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## ¡Yo soy Cubiche!

### *Soul de Cuba café brings the islands to the islands*

by Kawehi Haug / 08-02-2006

There's something to be said for keeping things small. Jesus Puerto, owner of Soul De Cuba Cafe, the most recent addition to the Chinatown dining scene, gets it. In his 40-seat dining room, small is just right.

The space that used to be Sisters Café has been converted into a den of warm, golden walls hung with family photos, frame-to-frame with vintage cigar labels and Santería artwork whose vibrant icons jump off the cumin-colored walls to add to the room the color that we gringos associate with the Caribbean or Africa or Spain. Cuban salsa, bolero and Kwaito music is the natural choice for the restaurant's sound, but even though you don't expect to hear anything else, when you hear it, you think: What is that amazing music? Perhaps it's the music and the art. Or the music and the six-stool, glossy, wooden bar inlaid with vintage cigar labels. Or the music and the food. Or perhaps it's the coming together of all the small things that makes Soul de Cuba Jesus Puerto's fail-proof venture.

Sure, there are hiccups in the very new system. The service can be slow, even during lulls. The food is sometimes inconsistent—the arroz moro (the traditional black beans and rice) is one day perfect, the next, undercooked. But in fairness, a restaurant should be granted at least three months for it to find its way, and we jumped the gun. But if week two of business is any indication of its future, we're willing to bet that Soul De Cuba will be downtown's dining destination of choice in no time at all.

Small and strong. In this market of the two-year business life, it's the key to survival. Know what you do well and stick to it. Puerto, whose flagship restaurant in New Haven, Conn. served as the template for the Honolulu Soul, knows the rules. The restaurant menu offers a few choice items in each of the meal categories: appetizers, soup and salad, chicken, beef and pork, seafood and desserts. And every category has something to offer.

Start with the devil crab appetizers. The triangular fritters are the street food of Tampa Bay, Fla. Key words: street food. Expect greasy. Expect heavy. Expect filling. If you expect a sophisticated crab cake or a dainty bite of delicate, you'll be disappointed. But if you want crab meat encased in a sturdy bread dumpling and fried to a dark brown, you've found your poison. Devil crab is to Tampa Bay Cubans as corn dogs are to Americans. The dumpling to crab ratio is high—higher than most might expect or enjoy—but the crispy outside, the thick, stuffing-soft layer of dumpling and the inner pocket of seasoned lump crab is addictive. Dunk the devil in fiery, vinegary hot sauce and you've made a good thing great. Order the croquetas on the Soul Sampler platter (\$15) and get a little bit of everything, including beef and veggie empanadas and shrimp sautéed in black beans and garlic. The house-made empanadas are flaky perfection. Puerto says he might have to take them off the menu if the kitchen can't keep up with the demand for the labor-intensive palm-sized turnovers—here's to hoping he doesn't. The menu would be lacking without them.

The restaurant's signature entrée, the Pollo Soul de Cuba (\$16), is a breaded chicken breast smothered in a chunky warm salsa of mango, guava, pineapple, black beans and rum. At first nod, it seems like a too-sweet choice to satisfy a craving for dinner, but the flavors—distinct and flawlessly blended—are sublime. The sweet, meaty chunks of guava and mango, the citrusy pineapple, the buttery rum and the black beans are an unlikely—and beautiful—combination.

Every entrée is served with some form of rice: white, moro or amarillo (yellow). The arroz moro, like good comfort food, is satisfying and surprisingly flavorful. The black beans lend to the simple dish a rich smokiness that is the ideal companion to the citrusy marinades that set Cuban food apart from other Latin and African cuisines. And speaking of comfort food, there's nothing quite so satisfying as a plate of good picadillo. And Soul makes good picadillo. The traditional ground beef-and-rice dish is bursting with flavors—ground beef sautéed with capers, Spanish olives and garlic—that, on a paper menu, seem like the opposite of a restaurant item, but take one bite and you might never get past the picadillo. But move on, because it would be a mistake to ask for the check without asking for dessert.

The very short dessert menu (there are only three items) makes it easy. There's no need to grapple with cheesecake or ice cream, apple pie or chocolate cake. Get the flan and the guava y queso empanada. Easy. Why flan? Because good flan is hard to come by. The custard should be firm but not mealy, tender but not fragile. Soul de Cuba does it right. And the dessert empanadas? Simple but not bland, sweet but not sugary. The three-bite turnovers, filled with guava and cream cheese and served hot and oozing, are the best end to a good meal.

It's true what they say: Good things come in small packages.



Soul satisfied: Soul de Cuba Cafe opened in Chinatown on July 5.

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### *Soul De Cuba Cafe*

1121 Bethel St., across from the Hawaii Theatre  
(545-CUBA, [souldecuba.com](#))

**Hours:** Lunch 11:30am-2pm; dinner 5:30-10pm

**Starters:** \$5-\$9

**Entrées:** \$9-\$16

**Recommended:** devil crab, picadillo, pollo soul de cuba, empanada de guava y queso, flan

**Credit cards:** AmEx, DC, Disc, MC, V