

CUBAN COUP

GOURMET TRAVELLER
HAVANA

A surge in privately-owned restaurants, led by innovative chefs, has created a food revolution in Havana, with locals rediscovering their roots. Lydia Bell pays a visit and gets a serving of the island's rich culinary heritage

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK READ





Left to right: ageing cars cruise past landmarks like Karl Marx theatre; Le Chansonnier is a *paladar* spearheading change in the city. Opposite, top row: creative dishes and decor at Le Chansonnier. Middle: diving in at Riviera Hotel (also right); cooling off with a frozen mango daiquiri. Bottom: Le Chansonnier; ceviche; Artedel Penthouses in the Vedado district

'The explosion of *paladares* has resulted in chefs returning from overseas with capital to fund projects and top dogs ditching state restaurants to start creative kitchens'

Travel information

Two currencies circulate in Cuba: Cuban pesos (CUP) for citizens, and Cuban convertible pesos (CUC), the tourist currency. All tourist activities are charged in CUC but some street food can be bought with CUP. Bring euro or sterling, as converting US dollars incurs a commission charge of 18 per cent. Cuba is in the Caribbean and the best time to visit is November to April, when the climate is generally dry and warm. From May it gets increasingly humid, and hurricane season peaks in September.

GETTING THERE

Virgin Atlantic (virgin-atlantic.com) flies twice weekly to Havana from London Gatwick.

Air France (airfrance.com) operates regular flights from London Heathrow to Havana via Paris.

RESOURCES

Cuba Tourist Board (travel2cuba.co.uk) has a website full of practical information, including lists of tourism operators and events.

Esencia Experiences (esenciaexperiences.com) is a bespoke Cuba specialist offering a seven-day food-focused trip taking in visits to *organopónicos*, suppliers, the latest *paladares* and cooperatives. Food tours extend from Havana to Viñales and Trinidad. Clients stay in five-star hotels and upscale private homes. From £1,395pp based on two sharing, including visa costs and private transfers but excluding flights.

Intrepid Travel (intrepidtravel.com). Wander through Havana's crumbling backstreets, take a salsa lesson, visit Unesco-listed Trinidad, soak up the mountain air of Soroa's mountain orchards and relax on the white sands of Playa Ancon on an immersive, eight-day Cuba tour. From £895pp, which includes transport and transfers, three nights' B&B and four nights at *casa particulares* (homestays with local families). Excludes flights.

FURTHER READING

Eat Cuban by Andy Rose and Judy Bastyra (Simon & Schuster, £16.99) interweaves recipes conceived by the former head chef at Soho's Floridita bar and restaurant with colourful shots of the island and brief interludes on Cuba's past and present. Epic plates include roast suckling pig and *ropa vieja*, a classic updated with duck confit and jalapeño crême fraîche.

Havana Good Time (£2, connergorry.com) is a Havana city guide app (iOS only) written by sharp-tongued US expat Conner Gorry.

To know Havana is to love her – those rutted, ruined streets of colonial beauty, those enchanting squares fringed with arches and bathed in bougainvillea. Sweet rum, tropical breezes, myriad rumbling American jalopies and a warm, charming people are the elements that combine to win hearts.

This is the most culturally rich country in the Caribbean, possibly in Latin America. And after getting on for six decades of socialism, it is clear that artistic virtuosity is flourishing, whether in dance, song or on canvas. Cuba's exotic food heritage, on the other hand, a fusion of Spanish, African, Amerindian and Chinese elements, is only just being rediscovered. Over the past six decades, it has been trampled on by the strictures of the US embargo and a domestic economic crisis – a paucity of ingredients devastating a once-rich cuisine. When private restaurants (*paladares*) were introduced from the 1990s onwards, a clutch of competent cooks began to flourish – notably at La Guarida, the film set for Cuban cult film *Fresa y Chocolate*, and La Esperanza, decked out like a colonially beautiful stage and ever popular despite the famously bitchy service. They flourished, though, because there was nowhere else to go. For the most part, prohibitive taxes and regulations, ignorance about entrepreneurialism and a dearth of produce meant the majority of restaurants remained uninspired front-room affairs, rotating a distinctly uncreative set of Cuban staples. Street food was inedible (the famous Cuban sandwich descended to reconstituted ham and cheese with the texture and taste of foot mould) and the hotel buffets were the spam-based stuff of horror-film legends.

But the winds of change have been blowing, and what started as a gentle gust a few years ago is picking up speed. The more pragmatic, less austere Raúl Castro, who took over from his brother Fidel in 2008, is presiding over a slow liberalisation. Barack Obama has eased restrictions on remittances for Cuban-Americans and millions more dollars are pouring into Cuba. Upwards of 15 resort-style hotels are on the drawing board with foreign partners in place.

To offset massive redundancy in the public sector, the state has sanctioned the establishment of small private firms and is even offering loans. Businesses have mushroomed across Cuba, from mobile-parts shops to nail bars. On the restaurant scene, the result has been an explosion of *paladares*. Chefs are returning from overseas with capital to fund homegrown projects, and top dogs are ditching state restaurants to start creative kitchens.





Opposite, clockwise from top left: Michel Miglis, owner of Miglis restaurant; his 1956 Chevrolet Bel Air; waitress at restaurant Nao; devouring a pulled pork roll at 17th and K market. This page, left to right: *chiviricos* snacks; Café Punto G; chefs at Nao



The number of covers permitted at a private restaurant has gone from 12 to 50, with licences available for venues wanting to cater for up to 100. Registration fees have been radically reduced, as have the taxes. And restaurateurs can now hire professional staff (previously, only family members could be employed).

These days, a new paladar opens in Havana practically every week, and none are short of customers. Paladar owners are still having to duck and dive to source ingredients though, getting pork and chicken from the state, and working a secretive network of black-market suppliers for dairy products and artisanal breads.

Take fish: as the state does not allow the establishment of fishing cooperatives (though there is talk that this could be about to change), fishermen improve their lot by creaming off a few of their trawl and selling door to door; or operate as sports-fishing unions as a way to go out and fish for snapper, marlin, mackerel, mullet and barracuda. With government catches going to hotels or abroad, Cubans still eat precious little fish for an island nation, unless they are lucky enough to live in a fishing village. It's hardly a surprise then, that menus are often not printed in a permanent format.

Cut to Atelier, one of Havana's hottest paladares, where the menus are handwritten daily – and 'ironically' – on government-issue ration cards. At lunchtime, its offerings are light and crunchy: asparagus gratin, carpaccio of tomato and parmesan, Serrano ham spread, octopus salad. As day segues into night, giant cushions and Eastern rugs are spread out on the cacti-lined, palm-surrounded roof terrace, 'El Chill-Out Zone' decorated with vintage typewriters and lanterns, and kissed by an ocean breeze. Candles cover the marble-topped tables and Havana's growing hipster population gathers to drink old-style daiquiri cocktails and make merry. The dishes become more substantial. Lobster, with a side sauce of sunburst tomatoes, olives and Cuban garlic, is programmed to melt on contact with the mouth – a relief in a country that has tended to rubberise its crustacean meat. Intense plum tomatoes are paired with Cuban-style farm feta and a rabbit confit that has been cured in thyme, salt and local garlic, and chilled for two days. The sides are barbecue-flamed aubergine, and yucca; that Cuban root-vegetable staple crunches up beautifully on salting and shallow frying. Falafels are soft and full of savor.

Where to stay

Artedel Luxury Penthouse The chic penthouse apartment of suave and immensely likeable Ydalgo Martinez is scattered with contemporary furniture, Murano glass, bronze lamps and vibrant art. Brilliant views and an outside terrace complete the picture. Unlike anywhere else in Havana, it also has a decent concierge. Sole use of penthouse on a B&B basis (sleeps six), £280 a night. *Calle 1, 260, between 15 and 17, Esq 17, esenciaexperiences.com*

Hotel Nacional de Cuba This grande dame opened in 1930 and has been highly popular with every kind of notable personality, from mobsters to films stars, ever since. It still dominates the Vedado district's skyline and its public spaces exude an atmospheric allure. Decent restaurants, a great cultural cabaret and wonderful gardens make this a great place to stay. Doubles from £116. *Calle O Esq 21, 00 53 7 8363564, hotelnacionaldecuba.com*

Hotel Parque Central The Parque Central is for mod cons and convenience, and close to landmarks such as the Gran Teatro and Capitolio. Its architecture is blandly modern and uninspiring in this beautiful neighbourhood, but its business centre, decent bar, lobby café, travel services and rooftop swimming pool with views make up for this. Doubles from £95. *Neptuno, between Prado and Zulueta, 00 53 7 860 6627, hotelparquecentral-cuba.com*

Hotel Saratoga Neoclassical gem with a wonderfully central position overlooking the Capitolio's dome. Probably the most expensive hotel in Havana, but has decent bathrooms, thread counts and a great rooftop pool and bar-restaurant. Doubles from £180. *Prado 603, Esq. a Dragones, 00 53 7 868 1000, hotel-saratoga.com*

Casa María Elena Well-preserved modernist suburban home in far-flung Siboney full of Cuban art, which will require a driver but will include the pool, catering options and laundry. Sole use of three bedrooms and two bathrooms, £350 a night. *Avenue 17, 20606, esenciaexperiences.com*

Villa El Portón Downstairs beneath a handsome new colonial-style restaurant and bar, Casa Vieja, Kelly and Javier's friendly *casa particular* has enchantingly old-fashioned and colonial, well-kept, cool rooms with high ceilings, situated only a little distance away from the noisiest part of Old Havana. Doubles from £19. *Calle Habana 203, Esq Tejadillo, 00 53 7 863 1009*



Left to right: Havana flickers at night; fish kebabs from Le Chansonnier. Opposite, clockwise from left: the setting for a cult film, La Guarida restaurant; Enrique Nunez, its owner; chef at work at Atelier; barbecued lobsters crop up on menus; La Guarida; echoes of the past in the Old Town



Food glossary

Arroz con leche A sweet, creamy rice pudding infused with cinnamon.

Batido Milkshake made with ice cream or, more commonly, milk and crushed ice, and tropical fruits like mango, pineapple, papaya or guava.

Cafecito Cuban espresso: punchy, strong and served in a tiny cup.

Chicharrones Fried pork skins, often sold in a twist of old *Granma* newspaper sheets.

Comida Criolla Cuisine created in Caribbean/Latin countries during the Spanish colonial period – a fusion of Amerindian, Spanish and African.

Croquetas Ground ham, pork, chicken or even tuna fried in a light batter.

Cuba libre A highball cocktail of cola, lime juice and white rum.

Daiquiri Rum, lime juice and sugar.

Flan A rich custard pudding poured into a pan and topped with caramelised sugar then baked.

Frijoles negro Black beans cooked into thick gravy with garlic and spices and served over rice.

Frituras de malanga Grated *malanga* (a root vegetable) rolled with egg, garlic and lime and then fried.

Mariquitas Plantains sliced extremely thin, then deep fried like potato crisps.

Mojito A highball cocktail of white rum, sugar (or sugar cane juice), sparkling water and *yerba buena* (Cuban mint).

Mojo Criollo A commonly used marinade of sour orange (*naranja agria*), garlic, onions and spice (oregano, cumin, bay leaf).

Moros y Cristianos (also known as *congrí*). Black bean and white rice cooked together with a *sofrito* (see below).

Palomilla A thinly sliced or pounded steak cooked in lime juice, garlic and onions.

Ropa vieja Literally 'old clothes'. The dish consists of beef shredded and stewed with tomatoes, onions, garlic, green pepper and spices.

Sofrito Sauce of onions, garlic, green peppers, cumin, bay leaf and oregano, sometimes with pork belly.

Tamales Banana leaves stuffed with cornmeal dough mixed with spiced pork.

Tostones Thick slices of green plantain, fried, flattened, refried, and served hot and salted.

Yucca A Cuban root vegetable usually boiled and served as a side dish in a lemon and garlic marinade.

Atelier is the baby of Nuris Higuera, one of the 'new' Cuba's movers and shakers (she's at a conference in Washington DC for Women In Business when we visit). Her interiors are even prettier than the roof terrace: each table topped with coloured glass pieces, vintage colonial crockery and crocheted tablecloths (a knowing dash of delicate *Cubania*). Contemporary Cuban art is rotated regularly, creating a constantly changing art gallery. The service is attentive but not overbearing. It's like being at a pleasingly secret bolthole in the bohemian villages of northern Ibiza.

What most drop-in tourists to Atelier may not be aware of, however, is just how much it takes to create this kind of offering in contemporary Cuba. To produce a decent menu here, you have to overcome massive problems of supply. Because of the embargo, Cubans cannot buy food internationally (although the state imports about 60 per cent of its food), so restaurants are limited to domestic production, which is very low because of a collective and corrupt farming system that has slumped into under-investment. Harvests can rot because of a lack of pickers, or trucks, or packaging – you name it. It's no coincidence that many paladares adopt a 'fusion' menu that uses a strictly local and organic stream of produce. Each paladar relies on a full-time *comprador* (buyer) who visits markets and main suppliers on a daily basis. Chefs then have to be creative with what their compradores come back with. Menus are more about necessity rather than any over-arching food ethos.

Against this kind of backdrop, it's intriguing to see where the restaurants source their food. Tanja Buwalda, who has an insatiable interest in the minutiae of Cuban food, runs tours for Esencia Experiences, offering a window on paladar culture and a crash course in Havana's complicated culinary story. She takes me to local markets, a trip that soon reveals the quality and variety of the vegetables, fruits and herbs available, and the flavour of the free-range chicken and pork, which is second to none.

Next, we travel to a cheese farm outside Havana, an idyllic spot with horses whinnying in the paddock. Here, a smallholder supplies trusted paladares, experimenting with pimento, herb, sweet onion and olive-infused goat's cheese; in typical Cuban style, the apparatus has been acquired by hook or by crook – thermometers from Canada, moulds from Russia, milking apparatus from Argentina.





Main: sugar cane workers in the province of Pinar del Río, west of Havana; mangos are harvested; a worker at Alamar Agroponico; farms in

Pinar del Río offer a simple way of life, with livestock and crops making their way back to the restaurants of Havana

Nuris and her crew at Atelier are typical of the many young paladar owners; they are not just out to make a quick buck. They are part of a growing food awareness, concerned with resurrecting Cuban cuisine from its coma and allowing it to breathe once more. Her chef, for example, is working with the office of city historian Eusebio Leal Spengler (who is responsible for the vast-scale restoration of Habana Vieja, the Unesco-protected colonial heart of the city) on a project to capture and promote the old recipes of Cuba.

Cuban cuisine originally evolved out of the island's layered history of incomers. The Amerindians were first: the Taíno in the east, the Guanahatabey in the west, and the Siboney everywhere else. These last two tribes were hunter-gatherers and fishermen. The Taíno were Arawak-descended farmers. They brought *boniatos* (white sweet potatoes), yucca, yams, corn, pumpkins, peanuts, peppers, avocados and tomatoes – all still staples. During colonial times, the Spanish food culture was assimilated, following the specificity of chain migration. Millions of incoming Canary Islanders brought mojo sauce; and *ropa vieja* shredded beef. The Galicians brought *pulpo a la Gallega* (marinated octopus), and *empanadas* (stuffed pastries); the Asturians thick soups and stews. After the Haitian slave rebellion in 1791, French slave owners flooded in, bringing robust cooking traditions for the culinary soup. A powerful mish-mash of influences was gifted by the enslaved Africans, who slow-cooked their stews over fires as they worked the fields. Other elements – Chinese, Jewish, Arab – also left their mark on the cuisine.

To experience the raw, domestic earthiness of classic Creole cuisine, I get down to brass tacks by visiting another paladar, Doña Eutimia, in the heart of Old Havana. Amid the Unesco-protected maze, Doña Eutimia is the place to take the pulse of yesteryear (an important act in a country in the throes of change). The tiny, inexpensive restaurant nestles in a cobbled alleyway next to an artists' print studio. Although less than three years old, it already feels like an institution with its wall clocks and antiques. Owner Leticia is rigidly Cuban in her pursuits and has no truck with new-fangled cuisine. A raft of things set Doña Eutimia apart, however. The menu includes snacks rarely seen outside the home: *frituras de malanga*, the malanga root vegetable peeled and grated and rolled with lime, parsley, eggs and garlic, then fried in a labour-of-love snack operation; *empanadas*, a fried dough encasing minced chicken or pounded leftover beef sautéed in a *sofrito* of green peppers, oregano, onion and garlic; *mariquitas*, green plantains mandolin-sliced and fried; and yucca chips.

So far, so tasty. But now it's time to take the *comida Criolla* acid test: Doña Eutimia's version of *ropa vieja* with *frijoles negros* (black beans). Translated literally as 'old clothes', *ropa vieja* is pounded beef simmered with green pepper, onion, tomatoes, wine and cumin – a sauce that forms the foundation of many dishes – then shredded. The key, suggests the waiter, is to choose a cut of nicely marbled beef with the fat on – removing it later during the shredding process – to impart flavour.

Where to eat

Prices are for two courses, excluding drinks, unless otherwise stated.

Café Laurent Taking over the penthouse of an apartment building in the Vedado district, Café Laurent's walls are adorned with old newspapers featuring 1950s adverts. Fish dishes are best, so book a seat on the large terrace and order white tuna seared with aubergine and tomato or a snapper in *salsa verde*. £11. *Calle M 257, between Calle 19 and 21, 00 53 7 831 2090*

Casa Miglis Michel Miglis has opened the first Swedish-Cuban fusion restaurant in Havana, with a menu that includes lingonberries. Funky interior design and beautifully presented food. £12. *Lealtad 120, between Animas and Lagunas, 00 53 7 8641 486, casamiglis.com*

Divino A fair drive into the sprawling suburbs, Divino is a rustic restaurant with a relaxed terrace, greenhouses, organic farm, geese and chickens. Mostly Creole food with international dishes, and Havana's best wine cellar. £11. *Calle Raquel 50, between Esperanza and Lindero, Reparto Castillo de Averhoff, 00 53 7 643 7734, cubarestaurantedivino.com*

Doña Eutimia At the end of a cobbled lane off Plaza de la Cathedral, this cosy, antiques-crammed *paladar* serves perfectly executed Creole classics from *ropa vieja* to *frituras malangas*. Handsome waiters. £7. *Callejón del Chorro 60C, Plaza de la Catedral, 00 53 7 5281 5883*

El Corte Principe This brand-new *paladar* owned by easy-going Italian Sergio is an unpretentious and rustic alfresco spot with red-checked

tablecloths on a covered porch. The chalked menu of fresh pastas and sauces is preambled by prosciutto, antipasti and bruschette. It's a pizza-free zone though. £11. *9na Esq. 74, 00 53 7 5255 9091*

La Guarida The film set for *Fresa y Chocolate*, La Guarida's ambiance is set by the incredible approach up a sweeping staircase. It's the Cuban version of The Ivy, so Hollywood actors dine here when they're in town – as do rafts of Cuban musicians. There's a decent wine list and a Cuban and international menu that changes frequently. £15. *Calle Concordia 418, between Gervasio and Escobar, 00 53 7 866 9047, laguarida.com*

Le Chansonnier A gutted colonial home decorated with modern installations and pieces. The cuisine pushes Cuban envelopes, fusing local ingredients with foreign, particularly French, influences. Menus change daily. £16. *Calle J 257, between 15 and Linea, 00 53 7 832 1576, lechansonnierhabana.com*

Rio Mar International and Cuban combinations in a beautiful position on the water where the Rio Almendares meets the sea. Baby Chateaubriand, lobster, spicy pork, garlic grilled fish, perfectly roasted vegetables: pared down Mediterranean fare with an expensive wine list. £11. *3ra 11, between C and Final, 00 53 7 209 4838, restauranteriomar.wordpress.com*

Santis or 'Santigos' At the edge of the water in a fishing village in Havana's west, Santis serves up super-fresh sashimi, California rolls and nigiri plus simple fish dishes in a fisherman's shack. £6. *240A 3ra. C, Jaimanitas*



Below, left to right: fisherman selling his catch on the road in Havana; rice workers in the Pinar del Rio; the area's honey production



A new, more conscious food creativity is growing in Havana and few embody this attitude more than Héctor Higuera, the thoughtful chef of Le Chansonnier. The godfather of the modern paladar scene and brother of Atelier's Nuris has created a slice of contemporary cool in this classic colonial setting, furnished with artistic installations. Beyond the inventive dishes and decor, Héctor plans to establish a not-for-profit cookery school that he hopes will enable the current generation to pass on valuable skills to the next. His chef's approach is almost cerebral: he has been studying other European food revolutions rooted in history, so he can understand what might happen in Cuba. 'We lost Creole traditions during the crisis, and here we are trying to revive them and fuse those with the fundamentals of French cuisine,' he says.

So his duck à l'orange is tangily sweet with a Cuban *mojo* of *naranja agri-dulce* (sour orange mixed with multiple heads of garlic for that breath-freshening kick). And you may find the tenderised chicken dressed in a sweet-guava salsa, or a French brie baked whole with a sweet Cuban marmalade.

Héctor argues that some of what needs celebrating is the African element of Cuban cuisine, which is always downplayed: the fried root vegetables (*viandas fritas*), the *congrí* (rice and beans); the fried dumplings. He uses his own family for inspiration: they were a soupy mix of ethnicities, from African to French to poor Asturian Spanish. It's important to understand the roots of your food, the history you are coming from, the reason you are doing things, what and why you are reinventing, he argues.

Other pioneers are circumventing issues of supply to create their own magical projects. At two-year-old Divino, a garden-to-plate restaurant on the outskirts of the city, they have their own mini *organopónico* (city farm), growing seedlings in greenhouses then transplanting them to growing beds over a 21-day cycle, choosing fast-growing leafy vegetables. Its practices are the same as Havana's myriad urban vegetable gardens, and only natural pesticides and insecticides are used. Another feature is its wine cellar, with 319 labels from 17 countries, a big deal in Cuba, where private import is nigh on impossible. There are only 500 sommeliers in the country – this is a rum-drinking, not a wine-drinking, society.

I end my trip by heading to El Malecón, the sea wall of Havana. This long, meandering promenade is where *Habaneros* come to fish, chat, strum guitar, pick up love interests and snack. Here, the siren call of the peanut vendor joins those selling naughtily salty *chicharrones de macarrones*: cooked macaroni re-fried with pork rind. I also seek out *guarapo* – fresh sugar cane juice to quench the thirst. It's not as sweet as a guava juice (always served at breakfast in Havana) but it gets into your system even more quickly than Lucozade – and that works for me especially, as I'm feeling peaky after a mojito-ridden night around the city's bars.

Like Havana's beautiful ruins, weathered by sun, rain and tropical hurricanes, Cuba's food has been damaged too – and like that architectural splendour, it wasn't down to thoughtlessness. Nor was it pushed aside by fast food and microwaved meals. It was just in a deep sleep. And now it is waking up. □

Lydia Bell travelled to Cuba courtesy of Esencia Experiences (esenciaexperiences.com) and Virgin Atlantic (virgin-atlantic.com).

Don't miss

El Mercado de los Millonarios Though not expensive by Western standards, this market, situated on the intersection of 19 and B, is known as the 'Market of the Millionaires' among locals because it's where the diplomats, *paladar* owners and *casa particular* owners like to shop. It's not where state-paid professionals do their shopping for vegetables. The quality here is good and you can also find fare that's unusual for Cuba, such as quail's eggs, ready-made salads and pre-chopped root vegetables, green chillies and ginger (not a given in this supply-hit country), beetroots and fresh herbs. *Corner of 19 and B*

Pork hamburgers vendor This street-corner shack in the Vedado district is a decent, new street-food joint dishing out ground pork burgers. Unfortunately, it doesn't offer any shade and the service could not be described as lightening quick either. So best not to linger if locals are ramming the place. However, the wacky combinations of ingredients work well together. Choose from the likes of pineapple, egg and jam and soft cheese with pork. *Corner of 5 and A*

Organopónico Vivero *Organopónicos* are Cuba's urban farms and produce the bulk of the country's home-grown vegetables. The concept originated during the 'Special Period' as a direct response to food supply issues, when there was not enough petrol to transport goods. Havana's biggest is Organopónico Vivero, actually in the eastern satellite town of Alamar. You can book a tour and a lunch through Esencia Experiences (esenciaexperiences.com). Here they pump out vegetables, seedlings, medicinal plants, herbs, condiments, pickles and preserves, composts and goat and rabbit meat. *Avenue 160 Parque Hanoi, Zona 6, Alamar*