

## A revolution in the best possible taste

Havana's fashionable areas are gaining hip restaurants, such as rooftop bar El Cocinero Mark Read Photography



By John Arlidge

**Kitchen capitalists are cooking up hot new restaurants in cool parts of Havana. John Arlidge reports**

“What are the three failings of the revolution? Breakfast, lunch and dinner.” I heard the old Cuban joke day after day on my first visit to Havana in 1993. That was during the “Special Period” when the Soviet Union collapsed and the roubles suddenly stopped flowing from Moscow, leaving Cuba bankrupt.

Back then, “food”, if you could get it at all, was old lobster so overcooked it tasted like warmed up sneakers and “meat” that was all grey fat and bone. Only the head-splitting mojitos tasted of lazy Caribbean days.

Thankfully, the sunshine socialist state has changed. To kick-start the stalled economy, Raul Castro, Fidel's brother, who is now president, recently allowed Cubans to set up small businesses and become - whisper it - capitalists. Thanks to the 3m tourists who visit Cuba each year, the fastest growing sector is restaurants.

"More than 500 new bars and restaurants have opened in Havana in the past two years," says Tanja Buwalda, an enterprising Irishwoman who has moved to Cuba to support local restaurants and write a Cuban food blog.

She's talking to me on the sun-scorched terrace of Ivan Justo restaurant in Old Havana, over some lightly spiced grilled mahi-mahi, served with organic tomato relish and plantain chips. "I have one fisherman who goes out for me every morning and brings the best lobster and fish," Ivan Rodriguez, the chef, explains.

Fishermen can now sell to private restaurants and hotels, not just the state. The same goes for farmers. Cuba is developing its first private supply chain of fresh food since the revolution in 1959.

At the same time, chefs who had toiled away in state-run restaurants, where there was no incentive to cook well because they got the same measly \$20-a-month wage regardless of whether the punters liked their food or not, are learning to cook again - and loving it.

"This is a *real* revolution," says Joel Begue who quit his state job to set up Havana Chef in Vedado, Havana's answer to Notting Hill. "It's so exciting, it's better than sex!"

I spent a week walking the tumble-down streets and eating out three times a day in the Cuban capital last month and - please don't hate me if you go and have a rubbish meal, which can still happen - I'd say food is now a reason to go, not stay away.

Sarah Saunders, a British private chef who has spent the past decade getting to know all the best restaurateurs in Havana, agrees. In fact, she's so confident Cuban cuisine is back, she's about to launch a culinary academy in Havana.

To prove her point, she takes me in a 1982 Lada, the passenger door held on by gaffer tape, to Santy in Jaimanitas, the pish-posh suburb where Fidel lives. It's a shack, doesn't take bookings, and there's only one thing on the menu. But it's worth turning up and waiting to sit at the splintery benches on the water's edge because that thing is some of the best sashimi you'll ever eat.

Each morning Santiago Alvarez, the fisherman who owns the shack, goes out and catches tuna and Spanish mackerel. He kills and guts the fish just minutes before he serves it, with a little olive oil, coriander and soy. "Eat it and weep, Nobu," smiles Saunders as she digs in.

Wine and champagne - for the new emerging middle class of champagne socialists who now eat out - are also arriving. Step past old men slapping down dominoes in the porticos of their bougainvillea-covered homes into Starbien restaurant and the hallway is decorated with bottles of Pouilly Fuisee, Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc, Terrazas

Malbec and some Gran Reserva Riojas. Most restaurants will let you bring your own vintages if you want, too.

Service which used to be not so much surly as non-existent - I once had to wake up a waiter who had fallen asleep between courses - is on the up. Daymarys Camejo, who left Italy to found Milano restaurant on a palm-lined avenue in Miramar, has drilled her staff *alla Milanese*.

It is, of course, early days. "The Michelin inspectors won't be packing their Bermuda shorts for a visit any time soon," concedes Toby Brocklehurst, a Briton who runs Havana Concierge, an upscale travel and villa rental outfit.

And, this being one of the oddest states on earth, there are some bonkers rules to observe. Don't eat beef. A cattle shortage means it is illegal to kill a cow in Cuba, so all beef is frozen and imported, and, therefore, expensive and often bad.

Bread, milk, fruit juice and tea and coffee in hotels are consistently lousy. Find a cafe you like, instead. Cervceria in Plaza Vieja is good. The local beer - Cristal - tastes like the strainings of the devil's Y-fronts. Thankfully, you can now buy Corona. Wines by the glass are lousy. Order a bottle. You're on holiday, dammit.

All fish and shellfish are good, especially raw. When it comes to cooked fish, old habits die hard, so it's best to say you want it "not too good" ie: not cremated. All fruit, veg and yoghurt is organic - that's one advantage of not being able to afford pesticides and fertiliser. Ice-cream is always good and safe to eat.

Most restaurants are in people's homes, so don't think 'It can't be here, it's someone's house' when you arrive. Just knock on the door. Menus change everyday, so it's best to ask what's good today. All bars and restaurants are strictly cash only. You can only book by phone. **Email** is useless. Expect to pay £25-40 per head, including wine.

Right, now that I hope I've convinced you to go, where should you eat? Here is *The Times* list of the best restaurants and bars in Havana.

**Le Chansonnier** - Calle J No 257, between Linea and 15, Vedado. [+537 832 1576](tel:+5378321576). This restaurant, in a Spanish colonial style mansion in Vedado, combines the best food with the best atmosphere. Try lobster carpaccio and grilled red snapper. Go early or late to beat the rush.

**La Campana** - Calle 212 no 2904, between 29 and 31, in Siborney. [+537 271 1073](tel:+5372711073). Walk in to this mid-century modern home in the suburbs of Havana and enjoy a light poolside lunch of carpaccio of octopus and fresh watermelon juice.

**Ivan Justo** - Calle Aguacate 9, esquina a Chacon, old Havana. [+537 863 9697](tel:+5378639697). Chef Ivan Rodriguez used to cook at the Floridita in Soho in London. Try his grilled mahi-mahi or anything slow cooked, with cuatro leches for dessert.

**Starbien** - Calle 29 No: 205 between B and C, Vedado. [+537 830 0711](tel:+5378300711). Visit this elegant townhouse in Vedado for the best wine list in town and a great shrimp curry and Cuban seafood broth.

**Rio Mar** - Calle 3RA 11, between C and final, La Puntilla. [+537 209 4838](tel:+5372094838). Grab a table on the terrace of this modern villa on the waterfront and you can see the whole of Havana. Order catch of the day.

**Vista Mar** - A1ra and 22, Miramar. [+537 203 8328](tel:+5372038328). This converted villa has uninterrupted views of the Atlantic. Grab a terrace table and order lobster and prawns, with lemon tart for dessert.

**Santy** - Calle 240 A. Jaimanitas. [+537 286 7039](tel:+5372867039). If you like sushi and sashimi, this is the best. It's a good idea to call in advance, as opening hours depend on catches.

**Milano** - 3ra 2404 between 24 y 26, Miramar. [+537 203 4641](tel:+5372034641). In a converted art deco home in Miramar, enterprising Cubans and Italians have created a very Miami vibe. Order linguine with prawns and rocket.

**Corte del Principe**, Calle 9na esquina 74, Playa. [+537 255 9091](tel:+5372559091). This is the best Italian in Havana. Go early or late for dinner to avoid the rush and whatever you do, try the calamari.

**Best bars and Tapas joints** - Prive, Mellem, Espacios, El Cocinero, Madrigal, El Chanchullero. The big names, El Floridita, Sloppy Joe's, Bodeguita del Medio, are good but very touristy.

### **Where to stay**

The Saratoga ([www.hotel-saratoga.com](http://www.hotel-saratoga.com)) is the best place to lay your head if you want style and all mod cons. Havana's only boutique-style hotel has a roof top pool, reliable internet (albeit at glacial speeds), big bathrooms, and good service.

### **Getting around**

Esencia Experiences offers escorted tours of Havana and beyond, as well as a restaurant, hotel and villa booking service. [www.esenciaexperiences.com](http://www.esenciaexperiences.com)

### **Further information**

Read Tanja Buwalda's blog: [thecubanfoodblog.com](http://thecubanfoodblog.com)

For full restaurant listings go to: <http://cubaabsolutely.com/whaton/WhatsOn.php>