

One delicious night in Puerto Rico

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It's our last night in San Juan and we have, as Anthony Bourdain likes to say, no reservations. Up for anything, we're ready to move beyond Avenida Ashford's casino hotels and Old San Juan's cobblestoned charms. Go where the locals go, we were urged. Go to [La Placita](http://placitasanturce.com/) [http://placitasanturce.com/].

The walk from our oceanfront resort takes less than 20 minutes, over one short bridge, alongside a highway, past darkened and eerily quiet side streets. We've entered Santurce, a residential neighbourhood whose rough industrial edges form a convenient boundary between it and the posh macaron purveyors and jewellery emporiums of Condado.

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At its core is La Placita, the nickname for the city's Plaza del Mercado. Established more than 100 years ago, it's still a bustling produce market by day. During the past few years, though, its head house and plaza have morphed into the nexus of an evening al fresco party that gets going on Wednesday nights and reaches far into the weekend.

On this Saturday, backed by the sounds of a raucous salsa ensemble, women gossip over mojitos at outdoor cafés and young men tipsily balance empanadas and Medalla beer dispensed from the dozen or so kiosks that ring the square.

Watching it all: tourists. Not many, not yet – just the few in search of great food, who heard they could nosh their way around stalls set up under the arches of the old market, or enjoy some of the hottest restaurants in town.

Credit for the area's renaissance goes to the eponymous [Jose Enrique](http://joseenriquepr.com/) [http://joseenriquepr.com/], which opened in 2007 after its James Beard Award-nominated chef/owner returned to his native Puerto Rico. Named a "best new chef" in 2013 by Food & Wine magazine, Enrique, who did stints in New Orleans and New York, most recently opened an eatery at [El Blok](http://www.elblok.com/) [http://www.elblok.com/], a swanky new hotel on

Vieques Island.

In Santurce, things are more informal. The restaurant does not take reservations, and as we approach the signless shack in which it's housed, a verandah full of cocktail-imbibers has beaten us to the, er, punch.

Someone suggests we hang out at the bar and sample from its menu instead.

This evening, perfectly fried fish cakes – dorado with mashed sweet potato – are so good, we order them twice. Combined with a few other tapas, including a salad of rice, mango and arugula, they are enough to make a meal. A stand-up one – literally.

Santurce, San Juan's most crowded and densely populated district, has long been on its way to becoming the city's hippest. Like many such neighbourhoods before it, young artists have led the change, so the area is populated with galleries.

Intrepid arts lovers should return by day to check out two museums located in historic buildings. [Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico](#) [<http://mapr.org/en>] surveys native work starting from the 17th century, while Museo de Arte Contemporaneo focuses on mixed media installations and videos.

Art is all around, though, thanks to a mural project that's transformed desolate buildings into strikingly adorned canvases.

There is even a regular cinema-under-the-stars program, started by a local filmmaker in an empty lot on Calle Loiza, the area's main drag. The street has a gritty vibe that mixes the old-time mundane (pawn shops, beauty salons) with the indie (designer boutiques, veggie cafés). Not far, a few women's ateliers have opened on Avenue de Diego in the arts corridor, home to several performing venues.

For us, it's all to be explored some other time. We push our way through the throng between Jose Enrique's bar and the open doors that lead to the plaza and see that a fine drizzle has begun. Grabbing a cab as it unloads a tumble of new arrivals, we say good night to La Placita.

Behind us, lit by our high beams and the fuzzy amber glow of street lamps, the party goes on.

The writer travelled as a guest of the [Condado Vanderbilt Hotel](#)

[<http://www.condadovanderbilt.com/default-en.html>]. It did not review or approve this article.

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