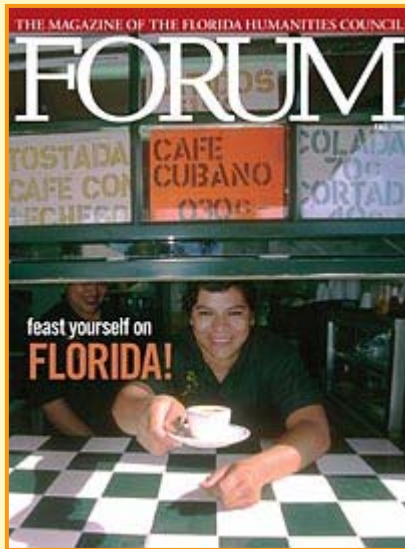


Miami's Old World Flavor

By Viviana Carballo



Little Havana, Miami's best-known Cuban neighborhood, is becoming less and less Cuban every day. A drive down the main street, Calle Ocho (Southwest Eighth Street), reveals Honduran, Argentine, Nicaraguan, and other restaurants and snack bars that reflect the new immigration patterns brought about by wars or economic necessity.

With new Latin American arrivals all the time, many nationality-driven restaurants are opening not only on Calle Ocho but all over Miami. And each is obliged to

serve "authentic and traditional" dishes. There is no question that as any immigrant group begins to assimilate, one of the last cultural linchpins to disappear is its own traditional cooking. Food is a way of keeping "home" close to one's heart.

This is evident in my own family. My three-year-old grand nephew Clive's favorite dish is black beans and rice. He identifies himself as Cuban—"yo soy cubano"—discounting that his father, my nephew, was born in the United States, that his mother is British, and that he lives in London.

The truth is that many Cubans still eat for nostalgia. Those of us who came from Cuba in the Sixties still eat as we did in the Fifties. The first generation of Cuban Americans was brought up with the same traditional flavors and tastes, and popular restaurants cater to that culinary nostalgia. They continue offering plain dishes: black beans, white rice, roast pork, and a variety of root vegetables, often fried. Similarly, the restaurants of the more recent arrivals from other Latin countries serve their own authentic cuisine. (See accompanying article.)

But at the high end of the Miami restaurant spectrum—haute cuisine—some celebrity chefs have been credited with creating New World Cuisine, or Nuevo Latino, or Fusion Cuisine. This is a "cuisine" that combines elements of various culinary traditions while not fitting especially into any of them. For example, this could include cooking

tuber vegetables or treating tropical fruits using classic French techniques.

Calling fusion cuisine "new," however, is just wrong. Over time, all cuisine eventually evolves, adapts and adopts. Geography, availability of ingredients, cultural influences, and change and innovation are a constant. Experimenting is natural and what is good, tasty, pleasant survives; what is not is discarded, a culinary survival-of-the-fittest, if you will.

Fusion cuisine in the Americas started when one of Columbus's sailors cooked his dry cod, a staple on long voyages, with an addition of *ajis* (hot peppers) and tomatoes, and sopped it up with *casabe* (manioc bread). Five hundred years later, this cultural mix of foods, *aporreao de bacalao*, is still eaten, although it's more likely to be sopped up with French bread than casabe.

This kind of interchange of foodstuffs has a long, long history. Indeed, sometimes it's difficult to determine which foods are traditional to which cultures. For example, traditional Italian cooking relies heavily on pasta (Chinese noodles) and tomato (native to Central America).

According to Raymond Sokolov, a scholar in the field, "within fifty years [of Columbus's discovery] the Spanish had established full-scale European agriculture in the West Indies, Mexico, Perú, and the Caribbean coast of South America." The Spanish also opened trade with China from their base in the Philippines, and the fun continued.

The Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands all now have similar cuisine as derived from native ingredients and marked heavily by the African and the Spanish ingredients and methodology. There is a dish made using mashed cooked plantains with the addition of a smattering of pork cracklings that changes its name and some of its characteristics from island to island. In Cuba it is known as *fufú*, in Puerto Rico as *mofongo*, and in the Dominican Republic as *mangú*—certainly all African voices.

The English and the French Caribbean islands have their own unique influences. In Jamaica, for instance, the "native" ackee fruit combined with salted codfish becomes stamp and go, the breakfast of choice. However, the *ackee*, whose scientific name is *Blighia sapid*, was brought to the island from Tahiti by Captain Bligh himself.

Because of the natural progression of intercultural exchanges, such adaptations of foodstuffs morph into a new set of rules. The very

Mexican *quesadilla* would have stayed a corn tortilla filled with grasshoppers and other bugs (regular diet for the Aztecs) instead of becoming a soft flour tortilla filled with luscious cheese and topped with silky sour cream from cattle first brought to the Americas by Spain. Today that *quesadilla* may be elevated with the addition of duck breast or an infusion of basil, morphing it into something contemporary and elegant. But is it fusion or natural progression, or just refinement?

Granted, today in South Florida we pretty much only see this in high-priced restaurants that can afford chefs with great technique and years of experience. We have quite a few chefs practicing what is without question "author's cuisine," their very own creative dishes employing native ingredients and European techniques, vice versa, or a combination of both, blending at will to create something new.

But the traditional "ethnic" foods in Miami have not blended, have not "fused." You will find Cuban dishes in a Nicaraguan restaurant but not Nicaraguan dishes in a Cuban restaurant; nor will you find the Venezuelan *arepas* (a type of corn cake) served with the Cuban white rice and black beans. But even so, that would not be fusion; it would not be blending one cuisine with another; it would only be one traditional dish accompanied by another. Desserts, however are an exception and are served interchangeably. The Nicaraguan *Tres Leches*—a pound cake soaked in a combination of condensed, evaporated, and whole milk—is available just about anywhere as is the creamy Cuban version of flan.

In any place else in the country, people might not know if ethnic food was prepared correctly; but in Miami, people know. Here you can eat authentic dishes from all over the Americas without leaving your own backyard.

VIVIANA CARBALLO's *most recent book is Havana Salsa: Stories and Recipes. She earned the prestigious Grand Diplôme at the Cordon Bleu in Paris, has traveled extensively, and has studied regional cuisine in Spain. Born and raised in Cuba, she now lives in Miami.*