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Soul de Cuba

By: Jane Rushmore

Jesus Puerto mashes a bit of fresh mint, adds a splash of rum and a little sugar, then tops it all off with a sugar cane stirrer. He mixes mojitos behind the bar at Soul de Cuba as though he's at home, and in many ways, he is.

Photos of his family hang on the walls - you can almost feel his grandfather, with the massive mustache, peering through his photograph frame for a glimpse toward the bar, to check that Puerto got the Sangria recipe right.

His brother Robert Puerto stars in the kitchen as the head chef, whipping up traditional Cuban dishes like the ropa vieja, a shredded beef entrée served with rice, black beans and plantains.

The menu at the new restaurant on 283 Crown St., 203-498-2822 blends both of Jesus Puerto's backgrounds - resulting in a mix of soul food and Cuban cuisine.

"This is just the food I grew up with," says Jesus Puerto. "It's home cooking to us. We grew up in a house where collard greens were on the same plate as Cuban food, and it all just complemented each other. We wanted to bring that cultural experience to the area."

Puerto grew up in the Latin quarter of Tampa, Ybor City, then served in the Peace Corps for a while before he headed to Connecticut to work with Hole in the Wall Camps, a project launched by Paul Newman.

Puerto joined the program, which sends children with life-threatening illnesses to summer camps, and worked out of the New Haven offices

While Puerto was in the area, he often stopped by Seoul Kitchen for lunch, right down Crown Street, where he met Yoon Kim.

Kim was working at his mom's restaurant and finishing classes at Johnson & Wales for his bachelor's degree in hotels and restaurant management.

The two became friends and one night when they were heading to BAR they passed by Mom's Indian Kitchen and noticed the "for rent" sign on the window.

They seized the opportunity and from there everything fell into place, though Kim's degree helped. "My education as well as all my experience made the whole process less overwhelming," Kim says of opening Soul de Cuba. "In terms of technical skill and setting up a restaurant, it's second nature."

But both the menu and the atmosphere lean more toward Havana than Atlanta.

"We definitely wanted some American soul foods like collard greens and ham, but the kitchen just wasn't large enough," Puerto admits. So instead they focus on the staples of Cuban cooking.

His grandmother's frijoles negro, the black bean soup, was a must on the menu. Traditional Cuban dishes like the lechon asado, a roast pork dish served around holidays, especially Christmas, feature a mojo marinade. The mojo is a blend of citrus with oregano, garlic and other spices and then the pork soaks in it for 24 hours.

Puerto explains that even though many people lump Cuban food in the same category as spicy Mexican cooking, the spices in Cuban dishes are simpler and subtler. "There's very few Cuban dishes that are piquant or super hot. The spices are well-rounded and very flavorful," Puerto says.

They're still tweaking the menu though, reworking the wine list and creating a separate section for the vegetarian dishes that Puerto's had requests for.

It's not surprising that the restaurant is still working out the kinks, as it's only been three months since they quietly opened its doors in January for a trial run, then officially launched at the end of February.

The biggest obstacle for the trio of young entrepreneurs was the size of the restaurant. "I think one our toughest challenges is operating out of this small space with the volume that we do," says Kim. "We always have to stop and ask ourselves how we can utilize the space."

Funky seating helps. A mix of banked benches line the walls and tall tables with bar stools maximize the amount of people they can pack in, but they still only seat three dozen people.

Soul de Cuba opens at 6 p.m. and it only takes 15 minutes for a line to form and wind out the door. Though they officially stop serving at 10 p.m., Puerto and Kim nod in agreement that they'll stick around and keep serving until everyone has been satisfied.

The food is obviously worth the wait - the kitchen serves more than 200 dinners on a Saturday night. Perhaps that's partly because of the prices, which are uber-affordable at \$12 to \$13 for steaks.

You certainly won't be bored while waiting for your table - Puerto describes the place as "homey and cozy, but festive," and he delivers. The bar entertains with its mix of inlaid cigar box tops, Cuban salsa rhythms float through the rooms and the whole coffee-colored restaurant glows with a mix of warmth and excitement that can only be matched by the meal.

So swipe a seat at the bar, where you can pleasantly pass the time picking out a cigar to savor on the trip home, or sipping on some homemade Sangria.

Sopa de Frijoles Negros (black bean soup)
 1 pound dried black beans cleaned and soaked overnight
 6 cups water
 2 tablespoons olive oil
 2 tablespoons malt vinegar
 2 medium onions finely diced
 2 cloves garlic pressed or finely chopped
 2 tablespoons oregano
 ½ teaspoon sugar
 Salt to taste
 Black pepper to taste

In a strainer, drain the soaked beans and rinse them lightly under cold running water. Put the beans and the fresh water in a large soup or stock pot (making sure the water covers the beans by at least 1 to 2 inches). Cover and bring to a boil over high heat. When the water has boiled, reduce the heat to low and simmer for at least 2 hours, until the beans are tender enough to be mashed with a spoon. Remove 1 cup beans and 1 cup liquid, and put in a bowl and mash with a potato masher. Return the mashed beans to the pot. In a large skillet, heat the olive oil over medium-high heat. Add the onion and spices and cook until tender. Add the onion, garlic, spices and vinegar to the soup. Let soup simmer for at least 2 hours. Add salt and pepper to taste.