

IMPERATIVES

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Home Cooking

LOCAL FLAVOR

THE PLANTAIN, THAT GLUEY cousin to the common banana, is the (slightly bent) pillar of Dominican cooking. “We eat plantains for breakfast, lunch and dinner,” laughs Nivia Piña, co-owner of Merengue, a popular Dominican restaurant in Roxbury. “For breakfast we boil them. For lunch and dinner we fry them ripe or green. We make mofongo,” a sort of garlicky plantain mash.

But a plantain is nothing without rice and beans, or steak and onions, or fried chicken chunks, or empanadas. Piña, a

Puerto Rican native, and her Dominican-born husband, Héctor, have built a “mini-industry” on the basis of such dishes. In 15 years, they’ve grown from a bumpy start as a local fry shop into a 90-seat restaurant with a catering arm and 13 employees. Héctor, 50, started Merengue without even knowing how to cook. “But he knew how to eat!” teases his wife, 34, a Brandeis graduate with a master’s in biochemistry.

“It’s a misconception that people have about Latino food, that they think it’s

going to be hot,” says Piña, who oversees the catering business while studying for a master’s in education. The primary condiments she uses are olive oil, garlic and oregano. It’s proved a successful recipe, as Merengue has reached past Roxbury’s Latino enclave to attract regulars from as far away as Providence and New Hampshire. Still, the restaurant has a budget for donations to local charities, and Héctor sits on the board of Project Right. Says Piña, “Roxbury is our community.”

ANDREW RIMAS