

EATING

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EATING

If you haven't heard of Rio's excellent restaurants, you're in good company. Despite top-notch chefs, ethnically diverse cuisine and a rich bounty from farm, forest and sea, the city hasn't earned much of a culinary reputation abroad. Inside Brazil it's a different story, with Cariocas (residents of Rio) convinced that there's no place quite like home for sitting down to a bang-up meal – whether that entails juicy grilled steaks, coconut-flavored seafood stews or glistening slices of sashimi and plump sushi rolls.

It's easy to eat well in Rio, no matter what your budget or your dietary restrictions (although counting calories is daunting in this city of temptation). Fresh tropical fruit is the basic building block for a healthy meal. Most Cariocas start their mornings off with a stop at the local juice bar, where they can enjoy two or three dozen varieties of vitamin-filled elixirs, including Amazonian flavors such as *açaí* (juice made from an Amazonian berry), *cupuaçu* (Amazonian fruit), *carimbola* (star fruit) and others. You'll also find the best restaurants make brilliant use of passion fruit, mango and other fruits. For a bit of caffeine, Cariocas opt for a *cafézinho*, short, black, strong and often quite sweet coffee.

At lunchtime, locals favor per-kilo restaurants, which range from simple, working-class affairs to sumptuous buffets lined with fresh salads, grilled meats, pastas, seafood dishes and a table packed with desserts. Like elsewhere, dinner is often as much about socializing as it is about eating, and the city has some magical settings for lingering over a long meal. You can dine at a sidewalk café overlooking the beach, book an outdoor table at a hidden spot high up in Santa Teresa or join the din of fellow diners in a traditional old-fashioned *boteco*, which are casual, open-sided bars scattered all over town.

Variety comes in many forms in Rio – which is not surprising given the large immigrant population. Lebanese, Japanese, Spanish, German, French and Italian cuisines are among the standouts, though there's an equally broad selection of regional Brazilian restaurants. Diners can sample rich, shrimp-filled *moqueca* (seafood stew cooked in coconut milk) from Bahia or tender *carne seca* (jerked meat) covered in *farofa* (manioc flour), a staple in Minas Gerais. Daring palates can venture north into Amazonia, enjoying savory *tacacá* (manioc paste, lip-numbing leaves of the vegetable *jambu*, and dried shrimp) or *tambaqui* (a large Amazonian fish) and other meaty fishes from the mighty Amazon. Cowboys and the *gaúcho* from the south bring the city its *churrascarias*, Brazil's famous all-you-can-eat barbecue restaurants where crisply dressed waiters bring piping-hot spits of fresh roasted meats to your table. Wherever you end up, try to pace yourself. Brazilian dishes are normally quite large – and some dishes are meant for two. When in doubt, ask the server to clarify.

Cafés, patisseries and ice-cream shops are also an integral part of the Rio experience. The leafy back streets of the Zona Sul (particularly restaurant-filled Ipanema) are great places to recharge with a cappuccino, a slice of chocolate torte or a creamy scoop of *sorvete* (ice cream). Juice bars whip up grilled sandwiches, and light bites like *pão de queijo* (cheese-filled rolls), but for the best assortment of snacks, plan a meal at the neighborhood *boteco*. *Salgados* (bar snacks) come in many satisfying, highly addictive, (and, yes unhealthy) varieties, like *bolinhos de bacalhau* (deep-fried codfish balls), *pasteis* (crispy pastries filled with meat or cheese) or *coxinhas* (pear-shaped cornmeal balls filled with chicken).

Those who'd like to get into the cuisine scene should check out *Eat Smart in Brazil* by Joan and David Peterson. It includes an overview of Brazil's culinary heritage and regional cuisines as well as recipes and a detailed glossary.

WHERE TO EAT

Ipanema and Leblon are the best places to browse for a memorable meal. There you'll find Rio's star chefs, beautifully set dining rooms and the fashion-conscious crowds that fill them. You'll also enjoy excellent meals in assorted Copacabana restaurants – though

not in the most obvious places (not in the beachside strip for example). Other gems are hidden in the streets of Jardim Botânico, high up in Santa Teresa and along the narrow pedestrian lanes in Centro. For details on top streets for mealtime browsing, see boxed text, [p129](#).