

BBC-4: Sweetness and Desire: A Short History of Sugar
Series 1, episode 4: Sugar Wars (Jan 25, 2018)

Female Speaker: So I'm making it Cuban flan not to be confused with an English flan or a French flan is basically just a form of crème caramel that's popular throughout the Spanish speaking world and this Cuban version requires one whole tin of evaporated milk, one whole tin of sweetened condensed milk, five eggs and then a lot of sugar.

When a cooking Cuban makes this dessert in their own kitchen following a family recipe, it's a personal act. But what lies behind this confection, are vast geopolitical forces, sugar shaped the world we live in and nowhere did this play out more fiercely than in the West Indies.

Male Speaker-1: With the rise of Sugar as a mass consumer product in the 18th Century, the Caribbean plantations become hugely important parts of their wider European empire which they sti

Female Speaker: Professor David Lambert is Director of the Center of Caribbean Studies at the University of Warwick.

Male Speaker-1: Jamaica, Barbados in the British case, Martinique and *[indiscernible]* *[00:01:04]* in the French case. The Caribbean becomes a vital theatre of war as each side seeks to capture or destroy its enemy's colonies or blockade them. The best example of this is the seven years war from 1756 to 1763 and this picture is Britain against France with a shifting cast of allies, it's fought in Europe, it's fought in North America and it's fought in the Caribbean. Britain invades and seeks to conquer a series of French-West Indian Island sugar colonies as well as the Spanish Cuba.

Female Speaker: The desire of Great Western powers to seize control of sugar was not just economically motivated, it was also political.

Ric Morris: The world powers that occupied or owned Cuba, as it were, over the centuries, they were much more interested, I think, in the symbolism of being able to control that much economic power. Britain, France, Spain, Netherlands were all wanting a piece of Caribbean real estate. My name is Ric Morris. I am a Professor of Spanish and Linguistics. And I've also done some research on Cuban history, specifically the history of sugar. There was a very brief period in the 1700s where Britain actually seized Havana for about 14 months and it was kind of an interesting little foray, because the spoils of that particular war involved Spain trading Havana for Florida which was much more strategic in many ways for Britain, but it also shows just how strategic Havana was. Cuba did grow the best sugarcane in the world. You would plant a cutting of cane and you could get in some places 30 years of crop. It was a fusion reactor from an agricultural standpoint.

Female Speaker: This wasn't the only bid of sugar real estate to change hands, a series of diplomatic treaties saw the major empires swapping sugar colonies almost like trading cogs.

Male Speaker-1: Britain returns the French colonies of Martinique and Guadeloupe. In exchange France agrees to cede its territory in Canada. At the time, some critics of the

BBC-4: Sweetness and Desire: A Short History of Sugar
Series 1, episode 4: Sugar Wars (Jan 25, 2018)

government believed that was a very bad diplomatic effort even though they'd won the war, they'd given up the prizes of Guadeloupe and Martinique for the icy wastes of Quebec it was seen. But one of the reasons why the British government did that was because the British planters in the older British colonies did not want Martinique and Guadeloupe to now enjoy the same privileged access to the British market. So they would rather effectively sacrifice the national interest for their more narrow interest of maintaining the price of sugar.

Female Speaker: There is a little golden crescent now developing in the pan of caramel, you can see it's just slowly turning from pure melted sugar into something darker. This sweet substance would continue to be a source of friction for Britain and its colonial rivals throughout the 18th Century and when those tensions flared up next, the map of the world will be dramatically redrawn.

Male Speaker-2: If we were in London in the 18th Century thinking about the empire, we would not be thinking about the North American colonies that ultimately become the United States.

Female Speaker: Robert Allison is a Historian of the American War of Independence.

Male Speaker-2: Britain's North American colonies really were important only as they related to this whole Atlantic economy in which sugar was the staple. One of the most important differences between the North American colonies, the West Indian colonies was that many of the men who own the estates, the plantations in the West Indies actually lived in London and that means a couple of things. Probably the most important one being they are much vocal interest in London than a New England interest or a Virginia interest, because they're there.

Female Speaker: But the British government's favoritism towards its sugar producing West Indian colonies over those in North America would have huge unintended consequences. A series of acts of parliament starting with the Molasses Act of 1733 imposed taxes on imports of molasses and sugar from non-English colonies. This may have benefited the West Indian sugar trade, but had ruinous consequences for British colonials in New England who made a living from turning molasses into rum, much of it shipped from French colonies. In 1764, the ineffective Molasses Act was replaced by the most strictly enforced Sugar Act.

Male Speaker-2: So the consequences of this initially with the Sugar Act, the Sugar Act de facto if you're engaged in the sugar trade, not everyone is. However, the merchants are making this argument not just we shouldn't be taxed because we're sugar merchants and we're doing a great thing for everybody and plus we are getting really rich. But they make it an ideological argument about who should have the power to tax us, to regulate us.

But then you see the Stamp Act affects just about everybody. If you buy a paradise or you get a marriage license, you have to pay this tax. Well, who voted for this? Parliament, 3,000 miles away, this underlying idea of Americans should be able to govern themselves

BBC-4: Sweetness and Desire: A Short History of Sugar
Series 1, episode 4: Sugar Wars (Jan 25, 2018)

because we always have. This is essentially the idea behind the American War for Independence and it all begins with their struggle over sugar. People used these same arguments for this resistance that were going to see expanding in 1765 and 1767 and then ultimately exploding in the next decade.

Female Speaker: Sugar wasn't just the spark that ignited the Wars of Independence, it would also have a pivotal effect on its outcome.

Male Speaker-2: Britain is trying to do something that is eminently doable, to win back the loyalty of these misguided Americans. But then things changed in 1778 when France joined the war, because now the French navy will be supporting American privateers in the West Indies. The French navy had been sent over and actually stops in Newport to consult with Washington and then it's on its way down to where the real action is. Washington has to really beg them to stop off in York Town to prevent the British from resupplying the base there. And then the French admiral goes along with this, but then he is off to continue the war against the British Empire and it's much more important that this war in the West Indies is one.

Female Speaker: That defeat of York Town marked the beginning of the end for Britain's rule in North America. There're myriad of reasons why the British lost the revolutionary war. But the choice to divert so many forces to the fight in the West Indies shows yet again the sugar interested trumped almost everything. The pan is now going in the oven for half an hour to 45 minutes. Overtime the British Imperial dominance of the sugar trade would decline. But what didn't stop was the power of sugar to create conflict. In the 20th Century, sugar again was at the heart of another imperial struggle, better known as the Cold War.

Ric Morris: There is a great Cuban historian named Manuel Moreno Fraginals and he summed it up brilliantly. He said the history of Cuba is the history of sugar. It's a much bigger statement than you might think, because to grow sugar and have it be profitable, it has to be very large scale. Cuba as a semi-independent country after 1898 becomes the sugar producing power house of the planet. One-third of the Cuban population is devoted to the sugar crop and almost all of the sugar grown in Cuba is going to the United States, 95% by the 1950s. To make matters even more interesting, the wages of these sugar laborers were pegged to the annual market price of sugar. So their livelihood sensed all of the fluctuations of Cuban sugar production. That would have been a really great arrangement if the price was always high. But the price was all over the place. The Cuban government frequently tried to intervene and manipulate the price. The American response was to tinker with tariffs. The system in Cuba was not designed to benefit Cuba. It was really only designed to benefit the United States and perhaps the businessmen who oversaw the industry.

Female Speaker: The story of building Cuban on rest, Castro, Che Guevara and all that is relatively familiar. What's less familiar is that it was sugar driving events, fermenting discontent. In Cuba, sugar became symbolic of the country's brittle dependence on the U.S.

BBC-4: Sweetness and Desire: A Short History of Sugar
Series 1, episode 4: Sugar Wars (Jan 25, 2018)

Ric Morris: There is a couple of other interesting effects that the revolution had related to sugar. There was a fair amount of military type incursion into Cuba in the years immediately following the triumph of the revolution in 1959...

Male Speaker-3: Impounded in Miami, one of the three B26s which bombed Cuban bases before the...

Ric Morris: ...mostly American exile incursions, but what's most interesting is that they did not go after military targets. They went after sugarcane fields. They set them ablaze. Now economically, this was a drop in the bucket. But it was very definitely a political attack probably to remind Cuba this is what you are.

Female Speaker: Ultimately Cuba would extricate itself from the U.S. This would initiate the chain of events leading to the Cuban missile crisis.

Ric Morris: Cuba had done a couple of social revisions.

Male Speaker-3: But the fiery bearded Castro is hardly shown words as he attacks what he calls United States Imperialism...

Ric Morris: There had also been some nationalizations of property, 70,000 acres of American sugar properties. At the beginning, the Soviet Union was skeptical of Fidel Castro, but these changes suggested that he might be leaning away from American style of capitalist system. The order of events is what's important here. Cuba reestablished its ties with the Soviet Union and then drops a really big bomb on the United States, the bomb that says we are expropriating all remaining American property. Within days, President Eisenhower said we will cancel the sugar quota for the remainder of 1960. Just a few days later the Soviet Union says we'll buy all 700,000 tons. Cuba played its cards very carefully, knowing that it was going to basically shut down the United States presence economically, that it had a deep-pocketed buyer so that its own economic livelihood could continue.

Female Speaker: Cuba had finally rested to sell free of the sugar trade that had kept it captive since the days of the Spanish empire even if freedom brought new complications. This history again underlines how the commercial power of sugar has so often been at odds with the nations and the people producing it.

Ric Morris: In Cuba, they don't talk about the revolution of 1959, they talk about the triumph of the revolution in 1959. They see the revolution has having been going on for centuries and just finally came to a head and resolved favorably in 1959.

Female Speaker: So the flan should have setup now in the fridge. It's a little bit flat, but it looks absolutely delicious. There is a pool of kind of amber caramel on top. Wow, that's so sweet. It's totally in that same flavor spectrum as dulce de leche, *[indiscernible]* *[00:13:05]* caramel. We could use a lot of that. I can totally see why this is the stuff of nostalgic in Cuban families. It's incredibly comforting. But I kind of have feeling it brings home another irony. The country may have escaped the imperial yolk of the U.S.,

BBC-4: Sweetness and Desire: A Short History of Sugar
Series 1, episode 4: Sugar Wars (Jan 25, 2018)

but it couldn't escape eating an Americanized diet. 43% of the Cuban populations are overweight or obese. America's political rule over Cuba was one thing, but it's still greater influence has been the cultural power of American ways of eating. This isn't just to of Cuba, but it's playing out across the world. The really elusive freedom for Cubans or anyone else will be freedom from sugar.