

# The Virgin Islands Consortium

## Crucianomics Holiday Edition: "My Coquito, I Do It With Love"

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When Christmastime rolls around in St. Croix there are some things that locals just expect: a Stanley and the Ten Sleepless Knights neighborhood serenade, pageantry, music competitions, and well, coquito.

Lots of it.

In an article on [The Latin Kitchen website](#), Cristina Gonzalez writes of coquito:

*Often imitated but never replicated, your abuela, tia, or padrino has the best coquito recipe in all the land. It packs a punch, it's indulgent and rich, and doesn't hold back on*

*the rum. Guarded like the family jewels, the recipe makes its first appearance during Thanksgiving, and then moves on to be the star of the show at Christmas dinner, and fades into the night by Dia de los Reyes.*

Coquito, which means "little coconut," is a traditional Christmas drink mostly found in Puerto Rico, but can also be found throughout the Caribbean. It is often compared to eggnog, and traditional ingredients call for coconut milk, coconut cream, sweetened condensed milk, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, and rum. The sweet and flavorful cocktail is often served in small portions as an after-dinner dessert drink.

It seems natural that the festive beverage would appear in St. Croix, as many people from Puerto Rico migrated to Santa Cruz and brought with them their delicious traditions.

So, this story is sort of about coquito, but not really. It's more about the efforts of one passionate St. Croix business owner who loves people and loves what she does--making coquito--a talent she calls "a gift from God."



Only eight years ago did Renee Jackson, a native Crucian, began making the drink after she inquired of her co-worker, Carmen Ortiz, who is the current owner of El Flamboyant Restaurant in the Estate Profit area.

"I can't tell anybody that she gave me a recipe, she just said, 'Oh, it's simple,' and she told me to put in your coconut, et cetera. And one day, I went home and I tried it and I was like, 'hmmm'. And like I said, she never gave me no recipe, so when anybody ask me about coquito, [I always say] my coquito making is a gift from God."

To understand why Jackson calls her coquito making an inspired gift, you'll have to understand that she does not come from a Hispanic background and had no prior experience making the drink before the conversation with her co-worker in 2006, something she likes to point out.

Furthermore, in order to get a full appreciation of Jackson's gift, well, you'll have to taste her product, too (clears throat).

The decadent beverage is rich, creamy and sweet. Robust and bursting with a medley of flavor, it has lots of yummy cinnamon and it goes down smooth. And, yes, it has quite a 'kick' to it.

Jackson said when she first started making the drink casually at home, she was just "playing with it," and her late father became her first customer and biggest fan.

"My father, every year, used to come over with his cup and he would buy my coquito, actually buy my coquito from me," she recalled, laughing.

"My father would say, 'This is good, you know'," she continued.

It wasn't long before Jackson said her father began inviting his friends to purchase his daughter's drink.

"So, when I see they start liking it, I said, well you know, 'I could sell this,' and I started selling it," Jackson explained. "My dad was my biggest customer and he was my motivation."

After those early sales, Jackson said her home-based business began to take off.

"The little business grew, but I never thought that my coquito would be what it is today with my label and I'm actually really selling this product like I'm selling it," she said.

Jackson is the current 2013-2014 reigning champ of St. Croix's annual Coquito Competition, which is scheduled to take place at the La Rein Chicken Shack on [redacted] she said her efforts only paid off after two failed attempts [redacted] about five years ago.



Moko Jumbie dances with Jackson's coquito.

"I went the first year, I participated, I didn't win, but I had so much fun; everybody there was so nice. I love everybody at Chicken Shack," she said.

Her second attempt at the competition was also unsuccessful, but Jackson said it didn't discourage her because "every year I went, I would sell my coquito in abundance. It grew and everybody just enjoyed it," she said. "My coquito, I do it for fun and I do it with love, I

don't do it for money."

Then, last year, it was Jackson's time to shine when she took home the competition's top honor. And she says she plans to participate in the competition again this year.

"I'm not participating just so I could win, I go because I enjoy the people that's there and I feel like all of us are making coquito and my coquito might be different from someone else's coquito," she said. "People happen to enjoy my coquito and I thank God for that."

As for the ingredients in Jackson's coquito? She says her mixture is "simple."

"I can tell you I put in my coconut, I put in my essence, I put in my milk and I only use Cruzan Rum," she explained. "I believe in supporting local, adding that she also purchases the labels for her bottles from local printers, A-Plus Signs Shop.

She further explained that she prefers to use cream of coconut rather than the freshly grated coconut that many other coquito makers use. She also does not use eggs in her mixture, as it causes the beverage to spoil faster.

About four years ago, Jackson said she officially obtained a business license and health card to operate Crucian Paradise Drinks lawfully, something she says she is happy she did and encourages other coquito makers to do the same.

However, Jackson said the realities of operating a small business in the Virgin Islands, as much as she loves it, are harsh and profits are marginal.

"Everything is so costly and for me selling my coquito at the price that I'm selling it, it's not really a gain to me," she said. "I make a profit, but it's not really a gain because the cream of coconut is really expensive, it's like a hundred and something dollars for nine of them."

She said a six-pack case of Cruzan Rum is approximately \$80, plus the additional costs of purchasing milk and the various essences, such as cinnamon and vanilla, really add up.

Then, there's the cost of the 1 liter bottles she ships in.

"If I bring in a pallet of bottles, it costs me no less than four hundred to five hundred dollars just to clear bottles," she explained, and this does not include the purchase of the bottles themselves.

"So when you see us, and there's a lot of people making coquito now, and they tell you \$20 for a bottle or \$15, don't take it for granted because it's very expensive. Not just for myself, but for all of us coquito makers."

Jackson credits much of her success to her business partner and fiance, Garry Richardson. When the couple met, she was already a successful coquito operator, but she affectionately calls him the "strong arm" of the business.

"I could be tired, because I take care of my mom, and I would tell him do this, I need you to do that. Just put in this or that and I'll go take a rest. When I wake up, he'll have my



bottles sterilized, cleaned and dried out. He puts in a little stuff, but he doesn't know all the ingredients, you can't let everybody know all the ingredients," she laughed, adding that he also helps with deliveries.

Currently, Jackson still makes her award-winning coquito out of her home, but she hopes to expand the business and open a small storefront one day.

"I could see God giving me a little spot down Frederiksted by the boardwalk and when people come in off that ship, I could say, 'Welcome to St. Croix, let me let you get a taste of our island.' And, not just a taste of our island out of the bottle, but with love and make people feel welcomed coming to St. Croix," she said.



But, in the meantime, besides private deliveries, customers can find Jackson's coquito in the shop at the One Love service station in Golden Rock, she can be found vending at various events around St. Croix, and she says the owners of Plaza East have also offered her coquito a place on their shelves.

"It doesn't matter to me to put it in the stores because I like selling it," she said. "I sell it to you with a smile and I like to look at people's face when they taste it. I enjoy selling it very much."

Jackson's coquito has even made its way to St. Thomas and is being sold at the seaplane terminal on the island.

"I would like to see it at the Yacht Haven in St. Thomas in some of those souvenir stores there," she said.

While Jackson says she would be happy to see expansion within the territory because she prefers to "keep my circles small," Richardson has bigger plans for the family business.

"I would just like to see it reach to a stateside level," he said. "As the years go by and I see her doing it, every year, it becomes more known and more popular. And the fact that she has won the competition, it's a process that is gradually taking its course. Like she's said, she didn't even think she would be able to handle this and there she is. It's been proven that she can't make enough."

More than anything, the warmhearted businesswoman, overflowing with huge amounts of gratitude, wants to let her customers know how much she loves and appreciates them.

"I love my customers and I love people," she said. "There is no me without you. It means more to me that people enjoy my coquito than the money. When I give my coquito to a customer and they say, 'I really enjoy your coquito,' it makes me feel good."

For year-round orders of Jackson's homemade coquito, call Crucian Paradise Drinks at 340-626-0420 or visit the company's facebook page [here](#).

*Feliz Navidad!*

*Crucianomics is a VI Consortium original series highlighting everyday Crucians doing entrepreneurial 'tings'.*

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