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## Saborea Puerto Rico A Culinary Experience

By *Maralyn D. Hill 'The Tandem Traveler'*

Over several decades, I've visited Puerto Rico, explored and made many interesting discoveries. None of my prior trips prepared me for its annual Saborea Puerto Rico—A Culinary Experience. Puerto Rico has so much more to offer than I could begin to imagine. I'd certainly encourage those who enjoy culinary travel to put it on their calendar for next year. It will take place April 1-3, 2011 at the same place, Punta del Escambro, San Juan.

Saborea Puerto Rico is the largest culinary event in the Caribbean. A portion of its earnings goes towards education for tourism industry employees.

This event is open to the public and draws more than 7,000. As crowded as that sounds, it does not get in the way of tasting and sampling as much as you want, as well as talking to chefs and suppliers.

In addition to experiencing Saborea, we were fortunate to be whisked off to many other places, which I'd recommend and plan to return to on my own. As a member of 35 global gastronomy and travel journalists, we were exposed to a crammed, packed showcase of Puerto Rican cuisine and how it has evolved. From famous roast pork and various fish stews and rice dishes, we discovered brilliant samples of their global contemporary cuisine.

We were both enthralled and delighted. I was fortunate, as Michelle Winner, Vice President of the International Food Wine & Travel Writers Association, was also attending. So together, we could cover it for IFWTWA. How pleased we were to be asked to judge the first competition. But, we were not alone and many of us were judges, along with Stephen Bassman of Frommer's Travel Guides; travel guide writer Zain Deane of Vis A is Magazine; French travel impresario André Gayot; Laura Kalehoff, Senior Editor of Self Magazine; Jolene Thym of the Oakland Tribune; Tara Bench, Food and Entertaining Editor of Ladies Home Journal; Aldo Vogrig, Creative Director of Argentina's Vinos y Sabores; Katie Kackenmeister, Associate Editor of Prevention Magazine; Robin Daniel Frommer of Grafenstein; and others.

There were 28 of the best local chefs, along with 12 colleagues from the United States and Europe (many from the Food Network and Bravo TV), demonstrating their interpretations of Puerto Rican and global cuisine. In addition, between 30-40 chefs, and 60 exhibitors served tastes of everything imaginable until our hearts were content and our tummies were full.

This event took place on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, but guess what? The party started early. On Friday evening, there was "Rums of Puerto



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Rico Beach Soirée,” open to the public. So attendees tasted exquisite rums of Puerto Rico, as well as sampling many outstanding food stations in between, set up to accompany the rum. One way to describe the experience was just plain fun.

One portion of our group experienced a tour of the Bacardi Distillery. It sounded so good, I wished I had the time to squeeze it in. Instead, I opted to start the day at the surfing class at Pine Grove Beach. What an experience!

After this fun filled morning, we were off to a luncheon at the San Juan Water & Beach Club Hotel. In addition to being in a prime location, Puerto Rican chef Giovanna Huyke, host of the television show “Giovanna’s kitchen,” provided a cooking demonstration. Then we continued with a luncheon feast. It was prepared by Héctor Santiago, owner of Pura Vida in Atlanta, GA, and Ernesto Ruiz, Executive Chef of the San Juan Water & Beach Club Hotel, along with Luis “Apa” Ramos. The luncheon was aptly named “The Cuisine of Puerto Rico.” Naturally, this was all accompanied by Ahmed Naveira, Rums of Puerto Rico ambassador, who prepared creative cocktails with a variety of Puerto Rican rums.

We stayed at the new Sheraton Hotel in the Convention District. For meetings, it was ideal. One night, we went to Latin Roots for dinner and salsa lessons. Located in “Old Town,” it draws many tourists. At Budatai, we experienced an exceptional lunch while overlooking the water. One of Chef Robert Trevino’s creative offerings was seasoned chicken with flying fish roe. Dining that evening at the InterContinental with Executive Chef Hector Campos was an innovative experience. From Europe, he offered Mushroom Risotto and Codfish Bayaldi, a J-French Wedding Appetizer from Japan, and a Cream of Eggplant Soup from the Middle East. Each dish was from a different InterContinental Hotel.

We toured Old San Juan with its Spanish influence and charm. Finding little hideaways was a benefit, since our group included a writer who visited Puerto Rico every month.

The next evening, our gala dinner at Koco in the El San Juan was an outstanding and memorable part of our Saborea experience. Everything about it was special—a trademark the El San Juan has maintained for decades.

When Saborea was over, a few of us went on to experience Vieques. We boarded a Seaborne prop-plane for this 8-mile flight. The newly opened “W” hotel was our destination and had its own welcome terminal at the Vieques airport. While our small group enjoyed refreshments, our bags were loaded into a van to be waiting for us when we checked into the hotel.

This “W” hotel brought a smile to our faces. The settees, chairs and couches were low, with more pillows to welcome us than we could have imagined. Its gilded mirrors and graphic prints were prevalent through the entire property. Our rooms were stunning. It’s amazing what attracts different people, but I loved the use of various sized doorknobs as hat, clothes and towel hangers—decorative and functional.

When we ventured outside to the hotel’s most inviting patio and proceeded to look over the cliff, the most gorgeous beach invited and awaited us.

However, it was early in the day and we were off to Abe’s Snorkeling and Bio Bay tours. Michelle and I had both signed up for snorkeling. Abe gave everyone a class and he was as thorough as a drill sergeant, with the same personality. The up side was we learned a lot and covered all safety angles.

Anyone who knows me knows I dislike putting my head under water. The only other place I have successfully snorkeled was the Great Barrier Reef. But I believe in taking part in all that a press trip offers, so snorkeling was part of it. Now, the next glitch was kayaking. I had never done that. Fortunately, Michelle and I partnered and we kayaked to the snorkeling area, keeping up with the group. Thus, I managed to get out and back in the kayak as well as snorkel, providing a memorable experience.

After two hours of a workout in the water, we went back to the “W” to enjoy lunch with Chef Dagan Lynn at its Alan Ducasse



[Maralyn Hill & Brenda Hill](#)

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restaurant, Mix On The Beach. After lunch, we had time to tour the Spa Chakra and enjoy the pool. That evening, we were off again for another kayak experience. I have to say, I enjoyed this one tremendously, as we went to the Bio Luminescent Bay. It was amazing. We paddled toward Abe's headlight, which was our goal.

When our paddles, or any part of our bodies touched the water, they glowed. There are very few of these phenomenon's worldwide, and the one in Vieques is known to be one of the largest and brightest. The glow was a result of microscopic plankton fed on by tiny shrimp. This chemical built-in defense generated a



glow that lasted only seconds. Any activity in the water caused this glow, which was beautiful and harmless to both participants and the organism. Some dove in and I eked my way over the side for a short swim that seemed magical.

Naturally, after all this activity, we were hungry again and stopped at El Patio. This was one of those places you might have hesitated to try, but they obviously had customers. The owner, Sonia Romero and her Argentinean chef, Carlos Alzogaray, prepared a feast. We enjoyed a lemon seafood ceviche, glazed beef, tender shrimp and plenty to drink.

We returned late to our beautiful rooms and I arose early to walk the beach before leaving. I would have loved to enjoy a few restful days at the "W" and would return in a heartbeat.

Next, we flew to Ceiba on the eastern end of Puerto Rico. Michelle was scheduled to go horseback riding and I was scheduled to



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