



## The Buzz

Erika Engle

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# Cuban eatery woos palates in Hawaii

SOUL de Cuba Cafe opened its doors on July 5, and lunch and dinner service has been hopping.

Its second night in business was First Friday downtown and "there was an hour wait," said Jesus Puerto, the owner.

Good, but bad. Good that there was so much interest, but bad because the restaurant's systems were still being worked out and bad because people had to wait.

Puerto has not advertised, but the restaurant is downtown where the fish are biting and word of mouth has spread like wildfire. In addition, positive reviews have appeared in Monday's Downtown Planet and Friday's MidWeek weekend edition.

Puerto expected a busy Tuesday after the first review, but "we got slammed on Wednesday," he said.

Soul de Cuba serves the home-style food Puerto grew up eating. The biggest misconception about Cuban food "is that it is spicy, like Mexican food," he said. It has spices and seasonings, of course, but it isn't hot-kine spicy.

### On the Net:

» [www.souldecuba.com](http://www.souldecuba.com)

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West African, Spanish, Moroccan and Chinese cultures have mixed in melting-pot Cuba to influence the flavors of its food, Puerto said.

"There is a huge Chinatown in Havana," Puerto said, making it a bit ironic that his Cuban restaurant skirts Honolulu's Chinatown, at 1121 Bethel St.

People say it is the only Cuban restaurant in Hawaii, or at least, on Oahu. Those people include local Hispanic community leaders and Star-Bulletin restaurant critic Nadine Kam.

A search of business registrations and the Internet found the only other active local business involving the word Cuba or Havana and food, is Cuba 'Ono, a catering company.

Honolulu's Soul de Cuba Cafe is Puerto's second. The flagship is in New Haven, Conn., established a year and a half ago by Puerto, his younger brother Robert and their partner Yoon Kim.

The first restaurant is nearly identical to the 800-square-foot Honolulu eatery, but doesn't seat quite as many as the 40-seater here. Chef Kamal Jemmari and manager Mike lamele came from Connecticut to open the Hawaii restaurant.

The New Haven location did \$600,000 in sales its first year, but Puerto was planning his Honolulu expansion six months into that initial venture because he once missed a connecting flight to Western Samoa.

Huh? We don't have space for his whole intriguing life story, but after nearly dying from spinal meningitis in 1993, Puerto turned to a life of serving others, working with the Peace Corps, United Nations, Habitat for Humanity and the Association of Hole in the Wall Camps.

During those years, on a trip to Western Samoa, Puerto missed his connecting flight and got stuck in Honolulu for the four days between flights.

He already was in love with the Pacific, and fell in love with Hawaii and its aloha spirit while here. Puerto knew he would be back to use his earlier restaurant management training.

Puerto feels he has been welcomed by everyone. Landlord Allan Dowsett, neighboring Indigo owner Dave Stewart and Hawaii Theatre executives have "been very supportive." Mayor Mufi Hannemann was in the other night for a birthday celebration. Well-known figures in Hawaii's Hispanic community, including Jose Villa, deputy director of the Honolulu Community Action Program; and Ray Cruz, host of "Sabor Tropical" on Hawaii Public Radio's KIPO-FM 89.3, have been creating buzz

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about Soul de Cuba Cafe among friends.

It moves Puerto, emotionally. "I don't know the words to explain how that makes me feel."

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