Cuban cocktails with a lot of Soul

By Derek Paiva
Advertiser Entertainment Writer

SOUL DE CUBA

- Where: 1121 Bethel St.
- Evening hours: 5:30-10 p.m.
  Mondays-Thursdays; 5:30-10:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays
- Phone/Web site: 545-2822; http://souldecuba.com
- Got parking? No. I parked at the Chinatown municipal garage off Beretania Street.

- The appeal? A refreshing fresh-ingredient- and premium-spirit-infused "Cuba-inspired" cocktail menu, import sipping rums and homestyle Afro-Cuban eats in a smallish, urban cool, yet warmly homey setting.
- The crowd: On the Thursday we dropped in 'round 8 p.m., a comfortable gathering of about 25. Among the downtown post-work dressy: a table full of

Laura Santi of Waimanalo and Dean Des Jarlais of Kailua enjoy dinner and drinks at Soul de Cuba on Bethel Street.

Photos by REBECCA BREYER | The Honolulu Advertiser

Bartender Matt Bedard prepares a mojito for Lindsey Stouffer of St. Louis.
raucous twentysomethings celebrating a birthday, a couple of chatty fiftysomething women at the bar growing chattier as their pitcher of sangria emptied. Post-9 p.m.: a much quieter Soul.

- **Interiors:** Warm, earth-toned walls softly lit by discreet spots; tables and bar seating illuminated by votives and ceiling-suspended lamps. A collection of otherworldly entities circling Soul's high ceilings are giclees of orishas — Santeria spirits — created by Miami-based, Cuban-born artist Luis Molina. Framed wall photos are of owner Jesus Puerto's relatives, dating back to the mid-19th century. Puerto's collection of 50- to 100-year-old labels from now shuttered Cuban and Tampa, Fla., area cigar factories also serve as framed artwork. Havana city life, residents and architecture — circa 2003, yet seemingly decades old — captured in a series of strikingly composed photos by Washington, D.C., artist Shawn Davis, loop on two suspended flat screen monitors.

- **Cuban soul food:** Puerto calls the menu of family recipe appetizers (between $7 and $10) and entrees ($9 to $24) "simple home-cooking." (Menu online.)

- **The soundtrack:** Piped-in classic Cuban, Afro-Cuban and Latin music (Beny Moré, Buena Vista Social Club, Ibrahim Ferrer, Cesaria Evora) on weekdays; a mostly salsa-flavored beat (Celia Cruz, Los Van Van) on Fridays and Saturdays. On occasion, live solo guitar musicians/vocalists. No dance floor.

- **About the beudas (mixed cocktails):** A few are originals. Others are classic Cuban tourist favorites with a Puerto-family twist. Soul's rum cocktails use only wicked smooth Matusalem Platinum. (The Dominican Republic brand was born in pre-Castro Cuba.) They're not the most inexpensive cocktails you'll have downtown — or the most quickly made — but some of the best. Among them are ...
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- **The expected tourist classics**: A house-recipe Matusalem-powered soul mojito with fresh lime and mint leaves ($7), a rum and grenadine-infused el presidente with a clean bite of pineapple juice and fresh lime juice ($7).

- **Cachaca!** Unlike many local bars — which substitute vodka or rum for a more tempered taste — Soul crafts its caipirinha ($8) with the woody, bold-flavored Brazilian sugar-cane distilled spirit.

- **Dad's sangria**: Puerto's father crafted the very secret recipe for Soul's smooth, refreshing and flavorful sangria ($6 glass/$27 pitcher). "My father wasn't born in Spain, so it's a very Cubanized version of sangria," Puerto says. Ask what's in the popular, wickedly potent recipe — besides three unnamed wines, fresh fruit and ice — and Puerto doesn't budge. "Ancient Cuban secret!"

- **Amarula!** The creamy South African liqueur made from the fruit of the marula tree brings a caramel-like sweetness to the brandy- and Kahlua-infused signature cocktail soul de cuba ($10) and Cuban coffee-blended cafe social ($8).

- **Try the rums**: Puerto loves sipping rums. So Soul stocks more than a dozen from Guyana, Guatemala, Anguilla, Trinidad, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, St. Croix and Mexico. My favorite? A glass of caramel-flavored Matusalem Clasico over ice ($6), which goes down smooth and invigorating.

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