

# GET A LOTE THIS

The spirit of chinchorrear is thriving at San Juan street-food market Lote 23, where customers queue for plates of Puerto Rican specialities and stallholders are helping feed into a fast-expanding restaurant industry





Lote 23 looks like your typical trendy street-food market – a hub of casual cuisine and conviviality. But among the bright murals, lively music and tables laden with poke bowls, tacos, fresh juices and french fries, there's something else going on.

A group of food vendors has occupied this space – located in San Juan's edgy arts district of Santurce – since late 2016, but today steps are being taken to empower its proprietors. The challenges of the past couple of years highlighted the need for an incubator programme for small food traders, so here, as heaving plates are passed from kiosk to customer, both sides of the exchange are being sustained.

Lote 23 co-founder Cristina Sumaza explains that its aim is to “help local chefs and owners of restaurants or food-product operations transform into entrepreneurs”. There are currently 10 vendors in the programme, of which, says Sumaza proudly, nine have successfully opened in other locations and expanded.

Vendors attend classes in areas such as finance and creative branding, and are offered mentoring. “We also provide participants with a physical space for classes and office space,” adds Sumaza, “and a fully equipped commissary kitchen that lowers the upfront costs associated with opening a food business.”

In Puerto Rico, the act of hopping between food stalls and hanging out with friends and family over good, shared food is so hardwired into the local way of life that it has its own name: chinchorrear. On a weekday lunchtime at Lote 23, trade is in full swing at the various food stands, or chinchorros.

At Budare, chef Leovaldo Mendoza whips up arepas (in Puerto Rico, these are flour-based and a little like fried bread, unlike the cornmeal cakes by the same name found elsewhere in Latin America), while at Malanga, contemporary comfort food includes a vegan burger made with taro root. Over at El Cuchifrito, Pablo Rosa is elevating mofongo – the Puerto Rican dish of fried and mashed green plantain – with a selection of bases: green plantain, yucca, and sweet potato (or the “trifongo”, a mixture of all three), topped with a choice of fried pork, fish in Creole sauce, garlicky king prawns or seasonal veg. “Mofongo is something that represents Puerto Rico in the field of gastronomy,” he says, as locals queue up to be served. “It's a very versatile dish.”

Rosa has serious ambitions – and high hopes – for taking his burgeoning business to the next level. “We're looking to have locations in different parts of the island,” he says. “The incubator gives us the training to be able to reach our goal.”

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HEN HOUSE

#### A RUN ON CHICKEN

Operated by chef Pierre-Philippe Saussy, Hen House, one of the longest-running food kiosks in the collective, has become widely beloved for its succulent fried chicken. Without the

pressure and overheads of a bricks-and-mortar business, new food businesses get to focus on honing their speciality dishes and at the same time build a dedicated following.





LOTE 23

#### SHARING THE LOVE

Lote 23 brings plenty to the table: as well as providing a nurturing platform for small food businesses, it's a chance for chefs to experiment with various cuisines that cater to San Juan's

increasingly discerning diners. Popular dishes include Budare's arepas and new spins on tacos by La Neta, washed down with cocktails from Caneca, mixed up in a vintage Airstream trailer.

