

Dominican Pastelitos by Ruth Mella

Pastelitos (pas-te-lee-toes)

Prep time- 15-30 minutes Cook time: 6-8 min.	Serving: 10 per pack
528 calories 8g protein	46g fat 21g carbs

Pastelitos with a Dominican

The sizzling sound of oil heating on the stove, the fumes of seasoned beef filling the kitchen, and the distinct aroma of plantains. All of these form part of my childhood memories, specifically tied to my grandma's grand plates. Growing up, visits to New York meant more than just the excitement of the city; they meant pastelito-making sessions in my grandma's apartment.

Grandma's pastelitos were the kind that made me feel uniquely Dominican, always served with a banana on the side. Every bite was savory and comforting, a small pocket filled with spiced ground beef wrapped in golden, crispy dough. Beyond the taste, the memory of her bustling kitchen is what made the experience rich—her hands folding the dough while the trains of New York zoomed past in the background.

When I first learned how to make pastelitos myself, it was from my mom. The process of cooking these was passed down, just her grandma had taught her in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. This is a story of how of pastelitos with a Dominican recipe.

The Memory of Grandma's Kitchen

My grandma's kitchen in New York wasn't large, but it had everything she needed to create something magical. The windows overlooked a bustling street in the Bronx, filled with the sounds of horns honking and the occasional shout from the Dominicans playing dominoes downstairs. I remember being small, sitting at her table, my feet dangling from the chair as I watched her move effortlessly around the room.

The kitchen had a distinct warmth. Even before she began cooking, the heat from the building itself gave everything a cozy feel. I'd watch her knead the premade dough, adding just the right amount of flour to make it stretchable yet firm. The dough felt cool and soft to the touch, but strong enough to hold all the ingredients she'd pack into it later.

When she started sautéing the ground beef, I'd always lean closer to the stove to get a better smell. The scent of sofrito- a blend of garlic, onions, bell peppers, and cilantro—would fill the room. The beef sizzled and popped as she stirred it, the oil crackled in the pan. She'd add a dash of cumin, oregano, and a sprinkle of sazón, filling the room with the smell of that Dominican home cooking.

Grandma was diligent about how she handled each pastelito. She'd spoon just the right amount of beef mixture onto the circular dough, making sure not to overfill it. Then, with her right hand, she'd fold the dough in half, pressing the edges firmly with her fingers before reaching for a fork to seal the edges with those ridged patterns. I loved watching her do that part; it was like a finishing touch that made the pastelitos mouth watering.

Once they were sealed, she'd drop them carefully into a pan of hot oil. The dough would puff up, turning golden and crispy. That first bite was always the best—splattered with ketchup on the top, crisp and flaky brown on the outside, warm and savory on the inside, with the slight sweetness of the banana on the side. MMMMM

Learning to Make Pastelitos with My Mom

Years later, I wanted to recreate that same magic in my own kitchen. My mom, who had learned directly from her grandma. The first time we made pastelitos together, I was nervous about getting everything right, but she reassured me that it was all about practice.

We started with the dough, the same premade kind that my grandma used. My mom explained that you could make dough from scratch, there was no shame in taking a shortcut. The dough circles were delicate but strong, and she taught me to lightly flour the surface and my hands so they wouldn't stick.

Next came the filling. I remember the feeling of raw ground beef between my fingers as I mixed in the seasonings. The smell was cool but the texture, eh. The sofrito came first, the smell immediately transporting me back to New York. It was a vivid blend of garlic and cilantro, with the slight tang of lime. Then came the seasonings: cumin, oregano, and that essential dash of sazón. As the beef cooked, my mom reminded me to keep stirring to ensure it didn't stick to the pan. The sizzle of the meat, as it browned and absorbed all the flavors, filled the kitchen with the same comforting scent from grandma's house.

When the beef was ready, my mom walked me through the next step, filling the pastelitos. This part was tricky, she said, because too much filling would make it hard to seal, and too little would leave the pastelito soggy with oil. She spooned a small amount into the center of the dough, we added cheese inside to be extra, and then folded it over like a taco shape.

"Watch how I press the edges," she said. First, we pressed the edges together gently with our fingers, making sure the dough was sealed without breaking. Then came the part I had always admired in grandma's technique, pressing the edges with a fork. My mom handed me a fork, and I pressed the stems of the fork into the dough's edge, just as my grandma had done so many times before. This is when I knew the marking of the pastelito was complete.

Once they were all sealed, we heated the oil. I was cautious, not wanting to overcook them, but my mom assured me the oil had to be hot enough to make them crisp. As we lowered the

pastelitos into the pan, they sizzled immediately. The dough puffed up, golden and flaky, just as I remembered from all those years ago. The smell of the frying pastelitos strolled into the air.

Ready to serve with a side of banana and ketchup as a topping. My family enjoyed these very much. THANK GOD FOR TRADITION!

The Recipe: Dominican Pastelitos

Here's a detailed version of the recipe I learned, with all the steps my mom and I followed.

Ingredients:

- 1 lb of ground beef
- 1 pack of premade empanada dough (discs)
- 1 small onion, finely diced
- 1 small bell pepper, finely diced
- 4 cloves of garlic, minced
- 1/2 cup of fresh cilantro, chopped
- 2 tbsp of sofrito (optional but recommended)
- 1 tsp ground cumin
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- 1 packet of sazón
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 ripe banana (served on the side)
- Vegetable oil (for frying)

Instructions:

Step 1: Prepare the Filling

- Heat a tablespoon of oil in a large pan over medium heat. Add the onions and bell peppers, cooking until soft and translucent (about 5 minutes).
- Add the garlic and cook for another minute, be careful not to burn it.
- Stir in the ground beef, breaking it up as it cooks. Brown the meat, making sure to cook it evenly.
- Once the beef is mostly cooked through, add the sofrito, cumin, oregano, and sazón(optional). Stir well to combine, allowing the spices to cook into the meat.
- Cook for an additional 5-7 minutes, until the beef is fully cooked and the flavors have combined together. Taste and adjust seasoning with salt and pepper. Remove from heat and let it cool slightly.

Step 2: Assemble the Pastelitos

- Lay out the empanada discs on a floured surface. Spoon about 1-2 tablespoons of the beef mixture into the center of each disc.

- Fold the dough in half to create a half-moon shape. Gently press the edges with your fingers to seal.
- Use a fork to crimp the edges, ensuring a tight seal.

Step 3: Fry the Pastelitos

- Heat vegetable oil in a deep frying pan over medium-high heat.
- Carefully place the pastelitos into the hot oil, frying a few at a time. Cook each side for about 2-3 minutes, until golden brown.
- Remove the pastelitos with a spoon and place them on a plate lined with paper towels to drain any excess oil.

Step 4: Serve

- Serve warm with a peeled banana on the side, just as my grandma always did.

The pastelitos came out just like I remembered. Each time I make them now, I feel a connection to my grandma and mom, their love and care passed down through the simple act of cooking.