Soul de Cuba

By: Jane Puerto

Jesse Puerto masters a bit of fresh mint, adds a splash of rum and a little sugar, then tips it all off with a sugar cone stieree. He mises mijitos behind the bar at Soul de Cuba as though he's at home, and in many ways, he is.

Photos of this 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 Father Puerto sings in the kitchen as the head chef, whipping up traditional Cuban dishes like theropa vieja, a shredded beef erteise served with rice, black beans and plantains.

The menu at the new restaurant on 235 Coevn St., 20-494-2922 blends both of Jesse's Puerto's backgrounds - resulting in a mix of soul food and Cuban cuisine.

"This isn't just the food I grew up with," says Jesse 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, You City, then served in the Ponce Corps for a while before he headed to Connecticut to work with Holc in the West Camps, a project funded by Paul Newman.

Puerto joined the program, which sends children with life-threatening illnesses to summer camps, and worked on the New Haven/Essex.

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

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

The two became friends and one night when they were heading to JAR they passed by Mor's Sunday Kitchen and noticed the "for rent" sign.

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 seem 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 frojo negro, the black bean soup, was a main course on the menu. Traditional Cuban dishes like the ropa vieja, a meal served on round plantains, the lechon asado, roasted pork shoulder, and the pork ribs in 16 hours for 24 hours.

Puerto explains that even though many people keep Cuban food in the same category as spic Mexican cooking, the spices in Cuban dishes are similar 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 dad 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 entreprenuers was the size of the restaurant. "I think our toughest challenge 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 better.

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

Soul de Cuba spent 6 p.m. and it only takes 15 minutes for a line to form and wind out the door. Though they officially start serving at 1 p.m., Puerto and Kim know in agreement that they'll stir 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 surprisingly affordable at $12 to $13 for mains.

You certainly won't be bored while waiting for your table: Puerto describes the place as "moody and cozy, but festive," and it delivers. The bar environment with its mix of hardwood and bar stools rhythm fills the room and the whole coffee-colored restaurant glows with a sense of warmth and excitement that can only be matched by the meal.

No swipe card at the bar, where you can leisurely press the time picking out a cigar to smoke 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 minced garlic
2 medium onions finely diced
2 cloves garlic pressed or finely chopped
2 tablespoons oregano
% teaspoon sugar
Salt to taste

In a simmer, drain the soaked beans and rinse them lightly under cold running water. Put the beans and the fresh water in a large soup pot (taking into account the beans by at least 1 to 2 inches) Cover and bring to a boil 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 onions and spices and cook until tender. Add the onions, garlic, spices and vinegar to the soup. Let soup simmer for at least 2 hours. Add salt and pepper to taste.

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