



The New York Times

How the U.S. Dictates What Puerto Rico Eats

Israel Melendez Ayala and Alicia Kennedy

October 2nd, 2021

In 1953, the Visitors Bureau of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico released a promotional film to entice visitors called “Fiesta Island.” The island and its people are presented as exotic oddities, reflecting the colonialist attitudes of the era, and one gets the impression that Puerto Ricans desire nothing more than to serve American tourists.

But what is most striking is how prominently the local agriculture is featured. We are treated to images of sugar cane being chopped down to be turned into molasses for rum, fields of pineapples being harvested, bananas growing in the Yunque rainforest.

Image

the small farmers markets that have begun to pop up; grocery stores also carry a smattering of locally grown items like cilantro, recao, ají dulce and eggplant. But these aren’t the building blocks of a well-rounded diet. They’re not even all the ingredients in sofrito, the base for many Puerto Rican dishes.

“Today we have an economic model of consumption,” said Eliezer Molina, a Maricao-based farmer who ran for governor in the last election. “The United States doesn’t want to encourage the growth of production in Puerto Rico, because what we consume is from their producers, and that gives their companies protection.”

For example, local egg producers have been snuffed out by the “dumping” of lower-priced, lower-quality eggs from off the island, securing the dominance of mainland producers in supermarkets. “Local companies are then driven to bankruptcy, and then there’s no competition,” Mr. Molina said, which means “the American companies raise their prices.”

It wasn’t always like this. In 1940, agriculture was the cornerstone of Puerto Rico’s economy, employing nearly 45 percent of the work force. But by 2019, it represented less than 1 percent of the commonwealth’s G.D.P. and employed less than 2 percent. Natural disasters, economic crises and mismanagement have contributed to the island’s transformation from agricultural powerhouse to one that relies on imports. But it has been U.S. policies like the 1920 Jones Act and Operation Bootstrap that have strangled local agriculture.

The Jones Act, a protectionist law that governs coastal trade, requires that maritime transport of cargo between points in the mainland and territories like Puerto Rico be carried by vessels that are U.S.-owned, crewed, registered and built. American freight rates are often higher than those charged by foreign carriers for shipments of similar products and distances. According to a 2012 report by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, shipping a container from the East Coast to Puerto Rico costs an estimated \$3,063. The same shipment to Kingston, Jamaica, costs only \$1,607.

“The Jones Act is still a straitjacket on Puerto Rico because it subsidizes the marine shipping companies of the United States,” said Fernando Lloveras San Miguel, president of Para La Naturaleza, a nonprofit that works on reforestation.

Puerto Rico’s dependence on imports is a boon for shipping companies whose vessels, in a brutal irony, carry names of local symbols like Taíno, after the Indigenous people of the Caribbean, or Coquí, for the island frog with a singsong croak. The enforced use of indirect importation for things like fertilizer and farming equipment in turn drives up local farmers’ costs.

But Puerto Ricans can’t afford to pay a premium to support local producers. The territory has been in an economic recession since 2006. Over the years, the government accumulated over \$70 billion in debt, which is equivalent to roughly 100 percent of its G.D.P. By June 2015, the governor at the time, Alejandro García Padilla, called the debt “unpayable.”

As a result of the overwhelming debt, Congress passed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act, which created a Federal Oversight and Management Board whose seven members are appointed by the president and typically don’t come from the island; Puerto Ricans disparagingly call it the “junta” for short. In 2017, the board imposed an austerity program that cut deeply into the public service budget, health care, pensions and education, setting aside the interests of the people to pay off creditors.

A series of natural disasters compounded problems here. That same year, Hurricane María pummeled the island, killing some 4,600 people and causing an estimated \$95 billion in damage. Earthquakes in early 2020 left many homeless, and the pandemic paralyzed the economy for months.

The economic consequences have been staggering. Hundreds of thousands of islanders have moved to the mainland. Puerto Rico has the highest unemployment rate in the United States; 40 percent of the population is experiencing food insecurity. The minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour will increase to \$8.50 starting in January, but that is unlikely to move the needle on a poverty rate that has hovered at nearly 44 percent since 2019.

Scrapping or changing the Jones Act could help turn the tide, but President Biden has reiterated his support for it. Proponents of the act include the U.S. shipping industry and those who owe their livelihoods to it, whether as shipbuilders or merchant mariners.

Puerto Rico's economy has long been exploited to satisfy the needs of its colonizers. Coffee was introduced during Spanish rule, and consequently Puerto Rico became one of the largest coffee producers in the world.

When it became a U.S. territory in the late 1800s, the focus shifted from coffee to sugar cane. But the industry was crippled by U.S. policies that prevented producers from getting bigger and more efficient. Today the 40 or so sugar mills from Aguada in the west to Vieques in the east that once exported over 60 tons annually have been abandoned, left to rust.

Tobacco and textiles were also big businesses until Operation Bootstrap policies championed by Washington solidified Puerto Rico's shift from agriculture to industrialization starting in the 1950s. One Operation Bootstrap initiative granted mainland manufacturers an exemption on an array of taxes to encourage them to set up shop on the island. The demand for factory employees sapped farm work forces, meaning that less and less food was grown domestically. Now, low-wage workers relying on food stamps go to the supermarkets to purchase shipped-in food, continuing a cycle of money leaving the island.

And yet despite decades of policies that have discouraged farming, some younger Puerto Ricans see an opportunity to reverse the historical trend. They are working to revive the agricultural industry, often using agroecological methods that foster biodiversity and use little to no herbicides.

“In the '90s, when I was a kid, everyone thought that whatever comes from the outside world was better than what was from here,” says Crystal Diaz, owner of El Pretexto, a culinary farm lodge in Cayey, and co-founder of PRoduce, an app that sells locally produced food. “I have seen the change over the last 10 years.”

That change needs help to become permanent, though. “Organic agriculture could be an action to detach from” the use of imported fertilizers and pesticides. “Compost and other organic techniques take time, teaching and support,” said Salvador Coleman-Davis, agroecology coordinator of Para La Naturaleza. “With the lack of support from the government, it is not easy.”

For Gabriel Hernández, the chef at the Old San Juan restaurant Verde Mesa, the growing number of small farmers has been a boon. Though he's had to develop his network of farmers from scratch, the quality and shelf life of local produce surpass what comes from off-island, which might languish on a ship for weeks.

“When I started cooking, it was very obvious to me that the more close to the source of produce, the better it is, the more flavor, more brightness, more fresh,” Mr. Hernández said. “All that translates to the plate.”

Agroecological farming is a labor of love for the land, one that is in line with building a climate-resilient future, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. But it's also labor intensive, and many small farms can afford to do this work only part time. These few local producers just cannot compete with cheaper products from the mainland.

Local agricultural policy should support small farmers in the territory and encourage agroecological practices. Increased wages and jobs aren't just good for the economy — it can ensure that Puerto Ricans have access to food that hasn't spent weeks on a ship. There are farmers markets like the government-run Mercado Familiares in towns around Puerto Rico, but they take place only once every few months. Markets like ones that run weekly in Old San Juan or Rincón run by artisans and small growers aren't as accessible to those outside these affluent areas.

Bolstering these markets, ensuring they are affordable and accessible throughout Puerto Rico, would help get local produce into more kitchens. Getting rid of the Jones Act's shipping laws and allowing Puerto Rico to import and export products using cheaper shippers would remove shackles that have prevented the local economy from evolving into a self-sustaining model in which local products can realistically compete with imports. It would mean a step toward sovereignty.