

Teresita's Authentic Costa Rican Desserts

From My Family's Kitchen to Yours

¡Pura Vida!

Welcome to my family's treasured dessert recipes! These aren't just recipes – they're traditions passed down through generations, filled with love, laughter, and the warmth of Costa Rican hospitality. Each bite carries the spirit of Pura Vida and the magic of our beautiful culture.

Con mucho cariño,
Teresita de Santa Cruz

Costa Rican Tres Leches Pastel de Tres Leches

This is the dessert that made Skip abandon brownies forever! A classic Costa Rican favorite, this moist, sweet cake is soaked in three types of milk for an unforgettable texture. Perfect for celebrations or any time you want to taste a little piece of heaven.

Prep Time: 15 minutes | **Cook Time:** 25 minutes | **Additional Time:** 10 minutes | **Total Time:** 50 minutes

For the Cake:

- 4 eggs (room temperature works best)
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup white granulated sugar
- Pinch of salt
- 1 cup white flour
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup milk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup white granulated sugar
- Non-stick cooking spray

For the Milk Sauce (The Magic!):

- 1 cup sweetened condensed milk
- 1 cup evaporated milk
- 1 cup sweet cream
- 1 cup whole milk (optional, for extra moisture)

For the Topping:

- 1 pint heavy whipping cream
- 3 tablespoons granulated sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon vanilla (optional)

Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 350°F and lightly spray your 9x13 inch baking dish with cooking spray.
2. Separate the yolks from the whites for each egg. (Room temperature eggs work better!)
3. In your mixer, beat the egg yolks and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar on medium speed until the yolks turn pale yellow.

- 4.** While mixing the yolks, combine flour, baking powder, and salt in a medium bowl and whisk.
- 5.** Add $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar (leaving $\frac{1}{4}$ cup behind), $\frac{1}{2}$ cup milk, and vanilla to the yolk mixture. Stir, then pour over the flour mixture and stir until just combined.
- 6.** In a separate bowl, beat the egg whites until soft peaks form. Add remaining $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar and beat until stiff peaks form (forme picos!).
- 7.** Gently fold the egg whites into the flour mixture. Your batter should be light and airy.
- 8.** Pour into your baking pan and place in the center rack of the oven.
- 9.** Bake for 20-25 minutes until a toothpick inserted comes out clean (up to 30 minutes if needed).
- 10.** While the cake bakes, whisk together the three kinds of milk for the sauce.
- 11.** Allow cake to cool slightly. The cake will be spongy and naturally pull away from the edges.
- 12.** Poke holes all over the cake with a fork, and pour the milk mixture over the entire cake until absorbed.
- 13.** Top with your whipped cream topping and serve, or refrigerate for up to three days. (It gets better with age!)

Abuela's Special Tips for Perfect Tres Leches:

■ **The Fork Trick:** Don't be shy with those fork holes! The more holes, the better the milk absorbs. My Abuela used to say 'poke it like you're mad at it!'

■ **Be Patient:** Pour the milk mixture SLOWLY, giving it time to absorb between pours. If you rush it, the milk will pool on top.

■ **The Overnight Secret:** This cake is good fresh, but AMAZING the next day. The flavors marry together overnight like a happy couple!

■ **Topping Options:** You can use Dream Whip, Cool Whip, or make fresh whipped cream. Some families don't even add topping! Do what makes you happy.

■ **Garnish Ideas:** Try sliced strawberries, drizzled chocolate, maraschino cherries, or a sprinkle of cinnamon.

■ **The Half Recipe:** This recipe halves perfectly for a smaller 8x8 pan if you're serving fewer people.

Costa Rican Rompope

Traditional Holiday Eggnog

Rompope is Costa Rica's answer to eggnog – but richer, creamier, and more delicious! This traditional Christmas drink is made with milk, egg yolks, cinnamon, and rum. Every family has their own version, and this is ours. ¡Salud!

Prep Time: 10 minutes | **Cook Time:** 20 minutes | **Chill Time:** 2+ hours | **Serves:** 8-10

Ingredients:

- 3 cans (400g each) evaporated milk
- 2 cans (397g each) sweetened condensed milk
- 2 cups water
- 6 large egg yolks (save the whites for another recipe!)
- 1 cinnamon stick
- ½ teaspoon ground nutmeg (freshly grated is best)
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 cup dark rum (Ron Centenario for authentic Costa Rican flavor!) or to taste
- ¼ cup coconut flakes (optional, but traditional)

Instructions:

1. In a large bowl, beat together the evaporated milk, condensed milk, water, and egg yolks for about 5 minutes until well combined and slightly frothy.
2. Pour the mixture into a large saucepan. Add the cinnamon stick.
3. Heat on LOW heat for 20 minutes, stirring CONSTANTLY with a wooden spoon. This is important – do NOT let it boil! If it boils, the eggs will scramble.
4. The mixture should thicken slightly and coat the back of your spoon. It will thicken more as it cools.
5. Add the ground nutmeg and vanilla extract. Stir well.
6. Remove from heat and let it cool to room temperature. Remove the cinnamon stick.
7. Once cooled, add the rum. Start with ¾ cup and add more to taste. Remember – the alcohol doesn't cook off, so add according to your preference!
8. If using coconut, stir it in now.
9. Pour into clean glass bottles or a pitcher. Refrigerate for at least 2 hours before serving, or overnight for best flavor.
10. Serve chilled in small glasses. Garnish with a sprinkle of cinnamon or nutmeg, and coconut flakes if desired.

Storage: Rompope can be stored in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks in a sealed container. Shake well before serving as it may separate slightly.

Abuela's Rompope Wisdom:

- **The Stirring is EVERYTHING:** Don't stop stirring! This is why we make rompope with family – take turns stirring to keep your arm from falling off!
- **Fresh Eggs Only:** Use the freshest eggs you can find. The quality of your eggs makes a huge difference in the final flavor.
- **Temperature Matters:** LOW heat is your friend. If you rush it with high heat, you'll have sweet scrambled eggs. Not delicious.
- **The Rum Choice:** In Costa Rica, we use Ron Centenario (dark rum) or sometimes Cacique guaro. Outside Costa Rica, any good dark rum works beautifully.
- **Make Two Versions:** Make one batch WITH rum for adults and one WITHOUT rum for children. Just omit the rum and it's still delicious!
- **Ice Cream Magic:** Freeze the non-alcoholic version to make rompope ice cream! Just put it in your ice cream maker. Heavenly!
- **The Coconut Debate:** Some families add coconut, some don't. Both are traditional. Try it both ways and decide!
- **Gift Giving:** Pour into pretty bottles with ribbons – makes a wonderful Christmas gift that people will treasure.

Abuela's Kitchen Secrets

Wisdom from Generations Past

These are the secrets my Abuela taught me, and her Abuela taught her. They're not in cookbooks – they're passed down through practice, patience, and love. Now I'm sharing them with you!

General Costa Rican Cooking Wisdom:

■ **Everything Tastes Better with Love:** My Abuela always said 'cocina con amor' (cook with love). When you cook with good intentions and happiness in your heart, people can taste it. This isn't superstition – it's truth!

■ **Room Temperature is Your Friend:** Eggs, butter, milk – let them come to room temperature before baking. Cold ingredients don't mix as well and can make your desserts dense instead of fluffy.

■ **The Wooden Spoon Rule:** When cooking milk-based desserts (like rompopo or tres leches sauce), ALWAYS use a wooden spoon, never metal. Metal can react with dairy and change the flavor.

■ **Taste as You Go:** Don't wait until the end! Taste your mixture as you make it. Too sweet? Add a pinch of salt to balance. Not sweet enough? Add a little more sugar. Every batch of ingredients is slightly different.

■ **The Patience Secret:** Good desserts cannot be rushed. If a recipe says to chill for 2 hours, chill for 2 hours. If it says to beat for 5 minutes, beat for 5 minutes. Shortcuts = sadness.

■ **Keep Your Oven Honest:** Oven temperatures lie! Get an oven thermometer. My Abuela burned SO many cakes before she learned this. Her oven ran 25 degrees hotter than it said!

■ **The 'Poquito Más' Philosophy:** In Costa Rica, we often add 'un poquito más' (a little bit more) of the good stuff – vanilla, cinnamon, rum. Start with the recipe, then trust your heart for that extra touch.

■ **Mise en Place:** Before you start cooking, gather ALL your ingredients. You can't run to the store for eggs when your cake batter is half-mixed. Prepare everything first!

Specific Technique Secrets:

- **The Egg White Secret (Forme Picos!):** When beating egg whites to stiff peaks, make sure your bowl and beaters are COMPLETELY clean and dry. Even a tiny drop of oil or egg yolk will prevent them from forming proper peaks. Also, add sugar gradually, not all at once!
- **The Fork Poke Pattern:** When poking holes in tres leches cake, use a systematic pattern –poke in rows about 1 inch apart. This ensures even milk distribution. Don't poke all the way to the bottom in one spot!
- **The Milk Pour Technique:** Pour the milk sauce in stages for tres leches. Pour, wait 5 minutes for absorption, pour another, wait again, then add the final third. This prevents pooling and ensures perfect moisture.
- **The Cinnamon Stick Trick:** When cooking with cinnamon sticks (like in rompopo), break them in half first. This releases more flavor. And ALWAYS remove them before serving –biting in to a cinnamon stick is not fun!
- **The Vanilla Amplifier:** Add vanilla extract AFTER you remove your mixture from heat, not during. Heat can cook off some of the vanilla flavor, so add it at the end for maximum impact.
- **The Altitude Adjustment:** If you're baking at high altitude (like parts of Costa Rica!), you may need to reduce baking powder slightly and increase liquid slightly. At sea level? Follow the recipe exactly.
- **The Temperature Test:** For milk-based recipes like rompopo, you want it to reach 'coating consistency' – when you dip a spoon in and run your finger across the back, the line should stay clear. That's perfect thickness!
- **The Cooling Secret:** Let baked goods cool in the pan for 10-15 minutes before trying to remove them. Too hot? They fall apart. Too cold? They stick. There's a perfect window – learn to feel it!

Secret Ingredient Wisdom:

■ **The Salt Secret:** Even in sweet recipes, a tiny pinch of salt makes ALL the difference. It doesn't make things salty – it makes the sweet taste SWEETER by balancing the flavors.

■ **Real Vanilla Only:** Please, please don't use imitation vanilla if you can help it. Real vanilla extract costs more but the difference in taste is like night and day. Your desserts deserve the real thing!

■ **The Rum Reality:** Good rum makes good rompopo. Bad rum makes... bad rompopo. You don't need the most expensive rum, but don't use the cheapest either. Middle ground is perfect.

■ **Milk Matters:** For tres leches, use FULL FAT milk products. This is not the time for diet versions! The fat carries the flavor and creates that amazing texture we're looking for.

■ **Fresh Nutmeg is Magic:** Pre-ground nutmeg is fine, but freshly grated nutmeg is INCREDIBLE. Get a whole nutmeg and a microplane grater. The difference will blow your mind!

■ **The Cinnamon Upgrade:** Ceylon cinnamon (canela) is what we use in Costa Rica. It's sweeter and more delicate than Cassia cinnamon (the common one). Try to find it!

■ **Egg Size Matters:** When a recipe says 'large eggs,' use large eggs. Using medium or extra-large can throw off the ratios, especially in baking.

■ **The Condensed Milk Truth:** Not all condensed milk brands taste the same. Try different brands and find your favorite. My Abuela swore by one specific brand for 40 years!

Final Words from Abuela's Kitchen:

Remember, mi amor, that recipes are guides, not rules. Every kitchen is different, every oven has its personality, and every cook adds their own magic. Start with these recipes exactly as written, then as you make them again and again, you'll learn where YOU can add your special touch.

The most important ingredient in any recipe is not listed: it's the JOY of cooking for people you love. Whether you're making tres leches for a birthday, rompo for Christmas, or just treating yourself to something sweet on a Tuesday – do it with happiness in your heart.

And please, PLEASE, don't stress about perfection. My Abuela once dropped an entire tres leches cake on the floor 10 minutes before guests arrived. You know what she did? She scooped it into bowls, called it 'deconstructed tres leches,' and everyone thought she was a genius!

Some of my best food memories aren't from perfect dishes – they're from the laughing, the talking, the sharing while we cooked together. That's the real magic.

So gather your family, turn on some music, and ENJOY the process. These recipes are meant to bring people together, create memories, and fill your home with love and the smell of something delicious.

¡Pura Vida, mis queridos! May your kitchen always be filled with love, laughter, and tres leches!

Con todo mi cariño,
Teresita
Santa Cruz, Costa Rica

P.S. — If you make any of these recipes, I'd love to hear about it! Share your photos, your stories, your disasters, and your triumphs. That's how we keep these traditions alive – by sharing them with joy! ♥■