

# HOW TO EAT A GUAVA

from *When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago

1 *Barco que no anda, no llega a puerto.*  
*A ship that doesn't sail, never reaches port.*

2 **T**here are guavas at the Shop & Save. I pick one the size of a tennis ball and finger the prickly stem end. It feels familiarly bumpy and firm. The guava is not quite ripe; the skin is still a dark green. I smell it and imagine a pale pink center, the seeds tightly embedded in the flesh.

3 A ripe guava is yellow, although some varieties have a pink tinge. The skin is thick, firm, and sweet. Its heart is bright pink and almost solid with seeds. The most delicious part of the guava surrounds the tiny seeds. If you don't know how to eat a guava, the seeds end up in the crevices between your teeth.

4 When you bite into a ripe guava, your teeth must grip the bumpy surface and sink into the thick edible skin without hitting the center. It takes experience to do this, as it's quite tricky to determine how far beyond the skin the seeds begin.

5 Some years, when the rains have

been plentiful and the nights cool, you can bite into a guava and not find many seeds. The guava bushes grow close to the ground, their branches laden with green then yellow fruit that seem to ripen overnight. These guavas are large and juicy, almost seedless, their roundness enticing you to have one more, just one more, because next year the rains may not come.

6 As children, we didn't always wait for the fruit to ripen. We raided the bushes as soon as the guavas were large enough to bend the branch.

7 A green guava is sour and hard. You bite into it at its widest point, because it's easier to grasp with your teeth. You hear the skin, meat, and seeds crunching inside your head, while the inside of your mouth explodes in little spurts of sour.

8 You grimace, your eyes water, and your cheeks disappear as your lips purse into a tight O. But you have another and then another, enjoying the crunchy sounds, the acid taste, the gritty texture of the unripe center. At night, your mother makes you drink castor oil,\* which she says tastes

\* *castor oil* — oil made from castor beans, used as a home remedy for digestive problems

better than a green guava. That's when you know for sure that you're a child and she has stopped being one.

- 9 I had my last guava the day we left Puerto Rico. It was large and juicy, almost red in the center, and so fragrant that I didn't want to eat it because I would lose the smell. All the way to the airport I scratched at it with my teeth, making little dents in the skin, chewing small pieces with my front teeth, so that I could feel the texture against my tongue, the tiny pink pellets of sweet.

10 Today, I stand before a stack of dark green guavas, each perfectly round and hard, each \$1.59. The one in my hand is tempting. It smells faintly of late summer afternoons and hopscotch under the mango tree. But this is autumn in New York, and I'm no longer a child.

- 11 The guava joins its sisters under the harsh fluorescent lights of the exotic fruit display. I push my cart away, toward the apples and pears of my adulthood, their nearly seedless ripeness predictable and bittersweet.

## Meet the Writer

### Esmeralda Santiago

#### Between Two Worlds

- 12 Esmeralda Santiago (1948– ) grew up in Puerto Rico, the eldest of eleven children. At the age of thirteen, she moved to New York City with her mother, her brothers, and her sisters. Living in Puerto Rico and in New York, she says, has to some extent made her feel that she doesn't quite fit into either culture—a feeling she highlights in the title of her memoir, *When I Was Puerto Rican*. In a note to readers of the book she writes:

- 13 ““ When I returned to Puerto Rico after living in New York for seven years, I was told I was no longer Puerto Rican because my Spanish was rusty, my gaze too direct,

my personality too assertive. . . . Yet, in the United States, my darkness, my accented speech, my frequent lapses into confused silence between English and Spanish identified me as foreign, non-American. In writing the book I wanted to get back to that feeling of Puertoricanness I had before I came here. Its title reflects who I was then, and asks, who am I today? ””

- 14 After graduating from Harvard University, Santiago earned a master's degree from Sarah Lawrence College. She currently lives in Westchester County, New York. Now, after years of struggling with not being entirely at home in her two cultures, Santiago says she defines *home* “as the place where I am.”