

January 22, 2006

Dining

## Cuban With No Pretenses

By [STEPHANIE LYNESS](#)

I FIRST heard about the Soul de Cuba Cafe last winter while eating at Seoul Korean Restaurant in [New Haven](#). Yoon Kim, who was waiting on tables there for his mother, the owner, mentioned that he was opening a Cuban cafe with two partners - Jesus and Robert Puerto, brothers from Tampa, Fla. - just down the block on Crown Street where Mom's Indian Kitchen used to be. He was so enthusiastic that I could not wait to eat there.

The place was mobbed from the day it opened. I finally made it there last month, and I did not catch the appeal right away. It is tiny, with tables at the front and an elevated bar at the back. It's noisy and cramped, with small tables very close to one another. The food is fine (more about that later), and it is not expensive. Entrees range from \$9 to \$16, and the mojitos, the classic Cuban rum cocktail, are good, crammed with mint and chunks of lime. That said, a friend of mine finds them too sweet.

Service was honest but amateur: water glasses were not refilled, and the food came too fast. And the experience was not altogether comfortable. You sit cheek by jowl with your neighbor, and the noise level is such that conversation is difficult. I may be the only person in New Haven who feels this way, however; people - students mostly - line up outside to get in on weekends.

But I changed my mind the last afternoon I was there for lunch, eating a pressed Cuban sandwich with a mojito. There were only a few of us in the restaurant, and we were served by a young man who, as it turned out, was the chef, Robert Puerto. He talked about his recipes, gleaned from his grandmother, and pointed out her likeness among the wall of black-and-white photographs. He talked about trying to duplicate a crab cake that he knew exclusively from his Cuban neighborhood in Tampa, finally settling on a layer of bread between the crab and the deep-fried breading.

As he talked, I was caught up in his appreciation of the food and culture. This is home cooking, Cuban not Mexican. Cuban food is subtler than Mexican, often built on a sofrito mixture of sautéed onions, garlic, bell pepper and sometimes tomato. Oregano, bay leaf, citrus and vinegar are other common seasonings. You don't find much cilantro, if any, at Soul.

The upside to home cooking is the comfort of familiarity. The downside to Soul is that there can be a sameness to the dishes.

In picadillo (seasoned ground beef with olives, capers and tomatoes), black-bean chili, steak cooked in red wine, and roast pork, the common dynamic is sweet (often from the sofrito) and sour (vinegar, citrus or capers). The pork is dynamite; the others are very good, too, particularly the chili. Also try the velvety oxtails braised in red wine and the snapper with sweet mango salsa. Everything is served with rice, rice and beans, fried ripe plantains, or tostones, which are green plantains, starchy, not sweet.

Soul serves only three desserts, and all are good. The caramel flan is traditional. There are two empanadas, one filled with a guava compote and cream cheese (guava has an exotic, almost buttery taste). The other is filled with mango purée and cream cheese (lighter and sharper). The pastry for both is tougher, more crackerlike than some I've tasted but certainly authentic.

There are problems with all three salads on the menu. The mesclun was far from fresh, iceberg lettuce does not stand up to balsamic vinegar. The dressing on the Tropicana salad, served with mango, needs more oil and more acid.

Soul de Cuba serves straight-ahead home-cooked food, and the price is right. I wonder if tighter service may better translate the enthusiasm and generous soul these three young men bring to their restaurant.

### **Soul de Cuba Cafe**

283 Crown Street, [New Haven](#), (203) 498-2822.

Good

**ATMOSPHERE** Small, loud, energetic room with Cuban music and lots of young people.

**NOISE LEVEL** Too loud for easy conversation when the restaurant is full.

**SERVICE** Honest but amateurish.

**RECOMMENDED DISHES** Deviled crab, empanadas, papa rellena, yuca frita con chili, camarones (shrimp) bailando, black bean soup, black bean chili, pollo asado (baked chicken), picadillo, lechon asado (roast pork), ropa vieja (stewed beef), oxtails, snapper with mango salsa, Cuban sandwich, all desserts.

**PRICE RANGE** Appetizers, \$5 to \$13 (for sampler); entrees, \$9 to \$16; desserts, \$5.

**CREDIT CARDS** All major cards.

**HOURS** Lunch: Tuesday through Saturday, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; Sunday, noon to 2:30 p.m. Dinner: Tuesday and Wednesday, 5:30 to 10 p.m.; Thursday to 1 a.m.; Friday and Saturday to 2 a.m.; Sunday, 5 to 9 p.m.

**RESERVATIONS:** Recommended; reserve a few days ahead for weekends.

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBILITY:** Seating is on the ground floor, but bathrooms are up two steps. **REVIEWED BY THE TIMES** Jan. 22, 2006.

**RATINGS** Extraordinary, Excellent, Very Good, Good, Satisfactory, Fair, Poor. Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.