

## Where to Dine in San Juan

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**S**an Juan has the widest array of restaurants in the Caribbean. You can enjoy fine continental, American, Italian, Chinese, Mexican, and Japanese cuisines, to name a few. In recent years, many restaurants have shown a greater appreciation for traditional Puerto Rican cooking, and local specialties now appear on the menus of numerous restaurants. When possible, many chefs enhance their dishes with native ingredients.

Many of San Juan's best restaurants are in the resort hotels along the Condado and at Isla Verde. There has been a restaurant explosion in San Juan in the past few years, but many of the newer ones are off the beaten tourist path, and some have not yet achieved the quality found at many of the older, more traditional restaurants.

Local seafood is generally in plentiful supply, but no restaurant guarantees that it will have fresh fish every night, especially during winter, when the sea can be too turbulent for fishing. In those cases, the chef relies on fresh or frozen fish flown in from Miami. If you want fresh fish caught in Puerto Rican waters, ask your server about the catch of the day. Make sure he or she can guarantee that the fish was recently caught rather than resting for a while in the icebox.

### 1 Best Bets

- **Best Classic Creole Cooking:** Chef Wilo Benet at **Pikayo** is a master specialist in the *criollo* cooking of the colonial age, emphasizing the Spanish, Indian, and African elements in his unusual recipes. See p. 101.
- **Best Wine List:** The luxurious **Vineyard Grill** in the dazzling Ritz-Carlton serves a refined California/Mediterranean cuisine, but we'd go there just for the wine list. The countries best represented on the wine *carte* are France, Australia, Chile, Germany, Italy, Spain, and even South Africa, with a California selection will make you think you're back in the Napa Valley. See p. 104.

- **Best French Cuisine:** Against a Moorish and Andalusian background, **Trois Cent Onze** serves a classic French cuisine with innovative overtones. Great attention is paid to color, flavor, and texture of each dish. See p. 88.
- **Best for a Romantic Dinner:** Out in Miramar, **Augusto's Cuisine**, on the 15th floor of the Hotel Excelsior, offers a stunning and panoramic view of San Juan at night. It also serves one of the best French and international cuisines in the Caribbean, backed up by an extensive wine list. See p. 100.
- **Best Asopao:** Soul food to Puerto Ricans, *asopao* is the regional gumbo, made in as many different ways as there are chefs on the island. Some versions are too thick to be called soup, such as the seafood variety at **La Bombonera**, in San Juan's Old Town, which is more like a stew. One popular version of *asopao* includes pigeon peas, although the one with chicken is better known. See p. 93.
- **Best Spanish Cuisine:** You'd have to go all the way to Madrid to find Spanish food as well prepared as it is at **Ramiro's**. The chefs take full advantage of fresh island produce to create an innovative cuisine of New Creole, although its roots are firmly planted in Spain. Their fresh fish and chargrilled meats are succulent, and any dessert with the strawberry-and-guava sauce is a sure palate pleaser. See p. 97.
- **Best Local Cuisine:** Devoted to *la cocina criolla*, the term for the often starchy local cuisine, **Ajili Mójili** features food that islanders might have enjoyed in their mama's kitchens. Try such specialties as *mofongos* (green plantains stuffed with veal, chicken, shrimp, or pork) or the most classic *arroz con pollo* (stewed chicken with saffron rice) in town. See p. 96.
- **Best Italian Restaurant:** In Wyndham El San Juan Hotel & Casino, **La Piccola Fontana** takes you on a culinary tour of sunny Italy. Plate after plate of delectable northern Italian food is presented nightly—everything from grilled filets of fresh fish to succulent pastas. Service is first-rate, and the welcome warm. See p. 103.
- **Best Family Meals:** **Ciao Mediterranean Café**, in the Inter-Continental San Juan Resort & Casino, offers an excellent and reasonably priced menu. Many tables are placed on a private boardwalk adjacent to the beach. Pizza and pasta are favorite dishes, and you can also choose from a large selection of other Mediterranean fare. See p. 107.



- **Best Pizza:** At **Via Appia**, you should try the special: a delectable blend of sausages, onions, mushrooms, pepperoni, green pepper, and bubbling cheese. Or sample a pizza with meatballs or one with vegetarian ingredients. See p. 100.
- **Best Sunday Brunch:** Both locals and American visitors flock to **Palmeras** at the Caribe Hilton for its delectable all-you-can-eat Sunday brunch. Good food, glamour, and live music are combined here. The freshly prepared seafood alone is worth the set price, which includes champagne. See p. 94.

## 2 Old San Juan

For the locations of Old San Juan restaurants, see the map “Old San Juan Dining” on p. 85.

### EXPENSIVE

**Aquaviva** ★★ LATINO/SEAFOOD One of the hottest restaurant tickets in Old San Juan, this is the third and final addition to a trio of stylish restaurants, each within a few steps of each other, that are owned by the same investors. The location is at the bottom of Calle Fortaleza, in Old San Juan, within a cool, turquoise-colored environment that’s in welcome contrast to the saffron-and-fire-colored decor of the other members (Dragonfly on p. 89 and Parrot Club on p. 88). Presiding above the sometimes frenetic bar action and dining room hubbub of this place are replicas of three *aquaviva* (jellyfish), quivering with illumination, each painstakingly manufactured from stained glass specifically for this site.

The result verges on the chaotic, albeit in the most stylish of ways. Just when you think the bar area is packed to the point where no further clients will possibly be admitted, *boom*, a new carload of hopefuls, either with or—unfortunately for them—without dining reservations, will cram themselves in among the stylish and scantily dressed crowd. Oysters and stiff drinks are served at the bar. Flowing from the open-to-view kitchens come dishes whose ingredients derive from the watery turquoise world that inspired this restaurant’s color scheme. The best examples include six different ceviches, including one made with mahimahi, mango juice, and lemons; and a different version with marlin and garlic. You might opt for a heaping tower composed of fried oysters, coco-flavored shrimp, fried octopus, and calamari. The best main courses include grilled fresh mahimahi with smoky shrimp, salsa, and coconut-poached yuca; seared medallions of halibut with a fondue of spinach and crabmeat; and a succulent version of paella garnished with seafood and pork

sausage. More recent additions to the menu feature such zesty fare as lamb spareribs with a tamarindo glaze or seared tuna in a Szechuan peppercorn sauce.

364 Calle Fortaleza. ☎ 787/722-0665. Reservations required. Main courses \$16–\$42. AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Wed 6–11pm; Thurs–Sat 6pm–midnight; Sun 4–10pm. Bus: Old Town Trolley.

**Barú** ★ CARIBBEAN/MEDITERRANEAN This is one of the most fashionable and popular of the creative and imaginative restaurants of Old San Juan, with an attractive and hard-playing clientele of beautiful people, some of whom might effectively compete for roles on the Hispanic soap operas. Named after an unspoiled island off the north coast of Colombia, a personal favorite of its Colombian-born owner, Barú occupies a stately high-ceilinged space capped with massive timbers, fronted with a hyper-convivial mahogany bar, and decorated with paintings by such Colombia-born artistic luminaries as Botéro. Many dishes are deliberately conceived as something midway between an appetizer and a main-course platter, so it's hard to know how much or how many courses to order. Hopefully, your waitperson will guide you. Menu items include an unusual choice of five different kinds of carpaccio (tuna, halibut, salmon, beef, or Serrano ham), presented in paper-thin and very small portions that are spread out like a few sheets of tissue paper on a pretentiously large plate. Ceviche of mahimahi is appropriately tart and appealingly permeated with citrus, and marinated lamb chops with a paprika and pineapple mojo sauce is flavorful. Other culinary ideas include almond-encrusted goat cheese with Jamaican jerk mango dip and yuca chips, and sliced filet mignon. Regrettably, the place is not cheap, and service is well-intentioned but disorganized as the youthful staff maneuvers as best they can through the packed-in crowd.

Calle San Sebastián 150. ☎ 787/977-7107. Reservations required. Main courses \$15–\$28. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 6pm–midnight; Sun 6–10pm. Bus: Old Town Trolley.

**La Chaumière** ★ CLASSIC FRENCH The classic cuisine here has a loyal following of foodies. Just steps from the famous Tapía Theater, this restaurant has cafe-style decor in a greenhouse setting. You might begin with a Marseilles-style fish soup or a hearty country pâté, then follow with a perfectly prepared rack of baby lamb Provençal, filet mignon with béarnaise sauce, magret of duckling, or Dover sole meunière. Or you might choose the tender chateaubriand for two. Old standbys include chitterling sausage with red-wine sauce, veal Oscar, and oysters Rockefeller.

Calle Tetuán 364. ☎ 787/722-3330. Reservations required. Main courses \$24–\$33. AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Sat 6pm–midnight. Closed July–Aug. Bus: Old Town Trolley.

**Parrot Club** ★★ NUEVO LATINO/CARIBBEAN Parrot Club is one of the most sought-after restaurants in Old San Juan. This bistro and bar serves Nuevo Latino cuisine that blends traditional Puerto Rican cookery with Spanish, Taíno, and African influences. It's set in a stately 1902 building that was originally a hair-tonic factory. Today you'll find a cheerful-looking dining room, where San Juan's mayor and the governor of Puerto Rico can sometimes be spotted, and a verdantly landscaped courtyard, where tables for at least 200 diners are scattered among potted ferns, palms, and orchids. Live music—Brazilian, salsa, or Latino jazz—is offered nightly as well as during the popular Sunday brunches.

Menu items are updated interpretations of old Puerto Rican specialties. They include ceviche of halibut, salmon, tuna, and mahimahi; delicious crabcakes; *criollo*-style flank steak; and pan-seared tuna served with a sauce made from dark rum and essence of oranges. Everybody's favorite drink is the Parrot Passion, made from lemon-flavored rum, triple sec, oranges, and passion fruit.

Calle Fortaleza 363. ☎ 787/725-7370. Reservations not accepted. Main courses \$18–\$36 dinner, \$12–\$20 lunch. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily noon–3pm and 6–11pm. Closed 2 weeks in Sept. Bus: Old Town Trolley.

**Trois Cent Onze** ★★ FRENCH When the French/Puerto Rican owners of this place—named after its 311 address—renovated this building in 1999, they discovered some of the most beautiful Moorish-Andalusian tilework in San Juan's old town buried beneath layers of later coverings. Because of those tiles, and because of the delicate Andalusian-style iron rosette above the door, they wisely decided to retain the area's Moorish embellishments during the reconfiguration of their restaurant's decor. What you'll get today is the premier French restaurant of San Juan, replete with a zinc bar near the entrance, a soaring and richly beamed ceiling, and a decor like what you might have expected in the Casbah of old Tangiers. Your hosts are Christophe Gourdain and Zylma Pérez, who are proud to recite the building's former use as the photography studio that developed many of Puerto Rico's earliest movies. Colors, textures, and flavors combine here to produce an irresistible array of dishes. Menu items include a carpaccio of salmon marinated in citrus; sautéed sea scallops served with an almond-flavored butter sauce; mango and crabmeat salad; magret of duckling roasted with

honey; and pork medallions served with caramelized onions, stewed white beans, and spicy *merguez* sausage.

Calle Fortaleza 311. ☎ 787/725-7959. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$19–\$30. AE, DISC, MC, V. Tues–Sat noon–3pm and 6:30–10:30pm (till 11:30pm Fri–Sat); Sun noon–10pm. Bus: Old Town Trolley, T2, or 2.

## MODERATE

**Amadeus** ★★ CARIBBEAN Housed in a brick-and-stone building that was constructed in the 18th century by a wealthy merchant, Amadeus offers Caribbean ingredients with a *nouvelle* twist. The appetizers alone are worth the trip here, especially the Amadeus dumplings with guava sauce and arrowroot fritters. And try the smoked-salmon-and-caviar pizza. One zesty specialty is pork scaloppine with sweet-and-sour sauce.

Calle San Sebastián 106 (across from the Iglesia de San José). ☎ 787/722-8635. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$7.75–\$25. AE, DISC, MC, V. Mon 6pm–midnight; Tues–Sat noon–1am (kitchen closes at midnight), Sun noon–11pm. Bus: Old Town Trolley, M2, M3, or A5.

**Bossa Nova** ★ (Value) BRAZILIAN Cozy, amicable, and unpretentious, this restaurant presents, night after night, one of the best food values in San Juan. Established in 2003 in a format that emulates a style of restaurant popular in Brazil and outfitted with masks fashioned from feathers from the rainforest and carved bas-reliefs of Brazilian dancers, it offers a convivial bar area near the entrance and an open-to-view grill from which derive many of the restaurant's specialties.

Your meal might begin with codfish fritters, succulent fried yuca served with hearts of palm and sausage, or turnovers stuffed with chunks of lobster and hearts of palm. But the main reason most diners come here is for the \$29 house specialty, a Brazilian-style *rodizio* consisting of five kinds of grilled meat brought out to your table skewer by skewer and accompanied with Brazilian risotto, pastas, salads, french fries, fried plantains, fried cassava, and more—all are flavored with Brazilian-style vinaigrette sauce. Beer tastes great with this kind of cuisine, but for an insight into the semi-psychedelic national cocktail of Brazil, consider, for \$5, a *caipirinha*.

358 Calle Fortaleza. ☎ 787/722-0093. Main courses \$18–\$21. Brazilian *rodizio*, a full-fledged meal in itself, \$29 per person. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 6pm–midnight. Bus: A5 or T1.

**Dragonfly** ★★★ LATIN/ASIAN At one of San Juan's hottest restaurants, the decor has been compared to that of a *bordello* in Old San Francisco. You pass through the beaded curtains into a

world of red ceilings, fringed lamps, and gilded mirrors. The restaurant lies right across the street from the Parrot Club, and these two dining enclaves have put the newly named SoFo district (south of Calle Fortaleza in Old Town) on the culinary map. In the bar, the preferred cigarette is Marlboro and the most popular drink, a lethal “Dragon Punch.” Night after night Dragonfly is the fun party place in town. Along with the latest gossip, you can enjoy live Latin jazz as background music.

This new-generation San Juan restaurant offers sexy cookery, such as seafood ceviche scooped up with yuca, and plantain chips, *chicharrones* (pork rinds), spicy crab cakes, and a host of other dishes, such as marinated grilled meats. We applaud the chefs for their use of root vegetables such as yuca. The red snapper and grouper are excellent, and we love the pumpkin and beans of every type. The barbecued lamb shanks are very hearty and filling. Ravioli, timbales, confits, cassoulets—it’s a dizzy array of taste temptations.

Calle Fortaleza 364. ☎ 787/977-3886. Reservations required. Main courses \$8–\$21. AE, MC, V. Mon–Wed 6–11pm; Thurs–Sat 6pm–midnight. Bus: A5 or T1.

**El Patio de Sam** AMERICAN/PUERTO RICAN Established in 1953, this joint has survived several generations of clients, who came here for booze, fantastic juicy burgers, Puerto Rican food, and dialogue. There is the unmistakable aura of pop, youth culture, Margaritaville, and college-age drinking ethos. The setting includes an exterior space with tables that overlook a historic statue of Ponce de León and a well-known church, and a labyrinth of dark, smoked-stained inner rooms with high-beamed ceilings and lots of potted plants. Dining usually occurs in a skylit garden-style courtyard in back where there is no view but a welcome sense of calm. In addition to those burgers, you can also order more sophisticated dishes such as Puerto Rican-style fried pork, ceviche, shellfish paella, chicken and rice, and *churrasco* (Argentine-styled grilled meats).

Calle San Sebastián 102 (across from the Iglesia de San José). ☎ 787/723-1149. Sandwiches, burgers, and salads \$9–\$11; platters \$13–\$35. AE, MC, V. Mon–Tues 11:30am–10pm; Thurs–Sat 11:30am–2pm. Bus: Old Town Trolley.

**La Mallorquina** ♀ PUERTO RICAN Founded in 1848, this old favorite has been run by the Rojos family since 1900. If you look carefully at the floor adjacent to the old-fashioned mahogany bar, you’ll see the building’s original gray-and-white marble flooring, which the owners are laboriously restoring, square foot by square foot, to its original condition. Lunches here tend to attract local office workers; dinners are more cosmopolitan and more leisurely,



with many residents of the Condado and other modern neighborhoods selecting this place specifically because of its old-fashioned, old-world charm.

The food has changed little here over the decades, with special emphasis on *asopao* made with rice and either chicken, shrimp, or lobster and shrimp. *Arroz con pollo* is almost as popular. Begin with either garlic soup or gazpacho, end with flan, and you'll have eaten a meal that's authentically Puerto Rican.

Calle San Justo 207. ☎ 787/722-3261. Reservations not accepted at lunch, recommended at dinner. Dinner main courses \$15–\$36 (highest price is for lobster). AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 11:30am–10pm. Closed Sept. Bus: Old Town Trolley.

**La Querencia** ★ (Finds) PUERTO RICAN/INTERNATIONAL

Because of the many desirable restaurants that flank it, it's easy to overlook the charms of this one. Set within a 400-year-old town house, it offers an appealing mixture of elegance, restraint, and urban hip, all of it factored into a long and narrow format that includes an exotic and cozy bar (painted red) near the entrance, and a more formal forest-green dining room in back. The high ceiling and formal layout evokes a salon in a colonial governor's house. Surrounding you will be a collection of antique guitars and wind instruments. Separating the two areas is a skylit courtyard with an open view of the hardworking kitchens. You can opt to sit anywhere within this warren of rooms, but our preferences involve drinks and *tapas* in the red-painted bar area in front, surrounded by artwork and hints of Madrid during its *movida*, and candlelit meals in back. Your meal might begin delectably with a ceviche of sea bass with orange zest; or sautéed shrimp with roasted pineapple, coconut flakes, and a rum-flavored vinaigrette. Main courses include a superb version of pork loin topped with cranberry sauce, served over caramelized apples, or a rack of lamb with red, black, and white bean ragout with fines herbs and puff pastry.

320 Calle Fortaleza. ☎ 787/723-0357. Reservations recommended Sat–Sun. Main courses \$16–\$26. AE, DISC, MC, V. Tues–Sun 6–10pm. Bus: Old Town Trolley, T2, or 2.

**Ostra Cosa** ★★ (Finds) ECLECTIC/ARGENTINE

This is the most artfully promoted restaurant in San Juan, with a growing clientele who swear that the ambience here is one of the most sensual and romantic in Old San Juan. It was created by a former advertising executive, Alberto Nazario, a lifestyle guru who mingles New Age thinking with good culinary techniques to promote love, devotion, and a heightened sexuality. Couples dine beneath a massive *quenepé* tree—waiters will tell you to hug the tree and make a

wish—in a colonial courtyard surrounded by a 16th-century building that was once the home of the colony’s governor. The atmosphere, enhanced by domesticated quail and chirping tree frogs, will make you feel far removed from the cares of the city. Featured foods are high in phosphorus, zinc, and flavor, designed to promote an “eat-up, dress-down experience.” The ceviche is superb, as are the grilled prawns. But it is the conch, known as Caribbean Viagra, that rates “Wow!!” or “Ay Ay Ay!!!”

Calle del Cristo 154. ☎ 787/722-2672. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$13–\$29. AE, MC, V. Sun–Wed noon–10pm; Fri–Sat noon–11pm. Bus: Old Town Trolley.

**Tantra** ★ *Value* INDO-LATINO This is one of the most genuinely creative restaurants in San Juan, a one-of-a-kind luminary in a dining scene that sometimes relies merely on derivations of tried-and-true themes. Set in the heart of “restaurant row” on Calle Fortaleza, it has become famous for a sophisticated fusion of Latino and South Indian cuisine. Its chef and owner, Indian-born Ramesh Pillai, overseas a blend of slow-cooked tandoori cuisine from South India with Puerto Rico–derived spices, flavors, and ingredients. All of this occurs within a warm, candlelit environment. One of the best martinis we’ve ever had (a version with cinnamon and cloves) is an appropriate way to begin a meal here. The best menu items include sesame *masala*-crusted sushi tuna with peanut sauce; fried coconut sesame jumbo shrimp with Indian noodles; chicken *tikka masala* with flat naan bread; and an absolutely brilliant version of tandoori chicken, one of the establishment’s bestsellers. Dessert might be a cardamom-flavored flan. Even if you’ve already had dinner, don’t overlook this place as a nightlife option.

356 Calle Fortaleza. ☎ 787/977-8141. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$13–\$19. AE, DC, MC, V. Tues–Sat noon–3am; Sun–Mon noon–12:30am. Bus: T1 or 2.

## INEXPENSIVE

**Café Puerto Rico** CREOLE/PUERTO RICAN On the Plaza de Colón, this restaurant offers balconies overlooking one of the most charming of Old Town squares. The setting is colonial, with beamed ceilings and tile floors, and with ceiling fans whirling overhead. The menu features hearty regional fare. Tasty options include fried fish filet, paella, and lobster cooked as you like it. Eggplant parmigiana is an excellent vegetarian option, and you might also order eye round stuffed with ham in Creole sauce. On weekends live bands play here, and the sound of romantic boleros or salsa fill the air. The

cafe is an especially good value then because you get your food and entertainment for just the price of dinner.

Calle O'Donnell 208. ☎ 787/724-2281. Main courses \$9–\$20. AE, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–11pm (closes at 9pm on Sun). Bus: Old Town Trolley.

### **El Buen Samaritano** PUERTO RICAN/DOMININICAN

Only the most experimental foreign tourists would venture in here, despite the fact that it provides lots of insights into the subculture of this thriving inner-city neighborhood. In fact, we have included this authentic little eatery to answer the often-posed question “Where do the locals dine?” It stands adjacent to the back door of city hall, near the corner of Calle San Justo, on one of our favorite “backwater” streets of the historic Old Town. Almost no English is spoken; it’s as Creole and ethnic as anything on the island, and it contains no more than four well-scrubbed tables in a setting Hemingway would have praised. All the food is predictably filling and starchy, including roast pork with yellow rice and beans and filet of red snapper in pungent tomato sauce. The menu, which depends largely on what was available in the market that morning, is recited lethargically by a member of the family who owns the joint. Except during the midday crush, no one will mind if you opt for just a cup of thick Puerto Rican coffee, a beer, or a soda.

Calle Luna 255 (near Calle San Justo). ☎ 787/721-6184. Reservations not accepted. Platters and main courses \$6–\$15. AE, MC, V. Daily 8am–7pm. Bus: Old Town trolley.

**Fatty's** JAMAICAN/WEST INDIAN Amazingly, Puerto Rico didn't have a Jamaican restaurant until this dive opened. You'll know it's Jamaican when you see a picture of Bob Marley and the Jamaican flag displayed. Not only that, but reggae music plays in the background. The welcoming owner, “Fatty,” is a great cook, turning out marvelous jerk dishes, especially chicken, fish, and shrimp. The chef is also known for curry chicken or a rice dish flavored with coconut milk. Chicken balls with curry sauce is another local favorite. Fried red snapper and conch in garlic sauce also win our hearts.

Calle O'Donnell 102. ☎ 787/586-6925. Main courses \$5–\$10. Thurs noon–3pm; Fri–Wed noon–9pm. Bus: Old Town Trolley.

**La Bombonera** ★★ *Value* PUERTO RICAN This place offers exceptional value in its homemade pastries, well-stuffed sandwiches, and endless cups of coffee—and it has done so since 1902. Its atmosphere evokes turn-of-the-20th-century Castille transplanted to the New World. The food is authentically Puerto Rican, homemade, and

inexpensive, with regional dishes such as rice with squid, roast leg of pork, and seafood *asopao*. For dessert, you might select an apple, pineapple, or prune pie, or one of many types of flan. Service is polite, if a bit rushed, and the place fills up quickly at lunchtime.

Calle San Francisco 259. ☎ 787/722-0658. Reservations recommended. American breakfast \$4.50–\$6.45; main courses \$6–\$18. AE, DISC, MC, V. Daily 7:30am–8pm. Bus: Old Town Trolley.

### 3 Puerta de Tierra

For the locations of restaurants in Puerta de Tierra, see the map “Eastern San Juan Dining” on p. 95.

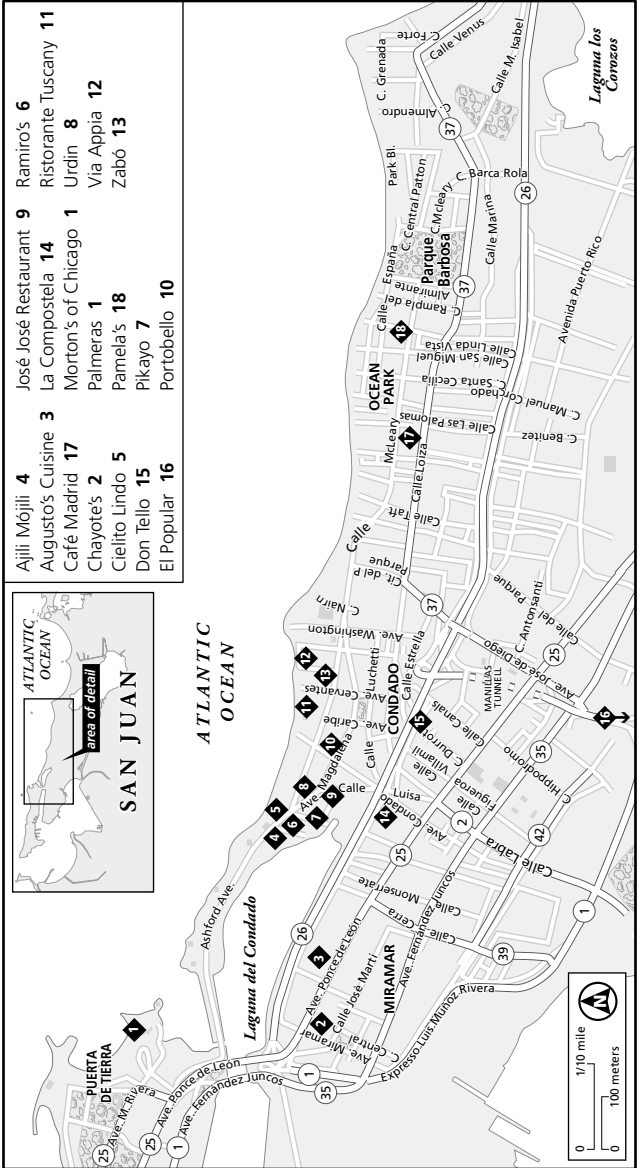
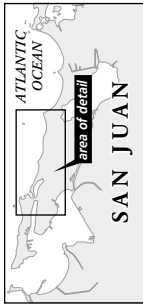
**Morton’s of Chicago** ★★ When it comes to steaks, Ruth’s Chris Steak House in Isla Verde enjoys a slight edge, but otherwise Morton’s is king of the steaks and other choice meats. The chain of gourmet steakhouses was founded in 1978 by Arnie Morton, former executive vice president of the *Playboy* empire. Beef lovers, from Al Gore to Liza Minnelli, know they’ll get quality meats perfectly cooked at Morton’s. Carts laden with menu options, ranging from prime Midwestern beefsteaks to succulent lamb or veal chops, are wheeled around for your selection. And Morton’s has the island’s best prime rib. This is a place where the bartenders make stiff drinks, and the waiters tempt you with their fresh fish, lobster, and chicken dishes. The vegetables here are among the freshest in the area. The house specialty is a 24-ounce porterhouse. Appetizers include perfectly cooked jumbo shrimp with cocktail sauce and smoked Pacific salmon. For dessert, we always gravitate to one of the soufflés, such as raspberry or Grand Marnier.

In the Caribe Hilton, Calle Los Rosales. ☎ 787/977-6262. Reservations required. Main courses \$24–\$46. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Sat 5–11pm; Sun 5–10pm. Bus: B21.

**Palmeras** ★ *Kids* INTERNATIONAL Every Sunday the Hilton’s brunch captivates the imagination of island residents and U.S. visitors with its combination of excellently prepared food, glamour, and entertainment. There’s a clown to keep the children amused, as well as live music on the bandstand for anyone who cares to dance. Champagne is included in the price. Food is arranged at several different stations: Puerto Rican dishes, seafood, paella, ribs, cold cuts, steaks, pastas, and salads. Although Sunday is the most festive time to visit, Palmeras prides itself on serving the biggest and most elaborate breakfast buffet in Puerto Rico on any morning. Another

# Eastern San Juan Dining

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|----------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Ajili Mójili <b>4</b>      | José José Restaurant <b>9</b> | Ramiro's <b>6</b>            |
| Augusto's Cuisine <b>3</b> | La Compostela <b>14</b>       | Ristorante Tuscany <b>11</b> |
| Café Madrid <b>17</b>      | Morton's of Chicago <b>1</b>  | Urdirin <b>8</b>             |
| Chayote's <b>2</b>         | Palmeras <b>1</b>             | Via Appia <b>12</b>          |
| Cielito Lindo <b>5</b>     | Pamela's <b>18</b>            | Zabó <b>13</b>               |
| Don Tello <b>15</b>        | Pikayo <b>7</b>               |                              |
| El Popular <b>16</b>       | Portobello <b>10</b>          |                              |



lavish buffet is the Friday-night seafood fiesta. On other nights dinner is a la carte. Specialties include pastas, paellas, chicken, and cheese quesadillas, along with an array of other international food.

In the Caribe Hilton, Calle Los Rosales. ☎ 787/721-0303. Reservations recommended for Sun brunch and Fri night. Breakfast buffet \$18 Mon–Sat, \$26 Sun. Lunch buffet \$20 Mon–Thurs, \$28 Fri–Sat. Main courses \$11–\$26. AE, DC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 6am–11pm; Fri–Sat 6am–midnight. Bus: 21.

## 4 Condado

For the locations of Condado restaurants, see the map “Eastern San Juan Dining” on p. 95.

### EXPENSIVE

**Ajili Mójili** ★★ PUERTO RICAN/CREOLE This restaurant is devoted exclusively to *la cocina criolla*, the starchy, down-home cuisine that developed on the island a century ago. Though the building housing it is quite modern, you can see artful replicas of the kind of crumbling brick walls you’d expect in Old San Juan and a bar that evokes Old Spain. The staff will willingly describe menu items in colloquial English. Locals come here for a taste of the food they enjoyed at their mother’s knee, like *mofongos* (green plantains stuffed with veal, chicken, shrimp, or pork), *arroz con pollo* (chicken and rice), *medallones de cerdo encebollado* (pork loin sautéed with onions), *carne mechada* (beef rib-eye stuffed with ham), and *lechón asado con maposteadado* (roast pork with rice and beans). Wash it all down with an ice-cold bottle of local beer.

Av. Ashford 1006 (at the corner of Calle Joffre). ☎ 787/725-9195. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$17–\$29; lunch \$13–\$26. AE, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Fri noon–3pm; Mon–Thurs 6–10pm; Sat 11:45am–3:30pm; Fri–Sat 6–11pm; Sun 12:30–4pm and 6–10pm. Bus: B21.

**José José Restaurant** ★ *Finds* INTERNATIONAL The imaginative and flavor-filled dishes at this elegant, colonial-styled restaurant next to the Convention Center come as a real surprise. The cooking is warm and generous, and some of the dishes appear on no other menu in San Juan. Try, for example, the loin of ostrich in a sweet cinnamon sauce served with plantain. The lobster-and-wild-mushroom risotto tops anything we’ve ever sampled in San Juan. The chefs are equally adept at other seafood dishes, including a delectable broiled hake served with a tangy caper sauce. The meat dishes are imaginative as well, including beef cheeks with a garlic-laced linguini. Chef Josébreu is one of San Juan’s finest chefs.

1110 Magdalena Ave. ☎ **787/725-8546**. Reservations required. Main courses \$23–\$35; tasting menu \$50–\$70. AE, MC, V. Tues–Fri noon–3pm and 6:30–10pm; Sat 6:30–10:30pm; Sun noon–8pm. Bus: A7 or M2.

**La Compostela** ★ SPANISH This restaurant offers formal service from a battalion of well-dressed waiters. Established by a Galician-born family, the pine-trimmed restaurant has gained a reputation as one of the best in the capital. The chef made his name on the roast peppers stuffed with salmon mousse. Equally delectable are duck with orange and ginger sauce and baby rack of lamb with fresh herbs. The shellfish grilled in brandy sauce is a sure winner. The chef also makes two different versions of paella, both savory. The wine cellar, comprising some 10,000 bottles, is one of the most impressive in San Juan.

Av. Condado 106. ☎ **787/724-6088**. Reservations required. Main courses \$24–\$39. AE, MC, V. Mon–Fri noon–2:30pm; Mon–Sat 6:30–10:30pm. Bus: M2.

**Portobello** ★ NORTHERN ITALIAN This restaurant offers some of the finest service on the Condado and a classic Italian cuisine, centered primarily in the north of Italy, especially Lombardy. It's the domain of chef and owner Martin Acosta. His restaurant's picture windows open onto views of the Atlantic and the night lights of the Condado. Appetizers include hot seafood antipasti and Caesar and spinach salads. The Caesar salad is made tableside with real panache. For a main course you can order one of the homemade pasta dishes or choose from such appetizing dishes as seafood suprême, *vitello* Martino (with shrimp), gnocchi with cream sauce and Parmesan, and filet mignon Monnalisa, which is flambéed at your table. In fact, almost any dish can receive a tableside flambé if you want. Good and reasonably priced wines add to the dining pleasure.

In the Diamond Palace Hotel & Casino, Av. Condado 55. ☎ **787/722-5256**. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$20–\$42. AE, MC, V. Daily 6–11:30pm. Bus: A7.

**Ramiro's** ★★ SPANISH/INTERNATIONAL This restaurant boasts the most imaginative menu on the Condado. Its refined "New Creole" cooking is a style pioneered by owner and chef Jesús Ramiro. You might begin with breadfruit *mille-feuille* with local crabmeat and avocado. For your main course, any fresh fish or meat can be chargrilled on request. Some recent menu specialties have included paillard of lamb with spiced root vegetables and guava sauce, charcoal-grilled black Angus steak with shiitake mushrooms, and grilled striped sea bass with citrus sauce. Among the many

homemade desserts are caramelized mango on puff pastry with strawberry-and-guava sauce and “four seasons” chocolate.

Av. Magdalena 1106. ☎ 787/721-9049. Reservations recommended off season, required in winter. Main courses \$27–\$39. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat noon–3pm and 6–11pm; Sun noon–3pm and 6–10pm. Bus: A7, T1, or M2.

**Ristorante Tuscany** ★★ ★ NORTHERN ITALIAN This is the showcase restaurant of one of the most elaborate hotel reconstructions in the history of Puerto Rico, and the kitchen continues to rack up culinary awards. Notable entrees include grilled veal chops with shallots and glaze of Madeira, and grilled chicken breast in cream sauce with chestnuts, asparagus, and brandy, surrounded with fried artichokes. The seafood selections are excellent, especially the fresh red snapper sautéed in olive oil, garlic, parsley, and lemon juice. The risottos prepared al dente in the traditional northern Italian style are the finest on the island, especially the one made with seafood and herbs. The cold and hot appetizers are virtual meals unto themselves, with such favorites as grilled polenta with sausages or fresh clams and mussels simmered in herb-flavored tomato broth.

In the San Juan Marriott Resort, Av. Ashford 1309. ☎ 787/722-7000. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$20–\$45. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 6–11pm. Bus: B21.

## MODERATE

Most main courses in the restaurants below are at the low end of the price scale. These restaurants each have only two or three dishes that are expensive, almost invariably involving shellfish.

**Urdin** ★★ SPANISH/INTERNATIONAL Urdin is proud of its reputation as one of the capital’s bright young restaurants. It occupies a low-slung, stucco-covered house set near a slew of competitors. Inside, a fanciful decor of postmodern, Caribbean-inspired accents and metal sculptures brings a touch of Latino New York. Popularity has brought an unexpected development to this highly visible restaurant: The bar is almost more popular than the food. Consequently, you’re likely to find the bar area jam-packed every day between 6 and 10pm. Cliquish, heterosexual, and fashionable, some of this crowd eventually gravitates toward the tables. Yes, that was Ricky Martin we spotted here one evening. Filled with authentic Spanish flavor that’s not necessarily geared to the palates of timid diners, the food is innovative, flavorful, strong, and earthy. For starters, there are baby eels Bilbaina style and Castilian lentil soup. Main courses include fresh filet of salmon in mustard sauce, filet of fish “Hollywood style” (with onions, raisins, and mango slices,



served in white-wine sauce), and rack of lamb with orange sauce. One always-pleasing dish is *piquillo* peppers stuffed with seafood mousse and black-olive sauce. Savvy locals finish their meal with a slice of sweet-potato cheesecake. The staff can put a damper on (if they're sulky) or enhance (if they're welcoming) a meal here.

Av. Magdalena 1105. ☎ 787/724-0420. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$16–\$29. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat noon–3pm and 6–11pm. Bus: A7.

**Zabó** ★ AMERICAN/PUERTO RICAN/STEAK This restaurant enjoys citywide fame, thanks to its blend of bucolic charm and superb innovative food. It's set in a dignified villa that provides some low-rise dignity in a sea of skyscraping condos. The creative force here is owner and chef/culinary director Paul Carroll, who built the place from its origins as a simple deli into one of the most sought-after restaurants on the Condado. Menu items fuse the cuisines of the Mediterranean, the Pacific Rim, and the Caribbean into a collection that includes dishes such as blinis stuffed with medallions of lobster with ginger, thyme, and beurre blanc; carpaccio of salmon with mesclun salad and balsamic vinegar; and baked chorizo stuffed with mushrooms, sherry, paprika, and cheddar. The black-bean soup is among the very best in Puerto Rico, served with parboiled cloves of garlic marinated in olive oil that melt in your mouth like candy.

Calle Candina 14 (entrance is via an alleyway leading from Av. Ashford between avs. Washington and Cervantes). ☎ 787/725-9494. Reservations recommended. Snacks \$6; main courses \$15–\$35. AE, MC, V. Tues–Wed 6–10pm; Thurs 6–11pm; Fri–Sat 7–11pm. Bus: A7.

## INEXPENSIVE

**Cielito Lindo** *Value* MEXICAN One of the most likable things about this restaurant is the way it retains low prices and an utter lack of pretension, despite the expensive Condado real estate that surrounds it. Something about it might remind you of a low-slung house in Puebla, Mexico, home of owner Jaime Pandal, who maintains a vigilant position from a perch at the cash register. Walls are outfitted with an intriguing mix of Mexican arts and crafts and ads for popular tequilas and beer. None of the selections has changed since the restaurant was founded, a policy that long-term clients find reassuring. The place is mobbed, especially on weekends, with those looking for heaping portions of well-prepared, standardized Mexican food. Examples include fajitas of steak or chicken; strips of filet steak sautéed with green peppers and onions, covered with tomatoes and spicy gravy; enchiladas of chicken or cheese, covered with cheese and served with sour cream; and several kinds of tacos.

Av. Magdalena 1108. ☎ 787/723-5597. Reservations recommended for dinner. Main courses \$10–\$19. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 11am–11pm. Bus: B21 or C10.

**Via Appia** ★ PIZZA/ITALIAN A favorite of Sanjuaneros visiting Condado for the day, Via Appia offers food that's sometimes praiseworthy. Its pizzas are the best in the neighborhood. The chef's signature pizza, Via Appia, is a savory pie made with sausages, onions, mushrooms, pepperoni, green peppers, cheese, and spices. Vegetarians also have a pizza to call their own (made with whole-wheat dough, eggplant, mushrooms, green peppers, onions, tomatoes, and cheese). There's even a pizza with meatballs. Savory pasta dishes, including baked ziti, lasagna, and spaghetti, are also prepared with several of your favorite sauces. All of this can be washed down with sangria. During the day, freshly made salads and sandwiches are also available.

Av. Ashford 1350. ☎ 787/725-8711. Pizza and main courses \$9–\$16. AE, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11am–11pm; Fri–Sat 11am–midnight. Bus: B21 or C10.

## 5 Miramar

For the locations of restaurants in Miramar, see the map “Eastern San Juan Dining” on p. 95.

**Augusto's Cuisine** ★★ FRENCH/INTERNATIONAL With its European flair, this is one of the most elegant and glamorous restaurants in Puerto Rico. Austrian-born owner/chef Augusto Schreiner, assisted by a partly French-born staff, operates from a gray-and-green dining room set on the lobby level of a 15-story hotel in Miramar. Menu items are concocted from strictly fresh ingredients, including such dishes as lobster risotto; rack of lamb with aromatic herbs and fresh garlic; an oft-changing cream-based soup of the day (one of the best is corn and fresh oyster soup); and a succulent version of medallions of veal Rossini style, prepared with foie gras and Madeira sauce. The wine list is one of the most extensive on the island.

In the Hotel Excelsior, Av. Ponce de León 801. ☎ 787/725-7700. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$24–\$38. AE, MC, V. Tues–Fri noon–3pm; Tues–Sat 7–9:30pm. Bus: T1.

**Chayote's** ★ PUERTO RICAN/INTERNATIONAL The cuisine of this restaurant is among the most innovative in San Juan. It draws local business leaders, government officials, and celebs like Sylvester Stallone and Melanie Griffith. It's an artsy, modern, basement-level bistro in a surprisingly obscure hotel (the Olimpo). The

restaurant changes its menu every 3 months, but you might find appetizers like a yuca turnover stuffed with crabmeat and served with mango and papaya chutney, or ripe plantain stuffed with chicken and served with fresh tomato sauce. For a main dish, you might try red-snapper filet with citrus vinaigrette made of passion fruit, orange, and lemon. An exotic touch appears in the pork filet seasoned with dried fruits and spices in tamarind sauce and served with green banana and taro-root timbale. To finish off your meal, there's nothing better than the mango flan served with macerated strawberries.

In the Olimpo Hotel, Av. Miramar 603. ☎ 787/722-9385. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$21–\$28. AE, MC, V. Tues–Fri noon–2:30pm; Tues–Sat 7–10:30pm. Bus: B5.

## 6 Santurce & Ocean Park

For the locations of restaurants in Santurce and Ocean Park, see the map “Eastern San Juan Dining” on p. 95.

### VERY EXPENSIVE

**Pikayo** ★★☆☆ PUERTO RICAN/CAJUN This is an ideal place to go for the new generation of Puerto Rican cookery, with a touch of Cajun thrown in for spice and zest. Starkly minimalist, it has a lighting scheme whose tones change from reds to blues to yellows throughout the course of your dinner. And a large TV screen shows, through closed circuitry, the culinary rituals transpiring minute-by-minute within the restaurant's kitchen. This place not only keeps up with the latest culinary trends, but it often sets them, thanks to the inspired guidance of owner and celebrity chef Wilo Benet. Formal but not stuffy, and winner of more culinary awards than virtually any other restaurant in Puerto Rico, Pikayo is a specialist in the *cocina criolla* of the colonial age, emphasizing the Spanish, Indian, and African elements in its unusual recipes. Appetizers include a dazzling array of taste explosions: Try shrimp spring rolls with peanut *sofrito* sauce; crab cake with aioli; or perhaps a ripe plantain, goat-cheese, and onion tart. Main course delights feature charred rare yellowfin tuna with onion *escabeche* and red-snapper filet with sweet-potato purée served with foie gras butter. Our favorite remains the grilled shrimp with polenta and barbecue sauce made with guava.

Museum of Art of Puerto Rico, Av. José de Diego 299. ☎ 787/721-6194. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$28–\$40; fixed-price menus \$80. AE, DC, MC, V. Tues–Fri noon–3pm; Mon–Sat 6–11pm. Bus: M2, A7, or T1.

**EXPENSIVE**

**Pamela's** 🌿 CARIBBEAN FUSION/VEGETARIAN A sense of cachet and style is very pronounced at this restaurant, a fact that's somewhat surprising considering its out-of-the-way location. Part of its allure derives from a sophisticated blend of Caribbean cuisines that combines local ingredients with Puerto Rican flair and a sense of New York style. Menu items include a salad that marries vine-ripened and oven-roasted tomatoes, each drizzled with a roasted garlic-cilantro vinaigrette; club sandwiches stuffed with barbecued shrimp and cilantro-flavored mayonnaise; plantain-encrusted crab cakes with a spicy tomato-herb emulsion; and grilled island-spiced pork loin served with guava glaze and fresh local fruits. Beer and any of a wide array of party-colored drinks go well with this food.

In the Número 1 Guest House, Calle Santa Ana 1, Ocean Park. ☎ 787/726-5010. Reservations recommended. Sandwiches and salads at lunch \$10–\$14; main course platters \$20–\$29. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–3pm and 7–10:30pm. Bus: A5.

**INEXPENSIVE**

**Café Madrid** 🍷 PUERTO RICAN Come here to escape from the gloss and sheen of big-city, big-money tourism. Local residents promote this simple diner for its sense of workaday conviviality and low, low prices. Located on a narrow but busy street in a congested commercial neighborhood of Ocean Park, this joint has a battered facade with plastic lettering—signs that the inside is going to be very tacky. At first glance, that's partially true. But if you retain a sense of humor, you might begin to appreciate the Formica bar tops, rows of mismatched refrigerators, big-lettered menus over sizzling deep-fat fryers, and the kind of industrial accessories that Andy Warhol might have appreciated or even collected. It's been the domain of the Molina family since the 1930s, and the food has changed very little since then. Examples include roasted pork, sold either as a full-size meal platter or stuffed into a sandwich; several kinds of *asopao* and *carne frita* (fried meat); lasagna; and lots of empanadas. Roasted chicken, the signature dish, is an ongoing favorite.

Calle Loíza 100 (at the corner of Calle Las Flores). ☎ 787/728-5250. Reservations not accepted. Breakfast platters \$3.25–\$12; sandwiches \$3–\$7; lunch and dinner main courses \$5–\$9. MC, V. Daily 6am–10pm. Bus: B5 or T1.

**Don Tello** 🌿 🍷 PUERTO RICAN Right at the Santurce Market Square (Plaza del Mercado), this is a family-run restaurant serving an authentic *criollo* cuisine. All the locals call the owners, Jorge and Rosin, by their first names. In a casual atmosphere, diners dress informally, eat well, and don't pay a lot of money for the privilege.

The service is excellent, and the ingredients are fresh and well prepared. The fish tastes among the freshest in San Juan. We've enjoyed the filet of sea bass in a plantain sauce, or a well-seasoned whole roasted sea bass. Grilled filet of mahimahi is another one of our favorites, as is the grilled filet of hake. You can also enjoy the traditional *asopao* of Puerto Rico, made with chicken, shrimp, lobster, or shellfish. A savory chicken stew is also served, as is a tender filet of steak roasted with onions.

180 Dos Hermanos, Santurce. ☎ 787/724-5752. Reservations required. Main courses \$6.95–\$29. AE, DISC, MC, V. Mon 11am–4pm; Tues–Sat 11am–8pm; Sun noon–5pm. Bus: 1, 5, or 21.

**El Popular** *Value* PUERTO RICAN The Santurce marketplace lies just 8 blocks south of the Condado and is filled with farmers selling fresh produce from wooden stalls along with mama-and-papa vendors. This is where locals go to feast on *criollo* food. At the corner of the marketplace, our local favorite is this dive with only 10 tables. You get completely authentic Puerto Rican food here, including *la olla española*. This is a very chunky meat soup that features everything from beef and pork bits to turkey. One absolutely delicious concoction is one of the island's best versions of *sancocho* (a beef-based soup full of vegetables). Chunks of pork are also tantalizingly cooked and served with garbanzos. Devotees of chicken claim that the *chicharrones de pollo* (fried chicken bits) are the tastiest in town.

Calle Capitol 205 (Plaza del Mercado). Reservations not accepted. Main courses \$5.50–\$6. MC, V. Mon–Sat 7am–4pm. Bus: 1, 2, 5, or 16.

## 7 Isla Verde

For the locations of restaurants in Isla Verde, see the “Isla Verde Dining” map on p. 105.

### VERY EXPENSIVE

**La Piccola Fontana** ★★ ★ NORTHERN ITALIAN Right off the luxurious Palm Court in the Wyndham El San Juan Hotel, this restaurant takes classic northern Italian cuisine seriously and delivers plate after plate of delectable food nightly. From its white linen to its classically formal service, it enjoys a fine reputation. The food is straightforward, generous, and extremely well prepared. You'll dine in one of two neo-Palladian rooms whose wall frescoes depict Italy's ruins and landscapes. Menu items range from the appealingly simple—such as grilled filets of fish or grilled veal chops—to more

elaborate dishes—such as tortellini San Daniele, made with veal, prosciutto, cream, and sage; and linguine *scogliere*, with shrimp, clams, and other seafood. Grilled medallions of filet mignon are served with braised arugula, Parmesan cheese, and balsamic vinegar.

In Wyndham El San Juan Hotel & Casino, Av. Isla Verde 6063. ☎ 787/791-0966. Reservations required. Main courses \$17–\$30. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 6–11pm. Bus: A5.

**Ruth's Chris Steak House** ★★ STEAK This Puerto Rican branch of one of the most famous steakhouse chains in the world presents macho food, especially steaks that are among the best beef dishes in San Juan. It obsessively focuses on big drinks and big steaks, grilled in the simplest possible way—usually just with salt, pepper, and a brush-over of butter. These are served within two dark blue, mahogany-trimmed dining rooms, separated by a saloon-style bar.

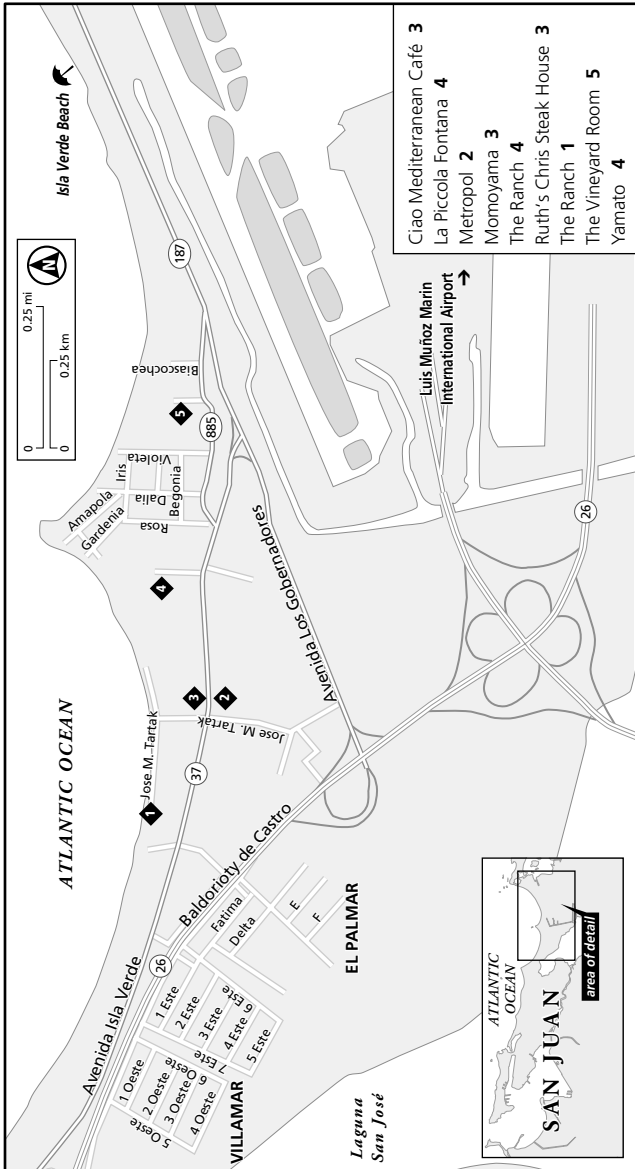
You might begin with barbecued shrimp, mushrooms stuffed with crabmeat, or seared ahi tuna. Or you might opt for a salad as an appetizer. Portions are large and very filling. Steaks are the finest from the U.S. cattle country. Examples include rib-eyes, veal chops, porterhouse, New York strips, and filet mignons. There's also roasted chicken, lobster, and a fresh catch of the day.

In the InterContinental San Juan Resort & Casino, Av. Isla Grande 187. ☎ 787/791-6100. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$22–\$40. AE, DC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 6–10pm; Fri–Sat 6–11pm. Bus: M7.

**Vineyard Grill** ★★ CALIFORNIA/STEAK Within the realm of haute cuisine served with impeccable European credentials, this is the finest restaurant in San Juan. The Vineyard Grill duplicates the gourmet citadels of Italy and France more accurately than any other restaurant in Puerto Rico, thanks to a staff of culinary luminaries spearheaded by Philippe Trosch, a prize catch who Ritz-Carlton worked hard to get. The waitstaff is the best trained in Puerto Rico. The wine-tasting menus, either four or five courses, are the best on the island. The wine list is superb, with both whites and reds from the Continent, as well as a strong emphasis on California wines. For the exotic, there are bottles from Chile, South Africa, and Australia.

You can select innovative appetizers like potato cannelloni filled with Caribbean lobster risotto, or a summer salad of cavallion melon, Serrano ham, mozzarella, and olive pesto with *ciabatta* toast. The main courses are equally appealing: Try Nantucket sea bass with barley tapenade and black-olive sabayon, or apple-smoked rabbit with cannellini bean mash. You might precede (or end) an experience here

# Isla Verde Dining



at the bar, where the dark paneling and deep leather seats emulate an Edwardian-era men's club in London.

In the Ritz-Carlton San Juan Hotel, Spa & Casino, Av. de los Gobernadores (State Rd.) 6961, no. 187, Isla Verde, Carolina. ☎ 787/253-1700. Reservations required. Main courses \$32–\$43; fixed-price menus \$45–\$75. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Tues–Sat 6–10pm. Bus: A5, B40, or C45.

## EXPENSIVE

**Tangerine** ★★ EURO-ASIAN This is the ultimate in chic Isla Verde dining, and it just happens to lie adjacent to the street-level reception area of The Water Club (p. 78). Minimalist, postmodern, and angular, and outfitted in monochromatic colors that include steel gray and navy blue, it has a prominent bar area in back, bubbling waterfalls, big-windowed views of the tropical landscapes outside, and an occasional and rather whimsical reference to the orange-colored fruit that gave the place its name. Lighting radiates gently outward from the kind of ultra-glam fixtures that makes ordinary-looking people look good and beautiful people look fabulous. Menu items include appetizers (the restaurant rather coyly refers to them as “foreplay”) such as crispy Vietnamese lobster rolls with mango-based sweet chile and avocado-minted melon relish, and citrus-cured yellowfin tuna tartare. For a main course, try cassia-smoked breast of chicken with sweet garlic potato purée; and Asian-herbed crusted Colorado lamb chops with garlic-flavored mashed potatoes and a sauce made from goat cheese, pulverized cucumbers, plum-flavored sake, and yogurt. Dessert might be a lemon-lime crème brûlée.

2 Tartak St. ☎ 787/728-3666. Reservations required. Main courses \$21–\$29. AE, DC, MC, V. Tues–Sat 6:30–11pm. Bus: T1 or A5.

**Yamato** ★ JAPANESE The artfully simple decor at Yamato shows the kind of modern urban minimalism that you might expect in an upscale California restaurant. Separate sections offer conventional seating at tables; at a countertop within view of a sushi display; or at seats around a hot grill where chefs shake, rattle, and sizzle their way through a fast but elaborate cooking ritual. Many visitors include at least some sushi with an entree such as beef sashimi with *tataki* sauce, shrimp tempura with noodle soup, filet mignon or chicken with shrimp or scallops, or several kinds of rice and noodle dishes. A more formal dress code is required.

In Wyndham El San Juan Hotel & Casino, Av. Isla Verde 6063. ☎ 787/791-1000. Reservations required. Sushi \$2.50–\$6 per piece; sushi and *teppanyaki* dinners \$25–\$41. AE, MC, V. Daily 6pm–midnight. Bus: A5.



**MODERATE**

**Momoyama** ★ JAPANESE Few other restaurants in Isla Verde are as indelibly associated with one dish: sushi pizza. The subject of rave reviews, it's made by deep-frying compressed rice into something akin to a pizza shell, which is layered with rows of salmon or tuna and garnished with fish roe, shaved ginger, and make-your-eyes-water wasabi. If you prefer your food cooked, you can head for one of several *teppanyaki* tables, where food is fast-cooked in front of you as part of a highly theatrical culinary show. Choices include chicken teriyaki with shrimp, soy-and-ginger chicken with filet mignon, and several kinds of tempura.

In the InterContinental San Juan Resort & Casino, Av. Isla Grande 187. ☎ 787/791-8883. Reservations recommended. Fixed-price lunches \$10–\$18; lunch and dinner main courses \$18–\$38. AE, MC, V. Mon–Fri noon–3pm and 5:30–11:30pm; Sat 5:30–11pm; Sun 11am–11pm. Bus: M7.

**The Ranch** AMERICAN/STEAK The posh Wyndham El San Juan Hotel scores an unlikely success with this irreverent, tongue-in-cheek eatery on its top (10th) floor. You'll be greeted with a hearty "Howdy, partner" and the jangling of spurs from a crew of denim-clad cowboys as you enter a replica of a corral in the North American West. Banquettes and barstools are upholstered in faux cowhide; the decor is appropriately macho and rough-textured, and even the cowgirls on duty are likely to lasso anyone they find particularly appealing. The cowboys sing as they serve your steaks, barbecued ribs, country-fried steaks, Tex-Mex fajitas, and enchiladas. Food that's a bit less beefy includes seared red snapper with a cilantro-laced *pico de gallo* sauce. Especially succulent are soft-shell crabs layered in a pyramid with blue and yellow tortillas. And if you want to buy a souvenir pair of cowboy spurs, you'll find an intriguing collection of Western accessories and uniforms for sale outside. Consider beginning your meal with any of 20 kinds of tequila cocktails at the Tequila Bar, which lies a few steps away, on the same floor.

In Wyndham El San Juan Hotel & Casino, Av. Isla Verde 6063. ☎ 787/791-1000. Reservations recommended at dinner Fri–Sat; otherwise, not necessary. Main courses \$15–\$32. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Tues–Thurs 4:30–11pm; Fri–Sat 4:30pm–midnight. Bus: A5.

**INEXPENSIVE**

**Ciao Mediterranean Café** ★★ *Kids* ITALIAN/SPANISH/SEAFOOD This is the most charming restaurant in Isla Verde, and it is one of our enduring favorites. It's draped with bougainvillea and set directly on the sands, attracting both hotel guests and

locals wandering in barefoot from the beach. The visual centerpiece is an open-air kitchen set within an oval-shaped bar. A crew of cheerfully animated chefs mingle good culinary technique with Latino theatricality.

Kid-friendly pizzas and pastas are popular here, and even more appealing are such dishes as seafood salad, wherein shrimp, scallops, calamari, peppers, onions, and lime juice create something you might expect in the south of Italy. *Kalamarakia tiganita* (Greek-style squid) consisting of battered and deep-fried squid served with ratatouille and spicy marinara sauce; rack of lamb with ratatouille, polenta, and Provençal herbs; and a mixed grill of seafood are evocative of what you'd expect in Marseilles, thanks to the roe-enhanced aioli and couscous.

In the InterContinental San Juan Resort & Casino, Av. Isla Grande. ☎ 787/791-6100. Reservations recommended for dinner. Pizzas and salads \$8–\$20; main courses \$14–\$28. AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm. Bus: M7.

### **Metropol** CUBAN/PUERTO RICAN/INTERNATIONAL

This is part of a restaurant chain known for serving the island's best Cuban food, although the chefs prepare a much wider range of dishes. Metropol is the happiest blend of Cuban and Puerto Rican cuisine we've ever had. The black-bean soup is among the island's finest, served in the classic Havana style with a side dish of rice and chopped onions. Endless garlic bread accompanies most dinners, including Cornish game hen stuffed with Cuban rice and beans or perhaps marinated steak topped with a fried egg (reportedly Castro's favorite). Smoked chicken and chicken-fried steak are also heartily recommended; portions are huge. Plantains, yuca, and all that good stuff accompany most dishes. Finish with a choice of thin or firm custard. Most dishes are at the low end of the price scale.

Club Gallistico, Av. Isla Verde. ☎ 787/791-4046. Main courses \$10–\$30. AE, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–10:30pm. Bus: C41, B42, or A5.