charlie's Bar in San Nicolas, open for lunch only.



Fresh lobster — like this one at RIU Palace — is a must-try in Aruba Photo Credit: Michele Peterson

Or look for local lobster grilled. In Aruba, lobster is typically served grilled as the meat of this type of smaller, denser lobster stands up better to extreme heat than its Atlantic counterpart.

## Pan Bati

*Pan bati* is the proverbial Aruban side, meaning “smashed bread.” It’s a thin corn flour pancake that’s ideal to soak up sauces or dip in soups. It’s also delicious on its own served hot with butter or deep fried and covered in melted Dutch cheese as a special treat.

You can also watch a cooking demonstration of pan bati at Coco Plum if you join [Aruba Walking Tours](#) for their Oranjestad adventure. Read more about Aruba Walking Tours and other food experiences in our post on [Eating Like a Local in Downtown Oranjestad](#).

## Funchi and other Typical Sides

Other typical Aruban side staples include *bananas hasa* (fried plantains), *arroz moro* (beans and rice) and a cornmeal polenta called funchi.



Be sure to try funchi or grilled polenta while in Aruba Photo Credit: Michele Peterson

Look for snack spots that serve funchi fries. These delicious local treats come topped with sea salt, black pepper and melted cheese and are downright addictive.

## Ayacas

Up until recently, it was very tough to find *ayacas* in restaurants on Aruba unless you were on island at Christmas time as they are typically made in the home during the holidays and each family has their own secret recipe.

But now there are spots like [Taste My Aruba](#) often serving them up in single portions to give visitors the opportunity to taste this local holiday treat.



Be sure to try an ayaca while in Aruba Photo Credit: Taste My Aruba

Originating in Latin America, ayacas are a delicious mixture of meats, usually chicken and ham mixed with spices, items like olives, raisins, pickled onions, prunes, cashews and the like, and folded into an envelope of funchi and steamed in banana leaves. Delicious!

## **Siboyo Tempera**

Made of slivered marinated onions and Madame Jeanette hot peppers (known as Madame Janette peppers in Aruba), you'll often see siboyo tempera as a side condiment at almost every meal in Aruba.





Siboyo tempera served with a basket of fish at Zeerovers Aruba

This tangy side with a bit of kick features the Madame Janette pepper from Suriname, a fiery hot pepper that clocks in between 200,000 to 300,000 heat units on the Scoville Pepper Index, putting it on par with the habanero pepper for heat.

But rather than being simply scorching hot, the Madame Janette pepper has a sweetness that makes it especially delicious.

## Pica

No self-respecting local diner would not have a bottle of “pica” within arm’s reach. It’s Aruba’s famous local hot sauce that they douse on everything except dessert!

It’s made from the island’s killer hot Madame Janette peppers, green papayas and spices. It makes a great souvenir, too.

## Sacos & Food Trucks in Aruba

Great BBQ- to-go has been a staple in San Nicolas at Saco di Felipe for decades. In fact, people drive all the way out there from the tourist strip to get their hands on big brown paper *sacos* (bags) of lip-smacking fare.

Ribs, chicken, pork chops, fries, salt fish and Johnny cake are all thrown in together with no utensils allowed!

See this Aruba Tourism Authority video for an example:

But there are also all kinds of food trucks (*truk' di pan*- bread trucks) scattered about serving the same kind of hearty fare to-go at excellent prices.

They open late for the after-the-party crowd and can stay open as late as 4am.

## Kesio

Dushi means sweet and Arubans like their sweets in cake, candy, and flan form the most. *Kesio* or *quesillo* is the island's answer to crème caramel or flan, and is a very popular dessert in Aruba . You'll see it on a lot of menus.

## Cocada and other Sweet Treats

And look to the corner stores, supermarkets and festival market stalls to find authentic "cos dushi"- house made goodies and sweets like *cocada* (a coconut candy) made with grated coconut, brown sugar and lime juice. Enjoy this fudge-like candy for a quick energy boost any time of day.

Other tasty desserts on Aruba include *soenichis* (coloured meringue kisses) and lots of treats made with cashews.

## Bolos – A Fancy Aruban Dessert

When it's party time, it's all about the *bolos*! Aruban high layer cakes known as *bolos* are a must-have at every get-together.

If you're lucky you'll see some of the coolest ones like pistachio cake, cashew nut cake, or *ponche crema* cake, made with the island's answer to liquor-laden eggnog, on the restaurant menu.

If you'd rather have an entire authentic Aruban cake, then you must go to [Bright Bakery in Paradera](#). It's well worth the trip to visit the island's most famous family-run bakery. It's been in business since 1949.

## Dutch Pancakes

Food influences from the Netherlands are also big on Aruba, and many Dutch expats craving a taste of home have recreated some delightful traditions on the island. Pancakes are one of them.



A Dutch pancake topped with fruit at Linda's Pancakes Aruba Photo Credit: Michele Peterson

Dutch pancakes are very different from their North American counterparts. They are thin and flat and more like crepes. They're served stuffed or topped with a wide range of goodies, both sweet and savory!

Dutch pancakes are definitely a must-try food in Aruba. They are eaten for all meal times – breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Two ideal restaurants to sample tasty pancakes are Linda's Dutch Pancakes and The Dutch Pancake House, the latter boasting over 75 varieties, including *poffertjes* (silver-dollar sized) made with buckwheat flour and topped with powdered sugar.

## Dutch Party and Bar Snacks

Decadent party snacks are also a Dutch-based indulgence you'll find served at every party.

Many happy hours on Aruba feature snacks like *frinkandel* (spiced meat hog dogs), *bitterballen* (meat balls), *kroket* and deep-fried cheese balls.

Check out our post on [restaurants and bars in Aruba](#) for ideas on where to find these Dutch snacks.



Dutch bar snacks in Aruba Photo Credit: Michele Peterson

The Dutch love affair with Indonesian food finds satay with peanut sauce available throughout the island as well.

## Dutch Cheeses

Of course, being in the Dutch Caribbean means top quality Dutch cheese is available everywhere. It's enjoyed at breakfast, lunch and as a snack.

Gouda cheese is the best-known Dutch cheese followed by Edam, Maasdam, Leyden and other lesser known but equally delicious cheeses.



Sliced cheese is a popular breakfast item in Aruba Photo Credit: Michele Peterson

One of the must-try Dutch cheeses is Old Amsterdam Aged Gouda Cheese. The intense, buttery flavour of this yellow gouda is so full of character, it's [what locals eat in Aruba](#) at parties, get-togethers and for snacks.

Buy some Old Amsterdam Aged Gouda Cheese at Super Food, the Dutch-owned supermarket in the Bubali neighbourhood near Eagle and Palm beaches. Or, you can pick up some Old Amsterdam cheese at the gourmet food shops at Queen Beatrix International Airport.

For more on Dutch influence on Aruba, read this article [Go Dutch](#).

## A Guide to Local Food in Aruba

**Local Food Theme Nights:** “Local Food Nights” have become increasingly popular in hotel dining rooms. For example, at Elements at Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort, every Monday night they serve an authentic Aruban menu including dishes like *keshi yena*.

The Mill Resort & Suites also frequently has “Aruban Night” on Fridays featuring island favourites like *stobas*.

**Farmers Market:** To sample all kinds of local products, also be sure to visit the big Santa Rosa Farmer’s Market on the first Sunday of every month.

**Supermarkets:** Supermarkets are a treasure-trove of local foods, ready to eat and to take out. A top spot for groceries, deli salads, sliced meats, drop (Dutch licorice) and cheeses such as Old Amsterdam is [Super Food](#) in the Super Food Plaza.

If you’ve rented an apartment with a kitchen — like our [top choice for a luxury apartment in the Bubali neighbourhood](#) — you’ll have fun exploring all the ingredients from the Netherlands available at Super Food and other local foods available at supermarkets such as Ling & Sons.

**Food Prices in Aruba:** Like most other Caribbean islands, food prices are higher in Aruba than what you’ll

find on the mainland. However, Dutch foods are surprisingly reasonably priced compared to what you'd spend in Canada or the U.S in a specialty food shop.

For example, a wheel of aged gouda or an aged artisanal Boeren Goudse Oplegkaas will likely cost less in Aruba than elsewhere in North America.



Be sure to buy some Old Amsterdam cheese while in Aruba Photo Credit: Michele Peterson

**Eat Local Month:** If you happen to be on island in October, the entire month is Eat Local Month and features lots of specials and culinary events all over the island.

**Food Truck Festival:** Once a year, food trucks gather for the annual Food Truck Festival so everyone can sample all the fun fare in one spot.

The next [Aruba Food Truck Festival](#) is taking place April 26-27, 2019. There will be live music, craft beer and plenty of *cuminda di truck*.

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TOP FOODS  
TO EAT IN  
**ARUBA**  
DUTCH  
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## MUST-TRY FOODS IN *Aruba*



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