

CUBA LIBRE

A RECENT SURGE IN SELF-EMPLOYMENT IN THE SERVICE SECTOR HAS SENT OUT A LIFELINE FOR CUBAN CUISINE. WITH CUBANS FREE TO SOURCE LOCAL, COOK TRADITIONAL AND SELL AT WILL, WE'RE FINALLY SEEING THE WELCOME RETURN OF CUBAN GASTRONOMY

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EL CHINO HAS SEEN IT ALL, FROM HIS FATHER'S LITTLE CAFE IN PRE REVOLUTIONARY DAYS, THROUGH THE APPROPRIATIONS AND SOVIET BLOC ADVISERS OF THE 60S, TO THE NEW RETURN TO PRIVATE ENTERPRISE.

In Cuba today, the Peanut Vendor is back, and this time it's personal. El Manisero – the Peanut Vendor – the hit song that launched the first world vogue for things Cuban in the 1920s, was based on a pregon, a street seller's call. Walk down any thoroughfare in Cuba today and you'll hear the first tweets of the rediscovered art of the pregon, as men carrying bunches of carrots, bags of onions, and trays of pizzas bustle through the streets fluting sales pitches, passing makeshift barrows offering roast pork in buns, holes in walls transformed into take away cafeterias, and waiters touting for tourists to try the latest new paladar.

These scenes of picturesque commerce have not always existed. Modern Cuba justifiably acquired a reputation as a food black spot. The 1959 revolution, followed by nationalisation, collectivisation, State monopoly and central planning, and finally the withdrawal of Soviet cash sponsorship, reduced Cuban food production and cooking to such a dire state that in the mid 90s you'd have been hard pushed to find a peanut, never mind a self employed peanut retailer. Unless you were a tourist of course, in which case limitless supplies of identical dull international buffets, plus the Cuban staples of roast pork, rice and black beans, and boiled yuca in garlic sauce were available.

Then, the bearded one decided the only way out was to loosen the State stranglehold. First came the paladares, the little home restaurants, and then legalisation of small scale private food producing cooperatives. Last year the State laid off a huge swathe of its employees and made self employment easier for a whole range of jobs, mainly in the service sector. In October things gathered pace, with a new raft of activities added, from insurance agent to party planner. No mention yet of a novel pavement trade I glimpsed from a taxi, a man bending with cloth in hand to buff the glittery logo on the white cotton clad chest of young

blade. Obvious cue here for a smash hit pregon called The Tee Shirt Polisher, and I'm sure the huge Cuban musician pool, itself becoming less and less state salaried, will soon respond.

Among the 330,000 Cubans who have applied for their self employment permit, the majority have gone into catering, fuelling the great surge in openings. Three paladares in the town of Cienfuegos a year ago, 30 last month, none legal in Trinidad and up to 40 now. Not all of these are run by ambitious youngsters. In the resort of Varadero, I came across the 73-year-old Rafael Pons, aka El Chino, opening the doors of his new restaurant in gleaming whites. El Chino has seen it all, from his father's little cafe in pre Revolutionary days, through the appropriations and Soviet bloc advisers of the 60s, to the new return to private enterprise. Last year El Chino was laid off by the State, and took the paladar plunge with a couple of former colleagues. Now he's relishing unheard of freedoms: to employ other Cubans, to buy his seafood directly from the fishermen down the road, whereas the norm is still for fish to be trucked up to central State distribution plants and then re-despatched, frozen, to restaurants possibly only metres from where it was caught. This means you can get a fresh fillet of firm white pargo (snapper) sizzling from the plancha, rather than a dull generic slice of de-frosted pescado (fish), as used to be the norm.

Changing times

The early paladares were often basic in the extreme. I remember a place called El Bistrot where the proprietor's wife struggled to create French dishes she'd never tasted from a battered 1953 cookbook, including a weird lapin a la moutarde: rabbit was at that time beginning its return to favour as an easily reared meat source. Some of the

top contenders are beginning to attain a genuine sophistication, however. Havana's classic La Guarida is marginally best still, for its incomparably atmospheric setting at the top of a crumbling but magnificent old townhouse, and its modern but classic cuisine: a signature dish is a rabbit lasagne, and other recent innovations include snapper in coconut sauce, a combination specific to the Baracoa region of Eastern Cuba. Regional Cuban cuisine is at last beginning to return to the gastronomic agenda. La

sweet pearl like garlic.

If the paladares are generally regarded as the best of the new Cuban catering, this is partly by contrast with the old State restaurants, some of which attained truly Soviet class awfulness. Some still do. I went to check out the Puerto de Sagua, a classic old seafood restaurant by Havana railway station, to find only ludicrously overpriced set tourist deals, with the emphasis on langosta – the Cubans are still obsessed with flogging their plentiful stocks of Caribbean lobsters – and a

reason for the Temple's expertise becomes clear when you learn the restaurant is masterminded by a Catalan consultant and a top notch Andalusian chef.

A bright future

Laudable too is a little noticed premises behind the seafront Malecon, opened five years ago by the Federation of Culinary Associations, a sort of kitchen workers' friendly society. Artechef would be regarded as dowdy and forgettable in Europe, but in Cuba,



Guarida also features truly excellent service: the best of Cuba's new private waiting staff are hard working, eager to please and unassuming. No hint of the haughtiness you could find in a fashionable restaurant in some cities, nor the indifference of the places Cubans, as opposed to tourists, had to eat in.

In recent months, the Guarida has suddenly acquired serious rivals over in the Vedado district: the Cafe Laurent, notable for its chic 1950s roof terrace apartment premises more than its decent but ordinary Spanish cooking, and above all the Chansonnier. This place, just converted from a grand 1920s villa by an ex State catering pro and a young architect for the princely sum of 15000 Cuban pesos, just over 10 grand in sterling, combines real elegance with some genuinely good food, for example a simple dish of octopus in a light ajillo sauce with

waiter telling me it wasn't permitted to photograph the scruffy plastic wrapped menus. Elsewhere, hotel dining rooms still devote dozens of man hours to elaborately carved vegetable table centrepieces while serving grim buffets in ranks of lukewarm bain maries.

But the State owned sector is moving too. One of the most dynamic players is Habaguanex, the commercial arm of the Historian's Office of Old Havana. Among the classic restaurants run by this entity is the Temple, by the ferry terminal, outstanding in the variety and freshness of its largely Spanish menu: paellas, good fish and mariscos, even exotic dishes such as elvers, delicious tossed momentarily in oil and garlic. Elvers, it transpires, are found in Eastern Cuban rivers, cost around a third of the price of their equivalents in Europe, but are still virtually ignored. The

to serve decent traditional dishes like tamal (a polenta-like gruel of corn meal with pork and onion) or malanga fritters at such modest prices that more Cubans than tourists eat there is noteworthy. For all the buzz of the new Cuban catering scene, it's still tourist-lead. The days of a two tier system, whereby Cubans without access to extra hard currency subsisted on malnourished rations while the tourists scoffed the lobsters, are not safely past yet. Things are looking more hopeful than for many years however. This is a fascinating time to explore a subject until recently regarded as a contradiction in terms: Cuban gastronomy. 🍴

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