

SEEDS OF

# Tomorrow

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PHOTOGRAPHY JOE HOWARD

Nostalgia for lost local ingredients and a desire for a more self-sufficient future are influencing the new Puerto Rican palate

**I**t started with a mango. Or rather, lots of them, fallen and forgotten along kilometres of Puerto Rican roadside. Chef Martín Louzau noticed them on his way home, but it wasn't until later that day, in the supermarket, that he had his epiphany. "They were selling exactly the same variety of mango," he remembers, "but imported from Mexico." Something didn't quite add up.

Puerto Rico is an island with a tropical climate ripe for growing food year-round – a place where locals lean into home-cooked dishes, and land is both abundant and fertile. Yet it's an island that imports 85 per cent of its food. Now, a growing number of island residents are seeking to change this status quo.

Take Louzau's popular San Juan restaurant, *Cocina Abierta*, part of Puerto Rico's developing farm-to-fork movement and backed by culinary research project Oriundo. Drawing together biologists, agricultural economists and food historians, Oriundo is a collaboration that seeks to identify native and naturalised ingredients within the local environment, with the ultimate aim of getting more of them onto Puerto Rican plates. ▶▶



“PUERTO RICO HAS SO MUCH POTENTIAL... BECAUSE OUR SOIL IS RICH AND OUR MICROCLIMATES ARE SO VARIED, WE CAN GROW ALMOST ANYTHING”



ORIUNDO

In an elegant backroom at Cocina Abierta, Oriundo's research is being showcased at one of the group's regular speakeasy-style dining events. Much as Oriundo's event schedule is sporadic, each menu is unique, based on what's in season – like the fresh, punchy ceviche we try, made from caballero chillies, turmeric, annatto (the red seed of the achiote tree) and lerenes (an ancient variety of tuber) – and what key ingredient the group wants to highlight. A recurring finale is *frutas olvidadas*, an adaptable dessert made from a changing selection of lesser-known “forgotten fruits” (such as the *jobillo*, a small, juicy tree fruit with a pineapple-like flavour) – a mouthful of which is liable to trigger a burst of childhood nostalgia in diners, says Louzau, followed by a lament as to its lack of availability.

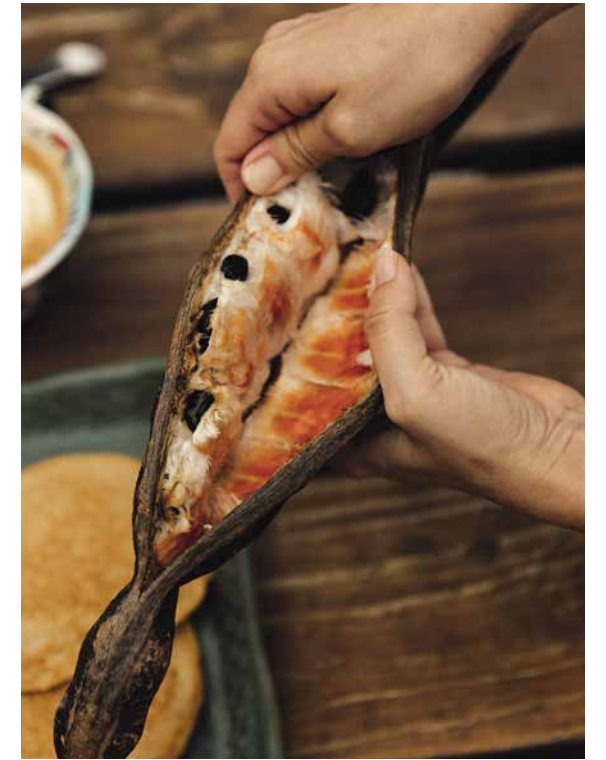
Finding such ingredients is getting easier, however, thanks largely to the grocery app P*R*oduce, of which Louzau is a co-founder along with a group of other farm-to-fork advocates. Initially designed to connect producers with chefs, the app launched just as the pandemic brought down the shutters on restaurants, so P*R*oduce pivoted to reach consumers directly. Today, it serves both, delivering locally sourced foodstuffs across the island as swiftly as the next day.

Crystal Díaz is another of the app's co-founders, as well as a regular customer. P*R*oduce is a key supplier to her kitchen at El Pretexto, a culinary farmstay she runs in the lush mountains of Cayey. Here, Díaz whips up meals in the outdoor kitchen on a sprawling wrap-around deck, using ingredients plucked from her own garden or sourced locally – via the app or from local farms and markets. El Pretexto is not a restaurant. Rather, it's based on agrotourism: guests are afforded an opportunity to connect with the natural environment and enjoy top-notch, consciously sourced, home-grown cuisine. Being serenaded by the melodic whistles of *coquí* (tree frogs) is just a happy bonus.

Each dish is an education, with Díaz introducing ingredients as she prepares them. “Puerto Rico has so much potential,” she says, as she wields a spoon over a pan. “Because our soil is rich and our microclimates are so varied, we can grow almost anything – and everything is flavourful.” As if to prove her point, she ladles out bowls of remarkably piquant mushroom soup. ▶▶



EL PRETEXTO





“This has three different types of mushrooms, all grown in Puerto Rico – two in Aibonito, which is the town next to this one,” she says as she passes me a bowl. The stock uses the same mushrooms and onions grown on a farm in the south of the island.

El Pretexto guests can explore the garden, with its free-roaming chickens, get hands-on with cooking classes and learn from producers. “It allows consumers to better understand the food production system and connects them to their food origin, humanising food, while the producer generates extra income,” says Díaz. “It’s a win-win for everyone.”

Díaz’s message across PProduce and El Pretexto is the same: choose local. “Choose restaurants that support local producers, and stay in places that have a local food-forward policy,” she emphasises. “There’s no need for strawberries from California in your breakfast fruit salad!”

A similar ethos is at play at Finca Gaia, a farm founded by Manuel Baez along with his mother, Ana. An arborist by trade, he has quickly become a passionate educator of biodiversity. Beyond Finca Gaia’s big green gates is a 14-hectare karst forest, nestled in the limestone hills, which has been in his family for decades.

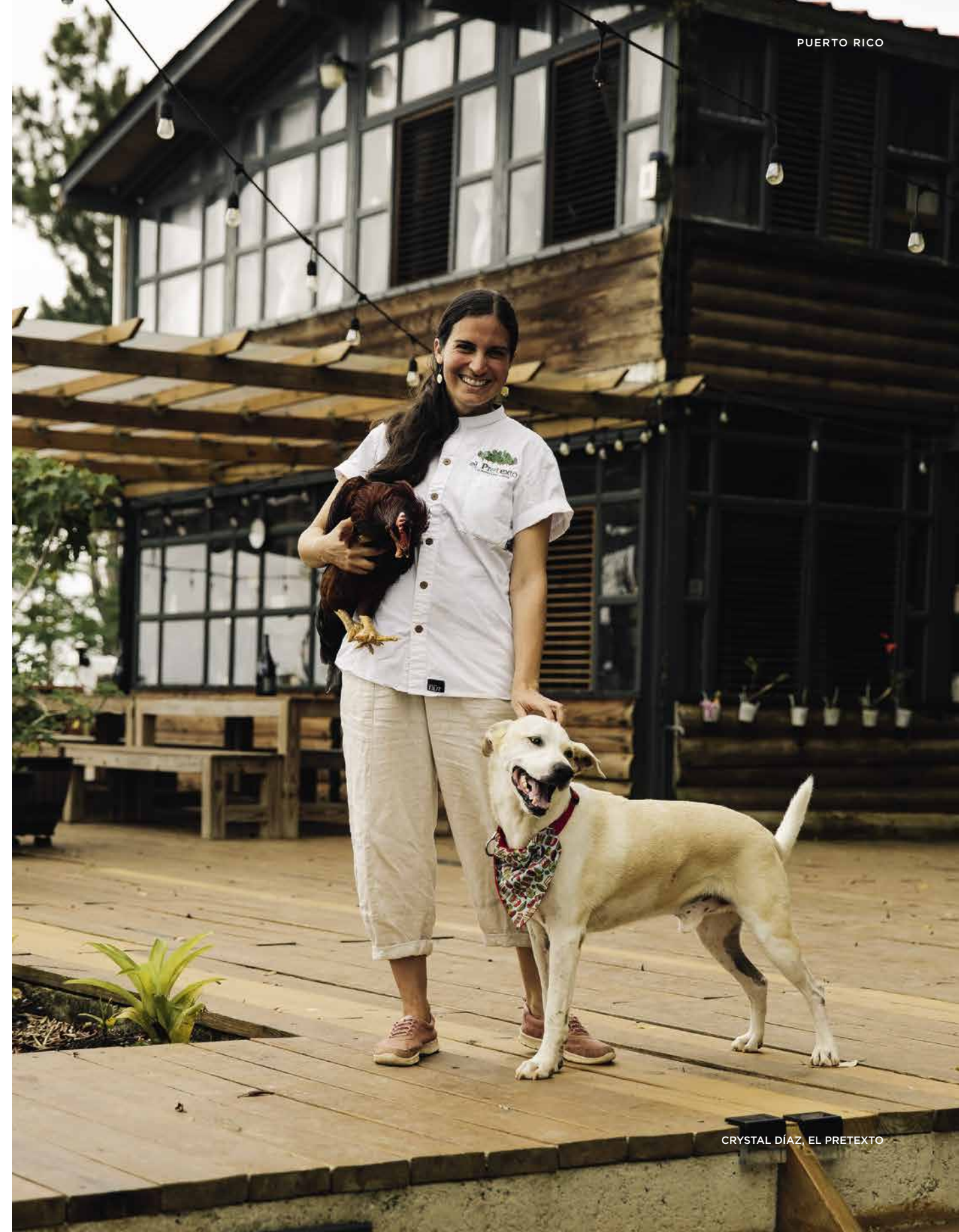
The farm was left neglected until, with the help of friends and family, Baez began developing it into a conservation haven. “First, we started planting fruit trees of all sorts,” he recalls,

pointing out the farm’s 14 varieties of avocado tree, at least eight types of bananas and plantains, and his wife Gabriela’s pet project: a tunnel house for traditional medicinal plants.

They’ve been keen to minimise impact on the land here: there is no running water or electricity. The aim, rather, is to create a peaceful place of environmental education: where visitors can connect with a slice of Puerto Rico’s glorious green nature while learning about growing practices and local conservation.

There’s a sudden tropical downpour, but the canopy of trees offers ample shelter. As the rain tumbles down, it seems to increase the lushness of the plants and Baez’s enthusiasm in equal measure, as he waxes lyrical about how on this patch of land alone they have identified more than 220 species of flora and fauna, 38 of them endemic to Puerto Rico. The trees are a year off bearing fruit, but there is still plenty to taste and smell: lively mint, the Christmassy fragrance of allspice and a type of hibiscus called flor de Jamaica. “Everybody knows the flower, but the leaves taste just like lemon juice,” says Baez. “If you add those to a salad, you don’t need a dressing.”

As the rain stops, sunshine bursts over the farm once more – a reminder, perhaps, of Puerto Rico’s environmental versatility. Celebrating what makes this island unique is well overdue, but thanks to this impassioned community, the seeds of tomorrow have been firmly planted, and now showing signs of flourishing.



In the Know

# Farm *to* Fork



## FARM

### EL PRETEXTO

ROAD 715, CAYEY 00736  
[elpretextopr.com](http://elpretextopr.com)

Go for the sweeping mountain scenery; linger for the food. It's a two-night minimum stay with breakfast at this innovative kitchen-garden homestay in Cayey. Crystal Diaz's breadfruit pancakes with tropical fruits (and a view over the island) offer reason alone to book in. And while dinner is optional, it's highly recommended.

### FINCA GAIA

CARRETERA PR-2, DORADO 00646  
[fincagaia.com](http://fincagaia.com)

Get into the weeds, literally, of Puerto Rico's plant life with a wander through this family-owned conservation farm; seeing, smelling and tasting as you go. Interactive elements and wildlife spotting are fun for visitors of all ages, while green-thumbs and anyone keen on conversation will appreciate the work being done here.

### FRUTOS DEL GUACABO

PR-686, MANATÍ 00674  
[frutosdelguacabo.com](http://frutosdelguacabo.com)

This is one of the island's longest-running produce farms and earliest promoters of the farm-to-table concept. It's invaluable in the island's gastronomy industry, supplying many major hotels and restaurants around Puerto Rico. Take a farm tour for a fun, engaging way to learn about sustainable agriculture and the value of buying local. ▶▶



ORIUNDO

## FORK

### VIANDA RESTAURANT

1413 AVENIDA PONCE DE LEÓN,  
SANTURCE 00907  
[viandapr.com](http://viandapr.com)

Dine Wednesdays through Sundays at this beloved Santurce restaurant, opened by husband-and-wife team Francis Guzmán and Amelia Dill in 2017. The menu is beautifully balanced, championing local ingredients through Puerto Rican classics and European and south-east Asian influences.

### ORIUNDO

58 CALLE CARIBE, SAN JUAN 00907  
[oriundopr.com](http://oriundopr.com)

If you are lucky enough to snag a seat, you're in for an evening of passion for Puerto Rico. Martín Louzao's six-course tasting menus provide a gastronomic tour through the island's seasonal food. The delight is in the detail, from the international wine pairings by aficionado Michelle Negron, to the plates spun by local potter Lau Serrano.

### ORUJO TALLER DE GASTRONOMIA

906 AVENIDA JUAN PONCE DE LEÓN,  
SAN JUAN 00901  
[@orujotaller](https://www.instagram.com/orujotaller)

What started as a supper club at chef Carlos Portela's house is now a moveable feast, with a multi-course tasting menu that changes both seasonally and daily, delivering culinary innovations that bring together indigenous cooking and Spanish flavours. The restaurant's ethos is to reduce waste and source locally.

### BACOA

CARRETERA 31, JUNCOS 00911  
[bacoapr.com](http://bacoapr.com)

Founded by three Puerto Rican chefs on a farm in the Juncos mountains, this restaurant grows and cultivates its own produce, creating sustainable, wood-fired dishes that honour the island's harvest and heritage. With a nod to traditional cocinaos (casual cookouts), Bacoa elevates the island's cuisine to feasts you won't forget in a hurry.