



At Home in Havana

Cuban cooking may be best known for its beans and rice, but it's all set to evolve – thanks to the *paladares* that's taking Havana by storm.

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Colors of Cuba: the famous Havana Club



Havana culinary scene: from a simple omelette dish (top left) to the ubiquitous beans and rice (middle left), and tomatoes (bottom right).

It's nearly nightfall in Old Havana and my stomach is growling, but when I look at the address of *La Mulata del Sabor* – “The Taste of La Mulata” in Spanish, this surely can't be right.

This isn't a restaurant; it is someone's home.

I knock quietly, hesitantly. The clatter of plates and faint strains of music stream onto the street. When the rickety door swings open, I instantly know that I've come to the right place.

I'm greeted by La Mulata herself – a gregarious Cuban woman with cocoa-colored skin, chestnut brown curls, and thick lips painted bright red like rubies. She invites me inside, where it looks as though the restaurant has been set up in her front living room.

There are only three tables, each covered in bright checkered tablecloths, and the walls plastered with photos of La Mulata posing with her customers. It's clear this place isn't a typical restaurant – this is where home-cooked comfort food is served with the secret ingredient of warm Cuban hospitality.

I've spent the entire day exploring the flavors of Havana – from a colossal breakfast of exotic fruits (think mango, guava, pineapple and sweet, pumpkin-like *mamey*) to freshly made *churros*, hot and spongy inside but crunchy on the outside. But through every finger-licking taste test, I've been waiting for this – dining inside a *paladar*, one of the country's many private residential restaurants.

The Warmth of Home

Paladares began in opposition to the Cuban government, when people set up secret restaurants inside their homes during the post-Soviet economic crisis in the 1990s. They were legalized soon after and are now all the rage in Havana, bringing new light to its normally lackluster dining scene.

Many have established themselves as gourmet restaurants, some are sticking to tradition, dishing up good ol' Creole home cooking, while others are coming up with new-age dishes like fried bananas stuffed with cheese and pork medallions with mango glaze.

La Mulata, however, has something else in mind. “I recommend *el pollo al limon, la especialidad de la casa*,” she tells me, gesticulating with her hands to show how she squeezes fresh lemon juice onto the oven-baked chicken. “It's my mother's recipe, it's what I grew up eating.” It seems as though my dish has already been chosen for me.

When the food arrives, I am overwhelmed by the monstrous portions. Like most typical meals in Cuba, my chicken is accompanied by black beans and rice – better known as *Moros y Cristianos* (translated to mean the Moors and the Christians, which like many Cuba dishes, traces its roots back to the Spanish colonial era). “You must eat everything on the plate,” says La Mulata, smiling and talking with a motherly tone. “I want to see the plates clean. *Limpio, limpio.*”

Streets of Havana: A vintage Chevrolet passing by the colonial buildings of Old Havana.



As I savor the zingy chicken, fluffy white rice and garlic-flavored beans, La Mulata tells me how her paladar came about. She spent thousands of dollars from her savings to transform her family house into a paladar. “It’s not glamorous or anything, but I love it. *Es mi casa*, it’s my home.”

Like other forward-thinking entrepreneurs in Cuba, La Mulata created her own business despite the restrictive communist regime. These days, she relies largely on a client base of expats, tourists and the few Cubans who can pay prices well beyond the pockets of most locals. “Life is not easy in Havana. Most Cubans make an income of around US\$10 a month, many of us cannot even afford to

even buy groceries at the supermarket.”

Just as she finishes her sentence, the lights go off and the entire house – and the city beyond – throbs in complete darkness. Blackouts such as these are common in Havana, but La Mulata and the other clients seem to be more than accustomed to it. The minute the power comes back on, upbeat Cuban salsa music crackles through the radio and La Mulata sashays into the kitchen singing and swaying her hips, ready to cook up a feast.

Tasting Cuba’s Heritage

While discovering new eats around the city over the next few days, one dish that catches my attention is *ropa vieja*, or “old clothes” in Spanish. It turns out to be a colorful dish of shredded pork resembling strips of rags swimming in a red bowl of *salsa criolla*, made from a rich tomato base, stewed peppers, onions and garlic. A single scoop of it in my mouth and a world of flavors explodes: from the sweetness of the tomatoes accentuated by the zing of the pepper to the tangy flavor of the pork.

With centuries of history behind it, this dish originated from the Canary Islands in Spain – the last port of call for Spanish ships enroute to the Americas during the colonial era. Today’s Cuba is still strongly influenced by the Canarian culture, with locals speaking a dialect very close to the Canarian dialect, and many of them taking pride in their Spanish heritage.

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Tracing its roots, Cuban cuisine is a beautiful concoction of Spanish, African, and Caribbean flavors. Many of their spices and techniques were adopted from the Spaniards and Africans, with some Caribbean influence in between. Modern day Cuban cuisine is a result of these eclectic combinations.

One excellent dish to showcase Cuba’s diverse cultural heritage is the *Creole Ajiaco*, a thick and explosive lava stew of pork, sweet potato, yucca, plantains. Its biggest component is the *aji*, a chili that gives the dish a feisty, piquant flavor and a strong sense of Caribbean identity. The African taste comes from the plantains and sweet potatoes, while the Spaniards had introduced roasted pork almost 600 years ago. As I savor the steamy masterpiece, I try to pick out the individual elements but soon succumb to the teases of the dish as a whole.

The Road to Fame

On my last evening, I criss-cross time-warped Art Deco buildings, colonial-style mansions and neon-colored Chevrolets in Old Havana, to find my way to the much-talked-about La Guarida, Havana’s best known paladar.

A curving stairway leads curious travelers up the white cracked marble flooring, past cigar-smoking gentlemen playing dominos along the hallway and up to a weathered wooden door framed by vintage floral carvings and a rusty brass handle. Like all the other paladares I’ve been, this looks just like a normal residential apartment from the outside.

Inside La Guarida, though, is a different world. Knickknacks cover every inch of the walls, from movie posters to images of Jesus and saints, resembling scenes straight out of the hippie ‘60s. Since serving as the set for the 1994 Miramax film *Strawberry and Chocolate*, the paladar has gained a spot of fame and now continues to draw in a steady stream of foreigners, including Queen Sofia of Spain and American actor Jack Nicholson.

Thankfully, La Guarida has excellent Cuban food to match its fame. Owner 39-year-old Enrique Nunez del Valle offers exquisite Nuevo Latino dishes, available nowhere else in the city. On the menu, there’s a dizzying array of contemporary platters: tuna steak grilled with sugar cane, rabbit lasagna, and grouper fillet simmered in orange sauce – all of which screams modern innovation,

something missing in Cuba’s culinary scene.

“There are over 80 paladares in Havana – but few are doing something new or different.” Enrique hopes that as more paladares open and develop, they will help change people’s impression of the island’s notoriously boring food. “I believe we can play our part in revolutionizing Cuban cuisine,” he says with a child-like sparkle in his eyes.

“Cuba is not just about rice and beans and roast pork.”

With bold and creative gourmands like Enrique, Cuba’s culinary scene is set to evolve – but until then, I’m savoring my last few tastes of Havana through its delicious home cooking. 1



Top 5 Foods to Try in Havana

Ropa Vieja 1

Literally meaning ‘old clothes,’ this dish may not sound very tasty, but is made up of shredded pork in a delicious Creole-style tomato sauce.

2 Creole Ajiaco

A thick stew made of pork, sweet potato, yucca and plantains - almost every restaurant serves some form of it.

Moros y Cristianos 3

Beans and rice are the staple of every Cuban dish, and *moros y cristianos* is created by mixing the two and frying them up. But if you just want plain rice and a bowl of beans, ask for *arroz con frijoles*.

4 Lechon Asado

Pork is a big part of Cuban cuisine – shredded or grilled, but most often roasted. On special occasions, Cubans like to roast a whole pig on a large spit.

Mojito 5

Although not technically a food, this classic drink made from Havana Club rum, lime juice, and mint leaves are a must when you come to Cuba.