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“We like Fried Things”: Negotiating Health and Taste among Hispanic Caribbean Communities in New York City

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ABSTRACT

The study was conducted to understand fried-food (FF) consumption among Hispanic Caribbean (HC) communities in New York City. Data were collected through qualitative interviews with 23 adults self-identified as Cuban, Dominican, or Puerto Rican. Most informants considered FFs an important part of their traditional diet. Potential explanations included taste, cost, convenience, and the emotive values attached to FF. FF consumption was contextualized in local foodscapes. Results include strategies to diminish FF consumption and differences across HC groups and migratory generations. The relevance for future nutrition interventions addressing health disparities in this community is discussed.

KEYWORDS

emigration and immigration; Hispanic Americans; New York City; qualitative research

Introduction

The taste of fried food is enjoyed across different cultures and socioeconomic strata (Drewnowski 1997). Frying foods provides dishes with the sensory qualities of fat and a desired texture. The palatability of fried foods can potentially lead to greater consumption of these foods, compared to their nonfried counterparts (Drewnowski 1997). The process of frying increases energy and trans-fat content, while also decreasing unsaturated fats (Leitzmann and Kurth 2012). This, in turn, augments cardiovascular risks, including high cholesterol, hypertension, and adiposity (Leitzmann and Kurth 2012), as well as an increased risk for type 2 diabetes mellitus (T2D) (Bao et al. 2014; Cahill et al. 2014; Qi et al. 2014; Tol et al. 2013).

The consumption of fried foods is an example of the juxtaposition between taste and health when individuals make daily food choices. For decades, dietary guidelines have been working to encourage consumers to limit fat consumption with no encouraging results (Lichtenstein et al. 1998; NCHS 2015). Understanding the role of fried foods in people’s lives can potentially improve nutrition education efforts. Most of the research concerning fried food has taken a postconsumption approach, focusing on the health consequences of fried-food consumption (Cahill et al. 2014; Leitzmann and Kurth 2012; Qi...
et al. 2014). Research is needed on fried foods from a consumer or “eater-oriented” perspective to further understand this eating practice from the perspective of those that engage in it. Past studies have shown the importance of the eater-oriented approach, underscoring links between food and identity (Bisogni et al. 2002) and the significance of “comfort foods” (Locher et al. 2005). Among immigrant and diverse communities, food choices are one of the ways individuals assert their ethnic background (Chapman and Beagan 2013; Weller and Turkon 2015), especially regarding foods associated with celebrations and festivals (Azar et al. 2013).

The present study addresses fried-food consumption among Hispanic Caribbean communities (Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans) in New York City. In 2010, 16.3% of the U.S. population was of Hispanic origin. Mexicans make up the large majority of this population (63%), followed by Puerto Ricans (9.2%), Cubans (3.5%), and Dominicans (2.8%) (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, and Albert 2011). The New York City area has the largest concentration of Hispanic populations in the United States, with Puerto Ricans being the dominant group, followed by Dominicans (33% and 25% of the Hispanic New York City population, respectively). While Cubans tend to concentrate in Miami, Florida (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, and Albert 2011), New York City and New Jersey host the second-largest concentration of this community (Duany 2011).

In the Hispanic Caribbean, the shared Spanish colonial history and insular geography result in similar cuisines that merge Spanish influences with foods from the precolonial indigenous populations and African influences brought from the times of slavery. Traditional diets in this community consist of white rice, beans, and meats (especially pork). Fried foods feature prominently in these cuisines. These include snacks, such as the Cuban croquette, the Puerto Rican alcapurria (deep fried green banana and root crop dough filled with meat or seafood), and the Dominican quipe (deep fried bulgur roll stuffed with ground lamb). Frying is also used to cook meats and side dishes, for example, tostones (fried, mashed green plantains), maduros (ripe, fried plantain slices), and fried yucca (Janer 2008).

Most of the studies addressing diets among Hispanics focus on the Mexican American population. Moreover, in general, there is a paucity of research comparing dietary habits within Hispanic groups (Escarce, Morales, and Rumbaut 2006). Available studies point to differences in health outcomes and eating patterns. For example, type 2 diabetes mortality is higher among Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, compared to their white counterparts and other Hispanic subgroups (CDC 2015; Smith and Barnett 2005). More research is needed to understand how potential confounders (country of origin, socioeconomic class, and acculturation) interact with eating patterns (Escarce, Morales, and Rumbaut 2006; Gordon-Larsen et al. 2003). The present study addresses this need, incorporating an in-depth, qualitative research approach. In specific, this study seeks to understand the consumption of fried foods
among Hispanic communities and assess differences in meanings and perceptions concerning this eating practice within traditional diets.

Materials and methods

The present article is part of a larger study addressing traditional foodways in the New York City Hispanic Caribbean community. Data were collected between December 2013 and June 2015, using semistructured interviews. The study targeted adults (21 years of age or older) self-identified as Puerto Rican, Cuban, and/or Dominican living in New York City. Informants were recruited through a snowball sampling approach, starting with contacts from community networks, including research centers focused on this community (such as the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College) and contacts made at various local community events.

The resulting sample was composed of 23 informants: 10 Puerto Ricans, 7 Cubans, and 6 Dominicans. Informants’ ages ranged from 21 to 74. The mean age was 44.5. More than half of the informants (n = 14) were women. All of the informants were college educated. Most of the informants (13) were married or living with a partner; the rest were single (n = 8, mostly the younger ones) or widowed (n = 2). More than half of the informants (n = 13) were first-generation immigrants (1stG). Seven informants were second-generation immigrants (2ndG), born in the United States, in either New York City or Miami, Florida, and three were classified as part of the 1.5 generation. Following the work of Rumbaut, the “1.5 generation” (1.5G) classification was used to encompass individuals moving to the United States at a young age (18 or younger) (Rumbaut 2004). Only one informant was a third-generation immigrant.

The interviews lasted about an hour and were conducted by the same bilingual, trained interviewer in the language of preference of the informants (English, Spanish, or both). The semistructured interview was conducted using a thematic guide, in a conversational, informal tone. Most of the interviews took place over meals (including fried foods) at restaurants, cafes, or informants’ homes, according to the informant’s preference. The interview guide included themes related to food preferences and traditional diets—overall descriptions, specific dishes, and discussions concerning taste and health. The latter, and focus of this article, included a reflection on the role of fried foods in traditional diets. Questions related to fried foods asked informants to reflect on how important these foods were in their traditional cuisines, as the reasoning behind their perception.

Interviews were digitally recorded alongside note taking. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed in the original language. The data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach beginning analysis alongside data collection (Corbin and Strauss 1990). This allowed for verification and triangulation of information in the field and establishment of the
saturation point. Upon completion of the data-collection period, in-depth analysis was conducted using the qualitative analysis software Dedoose. The analysis took a constant comparative approach, assessing differences across cultural groups (Cuban, Puerto Rican, or Dominican) and by migratory generation. Initial, open coding was used to uncover information based on themes related to traditional diets, fried foods, taste, and health, using direct quotations to illustrate each theme across the main characteristics of interest. Responses to the question regarding the importance of fried food in traditional cuisines were coded using a rating scale from 1 to 3, where 1 = low importance, 2 = medium importance, and 3 = high importance. A second coder was used to verify initial themes and categories uncovered from the transcripts. The New York University Committee on Activities Involving Human Subjects granted exempt status to the study. Oral informed consent was obtained from the research informants prior to participation.

**Results and discussion**

The topic of fried foods was addressed as a larger conversation regarding traditional diets and food practices. While the topic of fried foods was part of the interview guide, for some informants, it came unprompted, as part of initial discussions concerning food preferences and traditional diets. The timing of the topic revealed differences between generations among Puerto Rican informants. When asked to describe the traditional Puerto Rican diet, first-generation informants described staple foods, such as rice and beans. This was different for Puerto Ricans born or raised in New York City, where fried foods were immediately mentioned when asked to describe Puerto Rican food:

We like fried things. Fried things [are] big. Fried things with meat.—Puerto Rican man, 24 years (Y), 3rd Generation (G)

I am Nuyorican, born in the island, but raised here. When you asked [what] is typical Puerto Rican [food], islander, for me it is not rice and beans. It’s the *cuchifrito*.—Puerto Rican man, 74Y, 1.5G

As these quotes show, fried foods and *cuchifritos* were immediately linked with traditional Puerto Rican food and, in some ways, to the Nuyorican identity—the term used to differentiate Puerto Ricans born on the island from those born on the mainland. In concordance with these informants, it is important to note that the *cuchifritos* have been a symbol of Puerto Rican identity in New York City for decades (Glaser and Snyder 1972). The word *cuchifrito* is used in this community to refer not only to fried foods, but to the establishments selling those foods. The word *cuchifrito* is a composite of *cuchi* and *frito*, where *cuchi* is said to refer to *cochino*, or pork, and *frito* means fried. While *cuchifrito* translates to “fried pork,” it encompasses more than that. It
includes snacks, such as the *alcapurrias, empanadas* (turnovers), *bacalaitos* (fried codfish batter), and *morcilla* (blood sausage), as well as fried animal products.

Similar generational differences were not found among Cuban and Dominican respondents. Many foods that may be called *cuchifritos* are eaten by Cubans, Dominicans, and first-generation Puerto Ricans, but these informants spoke about these foods using the term *fritura* or *fritanga*, at a later time in the interview, when asked to talk about their traditional diets in terms of healthfulness or when prompted for directly as part of these conversations. Fried foods were seen as an unhealthy aspect of the diet, as seen in the quote below:

I think [Cuban food] gets a bad rep. There are certain things that are “sometimes foods.” We have a lot of *frituritas*, fried things.—Cuban woman, 42Y, 2ndG

These differences were explored further, when informants were asked to rate the importance of fried foods in their traditional diets, as discussed in the next section.

**Importance of fried foods in traditional Hispanic Caribbean cuisines**

The majority of the informants (18 out of 23, or 78%) saw fried foods as an important part of the traditional cuisine. The high importance of fried foods was found among the three groups, as well as across immigrant generations (figure 1).

Low importance ratings were only found among Cuban and Dominican first-generation informants. As the quotes below show, these two informants did not see frying as the main and most important mode of preparation in their cuisines:

No, I don’t think so. If you look up Dominican food in the Internet, you find recipes that are fried, but not all. We boil many things.—Dominican woman, 31Y, 1stG

From what I remember, I did not grow up with [fried foods] being important.—Cuban woman, 64Y, 1stG

Three informants saw that fried foods were of somewhat or medium importance in the traditional cuisines. While they acknowledged that fried foods were part of the cuisine, these were not central to the cuisine:

I think it’s probably a third of the way most things are prepared. There is a lot of fried foods, but there is also a la *plancha* [grilled].—Cuban woman, 42Y, 2ndG

Yes, fried foods are a part of us […] but aside from *tostones* [fried, green plantains] and *pastelitos* [turnovers], I don’t know what other [fried] food is eaten regularly.—Dominican woman, 37YO, 1stG
It’s a snack, a comfort food. You do not have to eat it every day. [...] It’s not something that you eat every day.—Puerto Rican woman, 58Y, 2ndG

While the five informants quoted in the preceding minimized the importance of these foods in their traditional cuisines, the rest of the sample spoke about their salience:

There is a lot of it. Like the *vaca frita* [fried steak], you know, it’s fried meat. The *croqueta* is fried [...] the *tostones* are fried. Yeah a lot is fried.—Cuban woman, 43Y, 2ndG

Fried food? Yes, there are many fried things. The *tostones*, fried cheese, the salami is always fried. Fried cheese, fried egg in the morning. The *maduros* are fried too. Fried chicken.—Dominican woman, 25Y, 1stG

There are a lot of fried things. I have changed to not frying too much to eat healthy, but my grandmother fries everything.—Puerto Rican woman, 33Y, 1stG

While the importance was acknowledged across the three groups, there was a difference in how this importance was spoken about. Among Cuban and Dominican informants, the high consumption of fried foods was seen as a negative and unhealthy aspect of the traditional cuisine:

Fried foods have a very dangerous role [in the Cuban diet]. As we say, everything that is delicious is bad, is dangerous. Fried pork, fried pork skin, they are very damaging for health. And there is a lot of it in Cuban cuisine, a lot fried food.—Cuban man, 52Y, 1stG

This contrasted with the way fried foods were spoken about by Puerto Rican informants:

The *cuchifrito* is the soul food of Puerto Rico. In New Orleans, soul food is fried chicken with grits and biscuit. In Puerto Rico, the food of the soul, the heart [of Puerto Ricans], is the *cuchifrito*. It is very easy to do. It’s on the go. So basically,
wherever you go there are turnovers, stuffed potato fritters.—Puerto Rican man, 48Y, 1stG

We love that cooking method! Frying things is preferred to roasting.—Puerto Rican woman, 43Y, 1stG

What I remember is that in El Barrio [East Harlem] when there were family reunions, yes, there was rice and all that, maybe the pastel. But when we talk about the soul food, the food that gives comfort, that is the cuchifrito, the empanadilla—that is what you look for.—Puerto Rican man, 74Y, 1.5G

This was found across generations, where Puerto Rican informants spoke about fried foods using terms that underscored a fondness for these foods, as shown in the preceding. When informants were asked to provide potential reasons why these foods were important, many cited the flavor of the food, as well as how these foods served as a vehicle to memories from back “home”:

The flavor. How it is prepared. You eat a well-made turnover and you start thinking of the times when it was prepared at home, when you went to Puerto Rico, and that is what you miss.—Puerto Rican woman, 66Y, 1stG

These findings are in line with other studies that have documented the power of food to connect with memories from the past (Holtzman 2006; Sutton 2005) and provide comfort, especially among ethnic minorities and immigrant groups (Azar et al. 2013). Cuban and Dominican informants spoke about the flavor and comfort of traditional foods, but without the specificity regarding fried foods found among Puerto Rican informants.

Explanations behind the importance of fried foods in traditional diets expanded beyond the sentimental value of these foods. Informants spoke about convenience and the quickness of frying as drivers for the salience of fried foods in traditional cuisines:

I think it’s relatively important because economically speaking it is easier to fry foods […]. But I would be lying to you if I said that it does not taste good!—Cuban man, 38Y, 2ndG

I think it’s important because of two things: because it’s easy and because it is how it’s done there, in Dominican Republic. The empanadas are so good, but fried too. Everything is fried. But I think that for my mom it was because of the easiness for her, because we are four [siblings…]. I think frying food was easier and quick.—Dominican woman, 25Y, 1stG

Maybe food is fried and it’s done quickly. I think of pork, because it has to be well done.—Puerto Rican woman, 33Y, 1stG

As the quotes show, the convenience and quickness of frying were used to explain the popularity of this cooking method and the consumption of fried foods. These explanations relate to the consumption of these foods at home. The next section discusses the consumption of fried foods away from home,
at local food establishments, as well as the role of the food environment in shaping and motivating this consumption.

Contextualizing fried-food consumption in the local foodscapes

As noted by Diner (2001), immigrant communities seek to recreate familiar foodways in the communities in which they settle. In line with this notion, Hispanic Caribbean communities have left their mark on the local foodscape of New York City. Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Dominican restaurants are spread across the city. Neighborhoods traditionally associated with these communities have concentrations of establishments offering a range of fried snacks and other fried dishes, including the *cuchifritos* mentioned in the preceding. These counter-style establishments sell fried snacks and quick meals (rice, beans, and plantains). In addition, there are *lechoneras*, or counter-style establishments specializing in selling pork (*lechón*) and pork products. There are also the Dominican bakeries, known not only for their pastries, but also for the fried snacks. Aside from these quick-style food establishments, sit-down restaurants also offer a variety of traditional fried appetizers, main courses, and sides.

Food establishments such as the *cuchifritos* and the Dominican bakeries offer a low-cost, quick-service alternative, with ready-to-eat fried food. Some first-generation informants also recounted the low cost of these foods in the islands. For example, a Dominican informant spoke about the local (island-based) fried-food establishments (called *frituras*) where for close to $2 USD, one could eat a plate full of fried meats and a side (also fried). Meat options ranged from pork or chicken to organ meats and other animal parts, such as ears, snout, or feet. Similar establishments are also found in Puerto Rico and Cuba.

These ethnic-food establishments fulfill the local demand for these traditional foods, while also serving as a source of income for the community, as recounted by one informant:

[Fried foods are] what most people ate for a long time, and many made their living by making and selling that. My grandmother said that one of her sisters had a fried-food cart in Puerto Rico, so that was the way they made their living, selling *morcilla* [blood sausage], *cuchifritos*—Puerto Rican man, 58Y, 1.5G

The use of fried-food stands as a source of income is still present in these communities, in both the United States and the islands. These establishments are important spaces of identity in the community, serving as places not only to satisfy physical hunger, but also to fill the need to reconnect to home. This is seen in the following quote from a Dominican woman who had moved to New York City less than a year before:

I was in Washington Heights and entered to a Dominican bakery and I went crazy! They had all the things from Santo Domingo. The *empanadas*, *quipes*. I bought all that in a day! It is what reminds me of over there.—Dominican woman, 27Y, 1stG
This informant reported consuming these foods during special occasions, when she visited the Dominican neighborhood of Washington Heights. As noted in this quote, she “went crazy,” letting her food inhibitions go, due to a longing for home that was fulfilled through the consumption of these foods. Contrary to this case, for those living in these ethnic communities, the ready access and consumption of traditional fried foods is a common occurrence:

The reason why I believe, I would eat fried foods, like pastelillos [turnovers] … I have been going to cuchifritos since I was a kid. I’ve been having them since I was a kid. I don’t know if that’s good, but I enjoyed it.—Puerto Rican man, 24Y, 3rdG

This then translates to fried foods becoming a habit, as noted by another informant:

It’s not that people want to eat fried foods all the time. It becomes part of ritual, and becomes a part of habit. But I would be lying to you if I said that it does not taste good! You know, I guess that is a matter of preference. [It is connected to] the styles of cooking, the ways of cooking become recycled, pass down from generation to generation.—Cuban man, 38Y, 2ndG

The presence and ready access to fried foods in ethnic communities can promulgate and reinforce the practice of eating them. The consumption of frituras becomes a habit embedded in taste memories, solidifying the connection between these foods and a sense of home:

When you eat a good alcapurria, you start thinking about the times when it was prepared in your home, in Puerto Rico, and that is what you miss.—Puerto Rican woman, 63Y, 1stG

Hence, frituras play a role beyond satiating hunger. The act of consuming these foods serves as a vehicle of comfort and a symbolic return back home, even when there is knowledge concerning the health consequences. The feeling brought on by consuming a food labeled as “unhealthy” is negotiated against the known consequences of the act. This negotiation goes beyond fried foods to the consumption of staple dishes, such as white rice, which individuals tend to view as unhealthy, especially after being diagnosed with conditions such as type 2 diabetes, common in the community (CDC 2015; Escarce, Morales, and Rumbaut 2006; Smith and Barnett 2005). This is best exemplified in the following quote:

I have diabetes. You try to adjust meals to that. There is no way … how can I make my chicken soup, my rice! Because you miss it! Because if you don’t have the comfort of your food, everything is worse. Your condition is worse!—Puerto Rican woman, 69Y, 1stG

Negotiations curbing fried-food consumption

As the quotes show, there was a high awareness and concern regarding the potential harmful effect of fried-food consumption. In relation to this, the
interviews revealed food-choice negotiations informants made that resulted in consuming less fried food in their daily lives. In the case of older informants, changes in eating habits came because of health conditions, such as T2D, as discussed in the preceding. They spoke of consuming traditional fried snacks on special occasions, such as making an “exception” for a well-made *fritura*:

If someone gives me an *alcapurria* at this moment, even if it has meat in it, if it looks pretty and taste good, I eat it, even if it has meat inside. I say, just one today, but I remember the [health] reaction I will have in the long run.—Puerto Rican woman, 66Y, 1stG

The Puerto Rican informant in the preceding had made many positive dietary changes in the past years. This included diminishing, and later eliminating, meat from her diet, due to health concerns. However, as the quote shows, exceptions were made for special occasions, despite knowing the adverse reaction (in the form of stomach discomfort) that would come after the consumption of the *alcapurria*.

At the same time, these conversations revealed individual motivators to curb fried-food consumption aside from health concerns. For example, spouses were cited as an influence in consuming less fried food. One Cuban informant mentioned that his (non-Hispanic) wife makes him aware of the high consumption of these foods. Three women spoke about their husband’s influence, pushing them to cook beyond their traditional dishes. One of them recounted the time her husband asked her to fry less:

When I started with my husband, I would make everything fried. Everything with oil […] He grew up eating differently. For me, breaded chicken—I love to fry it. I love it. And one day he tells me, “Why not putting it in the over?” I was like, “It does not taste the same.” But after that day, I was like, it had the same flavor, but not so greasy. So after that day, I started to try to make more things in the oven, instead of frying.—Dominican woman, 25Y, 1stG

The preceding case points to the use of alternative cooking methods, such as baking, to achieve similar sensorial qualities of fried foods, which may not work for all foods. While for the young Dominican woman in the preceding, baking breaded chicken had the same effect, a Puerto Rican informant shared feeling disillusioned after trying to make turnovers in the oven, instead of frying. Similarly, informants also spoke about specific dishes, such as *maduros* (ripe, fried plantains) and *tostones*, as needing to be fried.

While frying at home was described as a quick cooking method, some informants spoke about not wanting to fry in their homes. For these informants, the strong odor and messiness of frying trumped what others described as convenience and quickness of this cooking method:

The *maduros* are not healthy. I don’t cook them. Because why, to get fat?! I don’t cook them. Too much embarre [smear].—Cuban man, 36Y, 1.5G
I am not going to make tostones in my house. That’s what I call the “ode of the comida Latina,” you know, the house smells, your clothes, your hair. So I try not to do that in my house. But when I go to Miami [to visit family], I enjoy it very much.
—Cuban woman, 42Y, 2ndG

If I could, I would make tostones every day, but it is very laborious.—Dominican Woman, 37Y, 1stG

**Conclusion**

This study assessed fried-food consumption from an “eater’s” perspective, comparing the perceived importance of these foods among three Hispanic subgroups. Moving beyond the usual low-income niche found among most studies addressing immigration and food, this study included a sample of college-educated individuals. While the sample’s high level of education is not representative of the wider Hispanic Caribbean community in the United States, this study contributes the perspective from an understudied population, given that most studies in this area have focused on low-income, Mexican American populations (Weller and Turkon 2015). The results concur with other studies assessing the importance of traditional or “nostalgic” foods (Viladrich 2014) as part of immigrant adaptations and re-creations of familiar foodways (Diner 2001; Stowers 2012; Weisberg-Shapiro and Devine 2015). Re-created local foodways play an active role in shaping and maintaining cultural eating practices in the community by allowing consumers to experience memories of home through the consumption of traditional foods, including the fried snacks. At the same time, the consumption of fried foods is not only a function of taste, price, and availability; it is also tied to notions of tradition and the use of these foods as a source of comfort. Following the work of Sutton (2005), fried foods can be understood beyond their nutritive value to incorporate their significance as a “cultural site,” or a tangible object (in this case food) that facilitates a sense of relatedness and home (Sutton 2005). This function is especially important for communities that have faced discrimination and challenges to their cultural identity, as is the case of Puerto Ricans in New York City (Grosfuguel and Georas 2001). Historically, this population has faced discrimination in the United States and, in many cases, upon returns or visits to the island (Duany 2011). These experiences, as well as the island’s political status as a U.S. Commonwealth, may challenge a sense of identity, which may result in the overconsumption of comfort foods, such as fried foods. Hence, the pleasure and comfort brought on by the consumption of these foods is negotiated against the physical consequences of their consumption—both aspects having an opposite effect on overall quality of life.

The study addresses a subpopulation of the Hispanic community, taking a comparative approach to uncover distinct factors associated with eating
practices in these three communities. This approach addresses the research need to understand how differences between specific cultural groups may translate into different eating patterns and dietary outcomes (Escarce, Morales, and Rumbaut 2006; Loria et al. 1995; Weller and Turkon 2015). The comparative analysis suggests the greater salience of fried foods in traditional diets among Puerto Rican informants, compared to their Dominican and Cuban counterparts, despite the many similarities in these cuisines. This result is concordant with studies documenting the health and nutritional situation of specific Hispanic communities in the United States, where Puerto Ricans tend to fare worst compared to other Hispanic groups. For example, results from the Hispanic Community Health Study/Study of Latinos found that Puerto Ricans had the highest prevalence of extreme obesity (BMI ≥ 40 kg/m²) compared to their Hispanic counterparts (Isasi et al. 2015). Similarly, Puerto Ricans present the highest rates of metabolic syndrome and diabetes (ADA 2014). The disparities found among Hispanics and Puerto Ricans in particular are the result of multiple factors, beyond cultural eating practices such as the consumption of fried foods. However, studies like this one, addressing specific eating practices within specific Latin American groups, provide a more nuanced perspective on food behaviors in these groups, which can be used to target nutrition messages for these communities.

The information presented provides a consumer perspective that can benefit practitioners working with Hispanic Caribbean populations by bringing an in-depth understanding of the consumption of fried foods, a behavior often targeted by nutrition education interventions. In particular, the present study documented negotiations and techniques the informants used to curb fried-food consumption. Beyond their complete elimination, the consumption of fried foods was spoken about as a treat, reserved for times when an exceptionally well-made fried snack came along. In addition, the interviews uncovered motivations for diminishing fried-food consumption beyond its health consequences, including avoiding the mess frying leaves in the kitchen. While the sample included in this study is not representative of the U.S. Hispanic Caribbean community, these findings can be used to guide the design of future research and interventions that address the role of these foods, testing potential differences in perceptions among Hispanic Caribbean communities with lower educational attainments. This can include teaching frying techniques that diminish the amount of oil absorbed in the foods, encouraging the use of healthier fats for frying, or alternative cooking techniques that mimic the taste and texture of fried foods without frying. At the same time, consumption of these foods is not limited to home preparation. Interventions can also target local, small, food establishments, promoting adequate frying techniques and alternative cooking methods. However, more research is needed that incorporates local food
establishments and their willingness to participate in initiatives that improve the food environment in their communities.

The present study did not collect information on actual fried-food consumption, frying techniques, or nutrition status indicators. More information is needed to assess how perceptions are translated into daily eating practices and nutritional outcomes and how these outcomes are tied to larger, structural factors in these communities. This includes addressing these communities beyond the traditional measures of acculturation to account for transnational ties and conditions back home (Duany 2011; Martínez 2013) and different experiences of exclusion and discrimination (Viruell-Fuentes 2007). Such an approach reflects the greater complexity experienced by Hispanic communities in the United States, in the daily interplay and negotiations between identity and the experience of “otherness,” which can influence dietary practices and health outcomes.

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