

How exhilarating it was to explore Puerto Rican cuisine at the source.

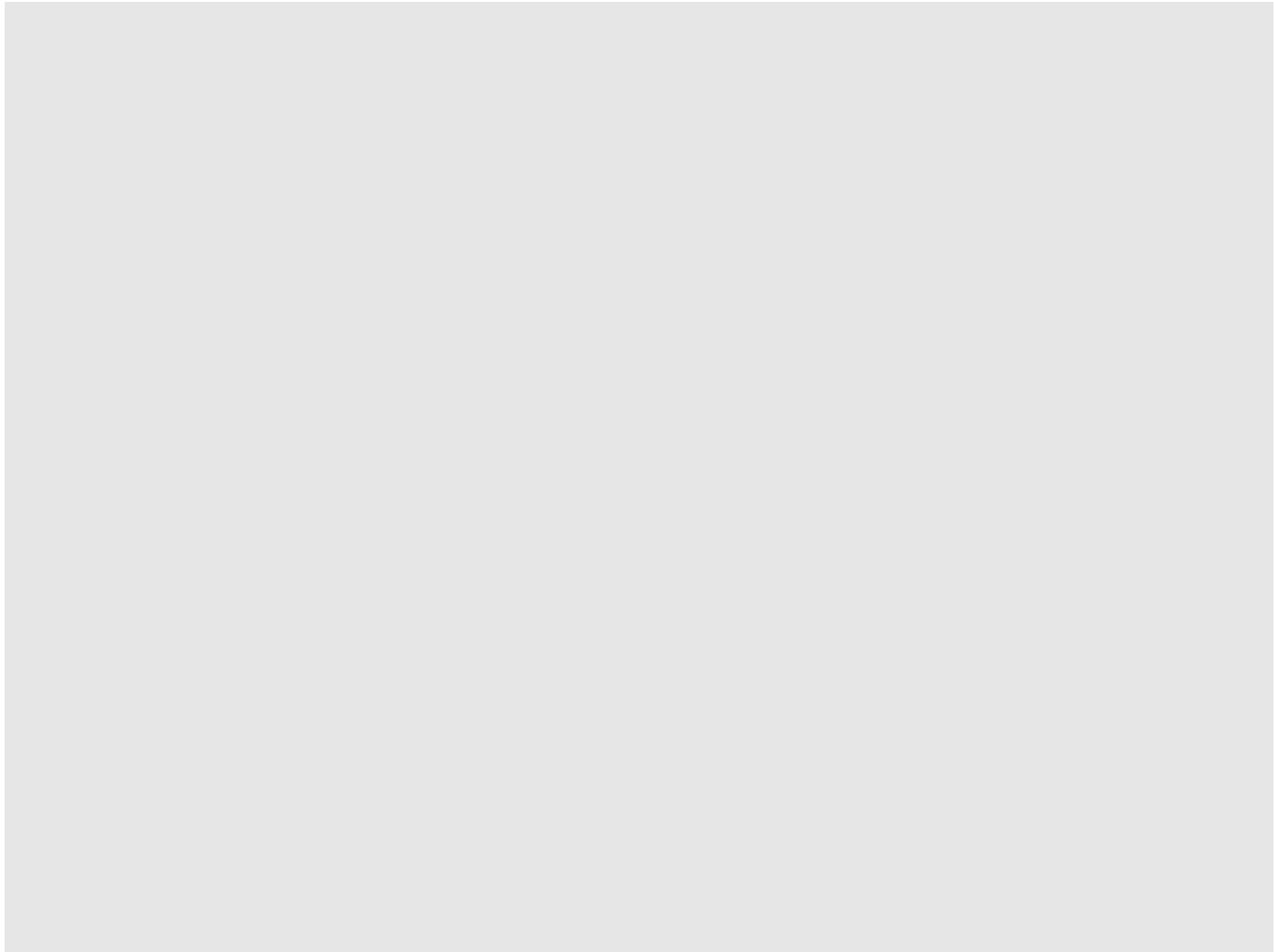
Before flying to San Juan in early January, I'd never been to Puerto Rico.

Truth be told, I had never partaken of this particular American ritual before. So like generations of snowbirds before me, I went to the airport in midwinter.

It deposited me into a reality where my main concern is how to figure out which rum drink you want to ask for next, while the waves erased the sand from between my toes.

Boricua describes people of Puerto Rican descent. My previous education in boricuan cuisine came at the hands of the hard-working Puerto Rican restaurateurs of Buffalo, from Senor Vargas' peerless pernil sandwiches to Sazon Criollo's fried-while-you-wait pastellitos. To tap into the source of their inspirations gave me a turbocharged appreciation of what the boricua brigade has brought to Buffalo eaters.

Here are the best places to find the Island of Enchantment's flavors in Buffalo and nearby:



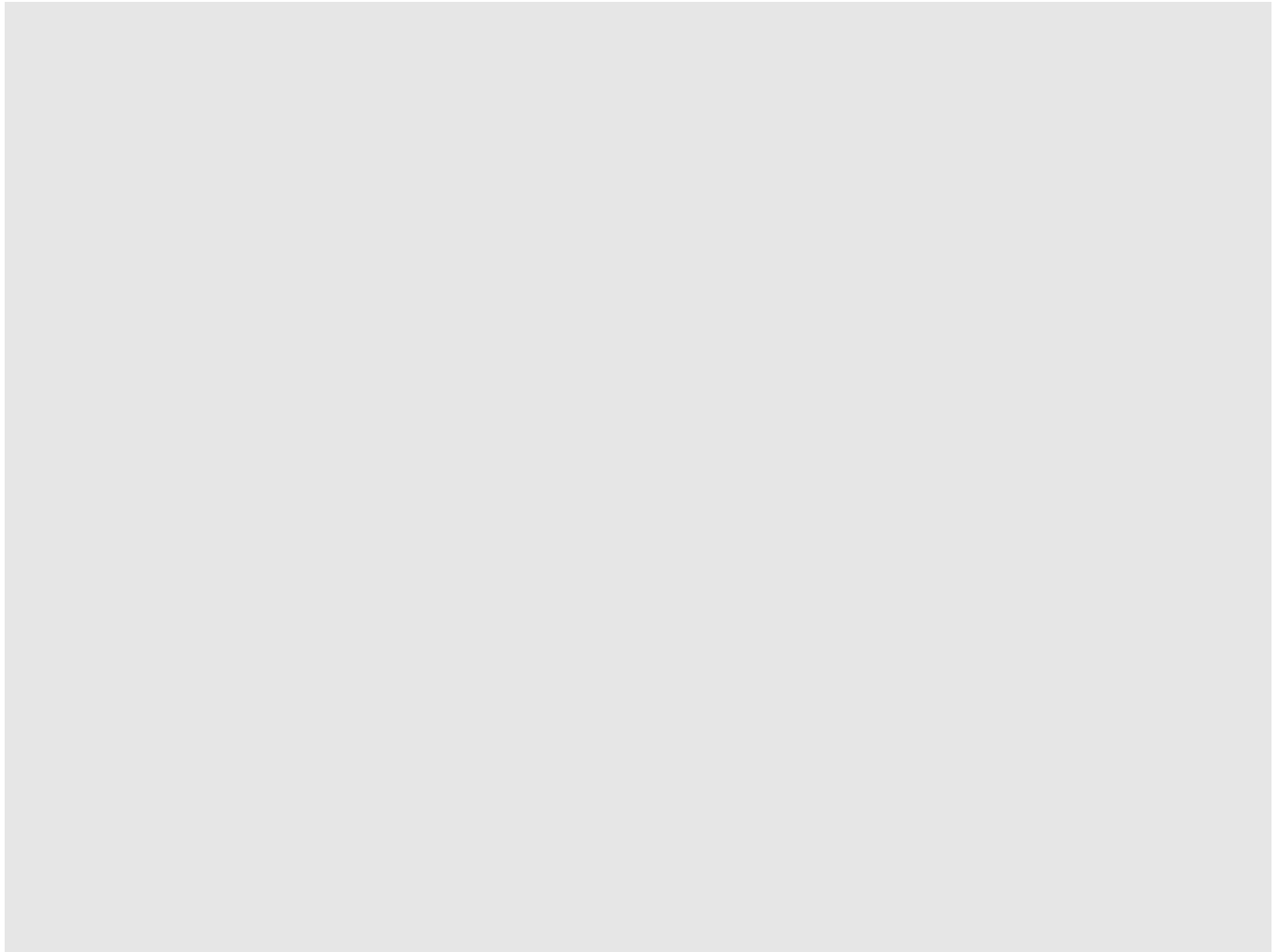
Baker Gilberto Perez tops off a tray of guava pastelillos with powdered sugar in the kitchen at La Flor Bakery.

Derek Gee

La Flor Bakery

*544 Niagara St.; 716-812-0187; **laflorbuffalo.com**.*

Puerto Rico has a type of restaurant called a *panaderia*. In the dictionary, that means “bakery,” but in Puerto Rico it’s a bakery operation that serves meals based on its work. That’s why people patiently wait for long minutes for the meals in the La Flor parlor. They wait for sandwiches on La Flor bread, sweets like flan and flaky sugar-dusted guava pastelillos, and stick-to-your-ribs steamtable meals like smothered pork chops and pernil, with rice and pigeon peas, and yuca.



La Flor Bakery's Cubano is made with Cuban bread and filled with roasted pork, ham, salami, pickles, white cheese and mustard and toasted in a panini press.

Sharon Cantillon

Don't go here if you're in a hurry, because La Flor is not Tim Hortons. Wait your turn, and when you have the counterwoman's attention, tell her what you want. She's fluent in English and Spanish, and wants to feed you, so if you've never before been a room filled with people speaking not a lick of English, take courage, and approach with humility. You'll be happy you did.

Hours: 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Saturday; 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday.

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Montes Grocery Deli

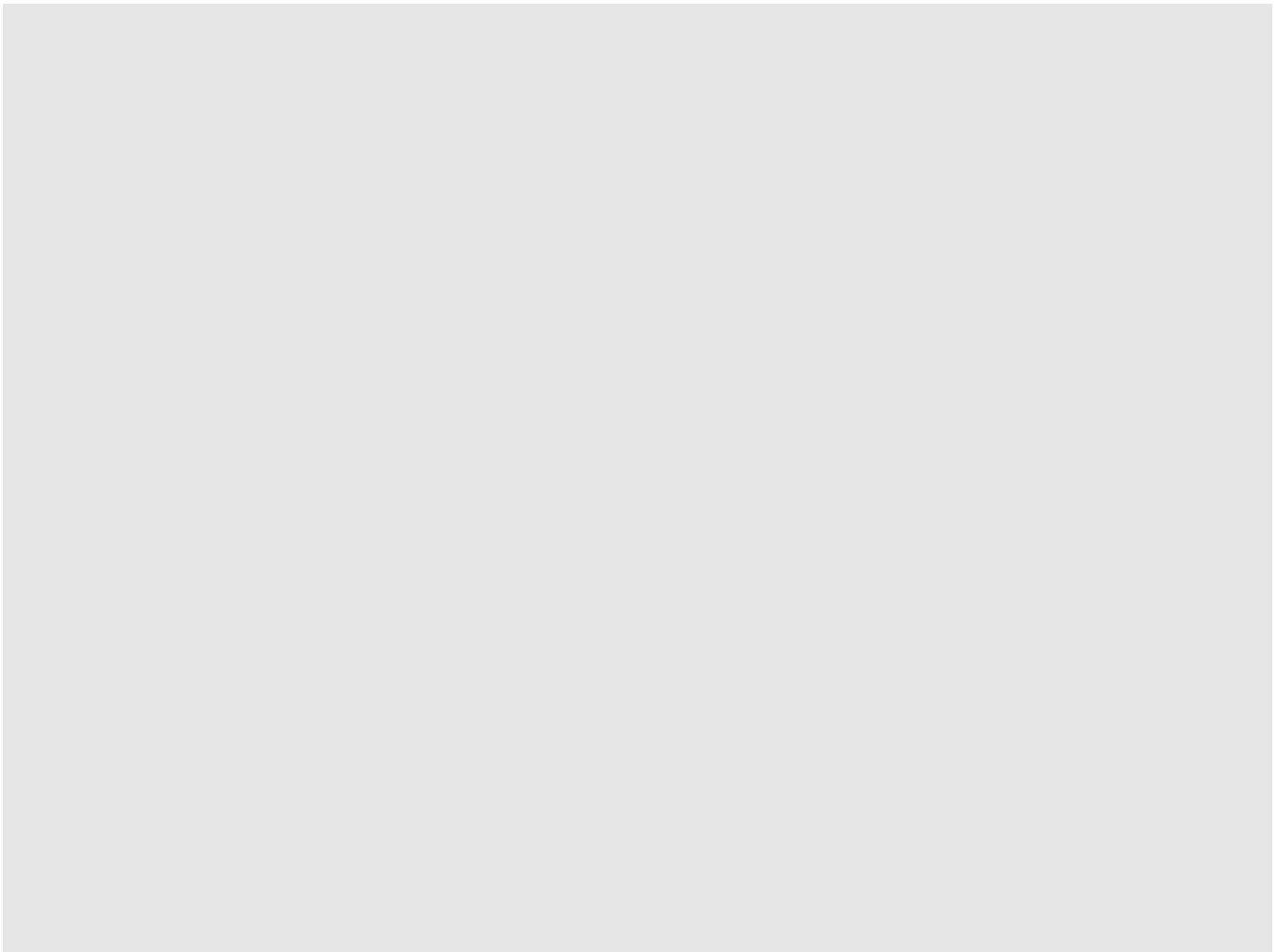
413 Swan St.; 716-854-3228.

People line up through shelves of grocery staples for ready-to-go treats collectively called pinchos, including deep-fried beef or chicken and cheese pastellitos, stuffed deep-fried mashed potato balls called pappas rellenas, and carne frita, pork butt chunks rolled in dried sauzon spices and deep-fried, sold by the chunk. But it's the steam-table meals that get the most laborers waiting in line in their battered boots, taking the meals to eat in their pickups. Dinners of pernil, long-roasted pork sweet and supple, roast chicken, or piles of that deep-fried pork carne frita are standards.

If you go Thursday, you can get the bistec encebollado, beef braised in sofrito and onions. This place is built for speed, so get in line and be ready to tell the counterwoman your desires.

Hours: 9:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday; 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturday. Closed Sunday.

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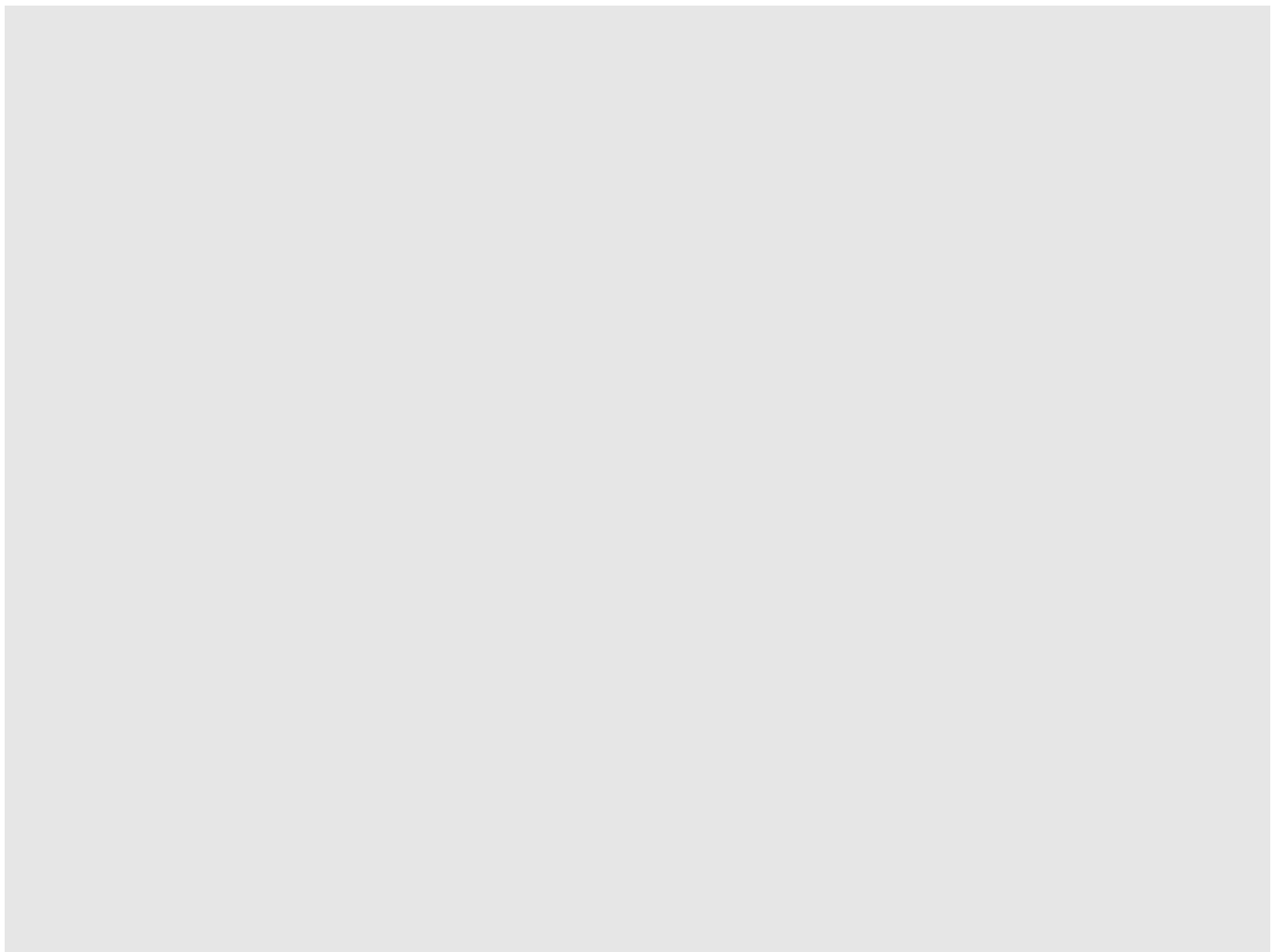
Niagara Cafe has been open for 25 years at 525 Niagara St.

Sharon Cantillon

Niagara Café

525 Niagara St., 716-885-2233; [facebook.com/NiagaraCafePR](https://www.facebook.com/NiagaraCafePR).

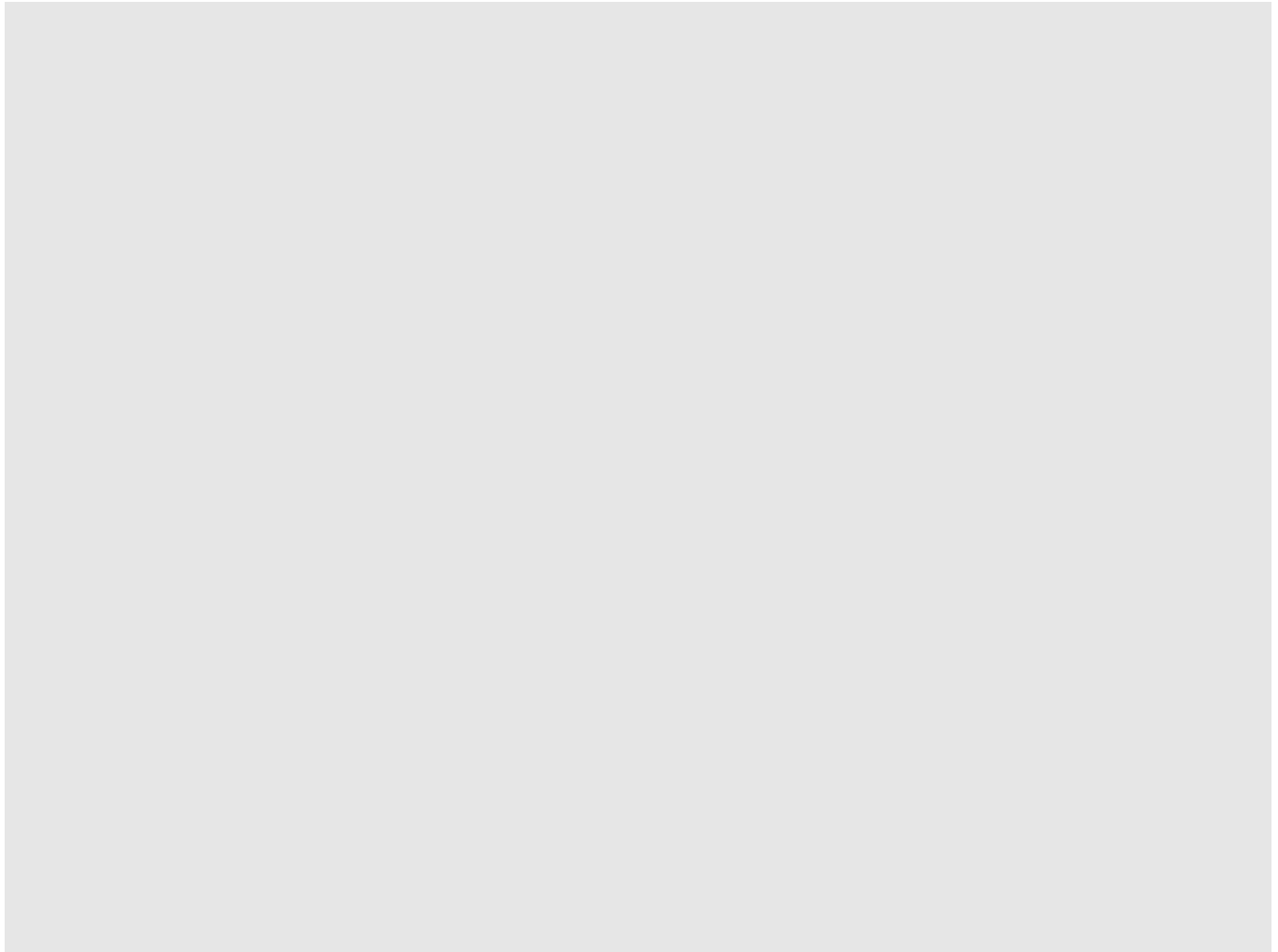
At the grande dame of Puerto Rican cuisine in the Queen City of the Great Lakes, the line hardly ever thins of Buffalonians hungry for rotisserie chicken, pernil, and steam-table classics. Maduros, plantains cooked into fruity caramel, are a personal must-have side.



The maduros, or sweet plantains, come with mojito (tomato garlic sauce) for dipping at Niagara Cafe.

Sharon Cantillon

An unbeatable \$8 lunch deal with beans and rice would be a steal at \$10. Built for speed, this is a cash-only place. If you turn around at the cashier station, the ATM is right there. There are tables to sit at here, but no service.



From 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., this can be yours for \$8 at Niagara Café.

Andrew Galarneau / Buffalo News

Hours: 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Closed Sunday, Monday.

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Kiosko Latino

*142 French Road, Cheektowaga; 716-608-6793; ***kiosko-latino.square.site***.*

West Side Bazaar graduates opened their own place last year, bringing the flavors of Puerto Rico to the wilds of Cheektowaga. Plenty of room to sit, and enjoy food that you order from the counter. Try an estimable Cuban sandwich of ham, roast pork, Swiss cheese, dill pickles and mustard, pressed in a griddle to a satisfying golden brown crisp. Order yuca, the potato cousin with more personality, cooked with onions, vinegar and garlic.

Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday; 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday.
Closed Sunday.

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House of Sandwich

800 Tonawanda St.; 716-342-
2684; [facebook.com/HouseofSandwichBuffaloNY](https://www.facebook.com/HouseofSandwichBuffaloNY).

Spacious Puerto Rican family restaurant has plenty of space to settle in after you order, and a case of pinchos next to the door, if you're in a grab-and-go mood. Huge sandwiches on estimably crusty loaves are a signature here. Breakfasts include scrambles and omelets, but the eponymous sandwiches are the thing here. Beef papa (\$13.52) includes steak, tomatoes, and potato sticks, Colby cheese, mayonnaise, ketchup, lettuce, pickles, garlic oil, and you better believe it's worth the extra napkins. Or try the counterwoman's nomination, which I heartily second: a tripleta (\$15.60) of chicken, beef and pastrami.

Send restaurant tips to agalarneau@buffnews.com and follow @BuffaloFood on Instagram and Twitter.

By Andrew Galarneau

Food editor

I am on a mission to find the best new sensations and old favorites. Send me a note and tell me about that dish I ought not to miss. I know I know nothing without my readers, who give me the clues to the buried treasure.