

Foods Consumed by the Healthiest People, Part 5: The Nicoya Peninsula

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Editor's note: Review parts 1-4 of Dr. Andersen's series [here](#).

The Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica was a surprise discovery when researchers from the National Geographic Society began their study of longevity hot spots (aka, blue zones) around the world. When they heard the region had a reputation for healthy aging, they suspected it wouldn't stand up to their scientific scrutiny. However, this changed when they reviewed the quality work of demographer Dr. Rosero-Bixby.

Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica

Categorized as a hot, dry, forest climate, the region has no real summer or winter. For 11 months out of the year, the temperature ranges from a high of mid-80s to a low of mid-70s, with one month, January, being significantly cooler. There is a 7-8-month rainy season yielding approximately 60 inches a year.

Measured geographically, the occupants of the 70-80-mile long, 30-mile-wide peninsula reside in the world's largest longevity zone. Residents have the lowest middle aged mortality on Earth. When the average Nicoyan celebrates their 60th birthday, they are 2-4 times more likely (depending on the source) to reach age 90 than Americans are, even though their health care expenditures are 84 percent less per person per year. What's more, once they reach 90, their life expectancy continues to exceed the life expectancy of American 90-year-olds, even with our advanced end-of-life treatment.

Like other areas of healthy aging, Nicoyans remain physically active throughout their lives. They don't spend their days sitting and looking at screens, nor do they hire others to take care of their homes and yards. They do have social interaction with family, friends and church.

The Nicoyan Diet

Nicoyans eat a large breakfast, a moderate lunch and a small dinner. Corn tortillas (made at home) accompany most meals. Black beans, white rice, eggs and fruit are dietary staples. Longevity journalist Dan Buettner states they also eat a lot of squash. Compared to other blue zones, their diet includes the most meat (mainly chicken and pork), eggs (mostly fried) and corn (mainly tortillas).

They also eat more fruit than the other blue zones, including mango, papaya, passion fruit, plantains (generally fried), mamones, guava, marañón (the seed is a cashew), pejibaye, starfruit, zapote, coconut, pineapple, cantaloupe, blackberries, lemons and limes.

The water in the Nicoya Peninsula is very high in minerals, especially calcium, due to the region's limestone bedrock. Costa Rica is known for coffee and the people of Nicoya make up the third blue

zone (along with Sardinia and Ikaria) to drink it daily. They sweeten their coffee with raw sugar cane.

Blemishes

The politically incorrect finding ignored by everyone is the presence of pesticides. Although many Web sites say the people of the Nicoya Peninsula eat organic produce, pesticides are used throughout Costa Rica. In fact, thousands are poisoned each year. Agricultural statistics from the World Health Organization show that Costa Rica uses more pesticides per acre of cropland than any country on Earth.

Ironically, their pesticide use supports what I've been telling patients and colleagues for many years: Eating organic produce is a little healthier than eating commercial produce - but eating commercial produce is much healthier than eating no produce at all. In the case of the people of the Nicoya region, there is no data available regarding their level of exposure - only that pesticides are essentially unregulated and commonly used throughout Costa Rica.

By the way, the other finding that gets little mention from many alternative sources, but has been covered by investigators, involves vitamin use. Like the blue zones in Japan, Italy and Greece, the people of Nicoya do not use nutritional supplements.

Resources

- Rosero-Bixby L. [The exceptionally high life expectancy of Costa Rican nonagenarians.](#) *Demography*, 2008;45(3):673-91.
- Casselman A. "Long-Lived Costa Ricans Offer Secrets to Reaching 100." *National Geographic News*, April 14, 2008.
- Costa Rica - Statistics. World Health Organization: www.who.int/countries/cri/en/.
- Rosero-Bixby L, Fernández X, Dow WH. CRELES: Costa Rican Longevity and Healthy Aging Study, 2005. Study conducted by the University of Costa Rica's Centro Centroamericano de Población (CCP), in collaboration with the Instituto de Investigaciones en Salud.
- [Agriculture statistics: pesticide use by country.](#) NationMaster.com.

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