

Cocina CUBANA

Chefs face challenges in Cuba today, but a passion for their profession allows them to preserve Cuba's cuisine.

BY MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ AND JULIO J. RAMIREZ, CEC, AAC



Coco Nuñez, one of the cooks at the research station in the Cuban countryside, shaves a pig in preparation for a feast that will include *mojo de yuca* and rice and beans.

Marie and Julio Ramirez, who own four restaurants in Seaside, Monterey and Pacific Grove, Calif., visited Cuba in June 2004 to sample traditional Cuban cuisine.

Cuba lies just 90 miles off the Florida coast—just offshore, yet a world away. The combination of a strict trade embargo imposed by the United States and the socialist regime has effectively isolated Cuba from U.S. tourism, mass marketing, retail fads and fashions, chain stores and shopping malls. There's no sign of the fast-food chains that are supplanting local foods in many third-world countries.

We wondered: What is it like for a chef to work in a country where the food supply, the businesses and the resources are state owned? Where there are food shortages and food rationing? Where group effort is valued over individual innovation? What was happening in the culinary profession in Cuba today? What was happening to Cuba's culinary heritage?

Old Havana is a beautiful colonial city—designated a United Nations World Heritage site—but sorely in need of a paint job. Many buildings are crumbling, but they're still occupied, and often overcrowded. It's hot and humid, but the streets are clean, and bustling with European tourists and locals. Folks buy pizza slices or Cuban sandwiches from tiny stalls, or sip the juice from coconuts with a straw. There are no supermarkets, but rather greengrocers for fruits and vegetables, bakeries for bread and butcher shops for meat and eggs.

Chefs in Havana

In the past, being a chef in Cuba was considered a humble, low-class occupation—a legacy of slavery and colonialism, when servants did the cooking. The Asociación Culinaria de Cuba has worked to change that perception, as well as to develop the art of cooking. Now with university courses

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and an emphasis on proficiency, chefs are educated and respected as professionals. The Department of Tourism has established schools to train chefs in the continental style, so they can cater to European tourists, but one of the objectives of the Asociación Culinaria has been to encourage the preservation and promotion of the traditional Cuban cuisine, a blend of the island's Spanish, African, French and indigenous her-

itages. So while a certain continental repertoire appears on most restaurant menus, more and more chefs today are promoting *criollo* cuisine, such as *pierna asada* (roast citrus-marinated leg of pork), *picadillo* (ground pork and beef in a spicy tomato sauce with capers, raisins and olives) and *moros y cristianos* (a mix of black beans and white rice).

Restaurants have set menus and no daily specials. Because they are state

run, they can only buy from one purveyor, an agency of the state. The kitchen isn't supposed to carry an inventory, so the chef must give a list of what he will need for that day to the purchasing agent, who calls in the order to the regional distribution agency. The agency buys from the state's centralized warehouses, and sometimes the suppliers don't have the quality, choice or quantity the chef needs for his regular daily menu.

"The distribution agency may send red beans instead of black beans; the rice may be broken; the cilantro may be old—the chef may have to pick through the leaves and use what he can," one chef told us. "So a lot of recipes may have missing ingredients or have substitutions."

Another chef said, "A good chef will be creative and work around this. But other, less-creative chefs will give up and just '86' those dishes from the menu, and then let the other ingredients that go into that dish spoil, instead of using them in another recipe."

When we asked about developing new menu items, one chef said, "I am only creating in my mind." A chef can't decide to order unusual ingredients for a new dish, because he won't be able to get them. Chefs can't just plan a menu and order items—they have to wait and see what comes in the delivery that day.

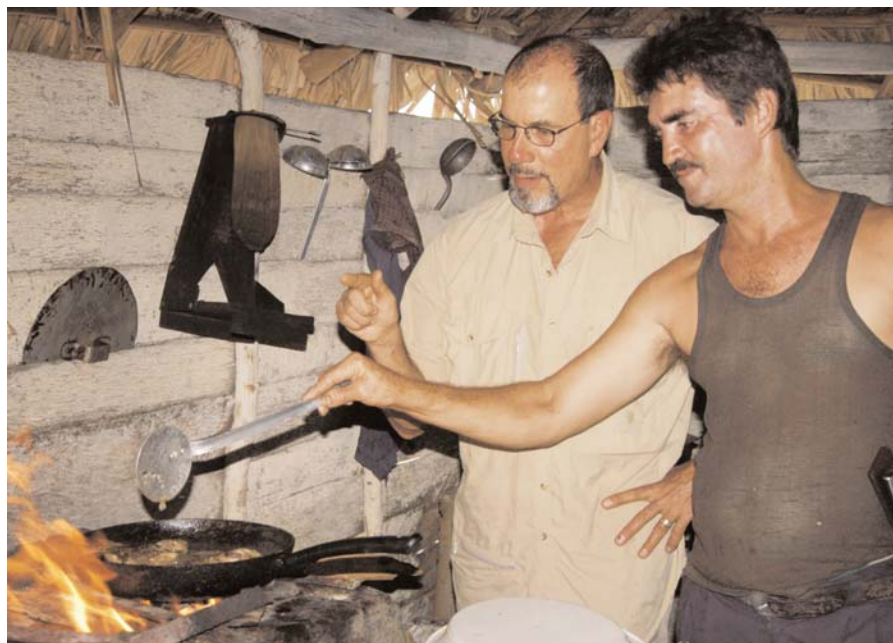
And a person "who doesn't know anything about cooking" has to approve of all changes on the menu. What, we asked, does a chef do when heads of state are guests, and a special dinner must be prepared? We were told, "There are exceptions made for dignitaries."

According to one chef, many chefs are in the profession "out of need, not out of love." This can be a problem when the day's delivery is short of necessary ingredients for the



Local fishermen supply fresh fish to the research station, which the cooks deep-fry and serve with a *mojo* of garlic and onions sautéed in olive oil with chile and a splash of vinegar.

Julio Ramirez (l) cooks with Manresa Cantallops at the research station.



menu, and the chef has to be creative. According to this chef, “You have to have love for cooking, like a painter has for his art. You can teach anyone how to cook—they can do it—but you can’t improvise with taste if you aren’t born with the gift. You’ll only produce mediocre plates.”

One chef has been successful for 14 years, but, he explains, there are challenges to being successful. If a chef is good at what he or she does, there will be promotions: A chef can start in a small hotel, go to a larger one with two restaurants, then on to an even larger one with two restaurants, a coffee shop and a bar, with more employees, more clientele and more problems. “You will still have the same salary, but it’s a promotion. Because of this, no one is really motivated to shine.”

Distribution

Meat and fresh produce go from farms to centralized warehouses. The products are then distributed each day by trucks with no refrigeration. Produce is often in poor condition by the time it reaches the restaurant. Cattle killed in the morning are in the centralized warehouse storage facilities by afternoon, then transported to the regional supply agencies, and finally delivered to the markets/restaurants.

The system of daily inventory distribution is problematic for chefs. Unlike in the United States, where a distributor gets a delivery of cilantro and can hold it in a warehouse for a week under appropriate refrigeration, in Cuba it comes to the warehouse and goes out on the same day. So if a chef wanted cilantro, and none had

come in that day, he couldn’t get it. Given that restaurants are expected to deplete their inventories every day, they can’t order a larger amount when it’s available and then hold on to it for the rest of week.

Paladares

While the state owns and runs hotels and restaurants, *paladares* are private family-run restaurants, usually operating in homes. When Castro opened Cuba to international travel in 1993, he also relaxed rules regarding private ownership, thereby allowing the licensing of small family restaurants. But these *paladares* would operate under strict regulations: they would be heavily taxed, they would serve only *criollo* food, they would not have more than 12 seats, and they would not be permitted to serve beef or lobster, which were reserved for export or for the state-owned restaurants. “However, that doesn’t mean, of course, that you can’t get beef or lobster in a *paladar*—many things are possible with the right incentive,” a chef says.

Paladares appeal to tourists, and often offer more variety and creative cuisine than state-run restaurants, but like the state-run restaurants, *paladares* have the same difficulty

obtaining food items. One *paladar* we ate at was out of all the pork dishes on its menu except one—a smoked chop. They were also out of Cristal beer and mint, so we couldn’t order *mojitos*.

Marketplace

At Havana’s central marketplace, the vendors were subdued—there was no friendly calling out to passersby to sample their fruits, no bargaining and no negotiating prices. Perhaps that’s because the vendors don’t own the produce they’re selling—it belongs to the state. The vendors are paid to sell, so there’s no incentive to compete for customers.

The market stalls offered roots and tubers, avocados, coconuts, guavas, papayas, onions, citrus, pineapples and plantains—an inventory of primarily pre-Columbian food items. Upstairs in the meat section, only a few stalls were open, and little meat was available.

Criollo dinner

Despite the difficulties chefs face in producing their menus every day, the chefs we talked to were proud of their professions and proud of their culinary heritage. One chef, Sarai Guerra, invited us to enjoy a five-course meal that she prepared to

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showcase *criollo* cuisine. Using the ingredients of traditional Cuban cooking, she produced a feast that included: *croquetas* with ham; *chicharitas* (deep-fried thin-sliced plantain chips); *tostones* (twice-fried plantains) and *chicharones* (crisp-fried pork skins), served with *mojitos* (a cane rum, mint and lime drink); *tamal in cazuela* (a thick soup of tender corn with pork); *ropa vieja* (shredded beef simmered in *sofrito*, a spicy tomato sauce) accompanied by rice and *maduros fritos* (fried ripe plantains); a plate of *yuca con mojo criollo*; and for dessert, *torrejas elegantes* (an elegant bread pudding with coconut and cinnamon).

When people ask what is distinc-

many recipes, reflect Cuba's African heritage. Meats are usually sautéed or slow-cooked, and there is a heavy reliance on starches in the Cuban diet, especially the pre-Columbian roots and tubers: yuca, malanga, boniato and potato.

Countryside

After our stay in Havana, we traveled through the Cuban countryside, heading east. We had volunteered to work on a research project involving American crocodiles in an isolated area of mangrove swamp on the southeastern coast of Cuba. Our job would be to assist scientists tagging and monitoring hatchling crocodiles.

The camp cooks, Coco Nuñez

and Manresa Cantallops, worked over an open fire, preparing camp meals in a thatched-roofed patio next to the mess hall. While breakfast was a simple affair—crackers and cheese and, of course, the strong sweet *café cubano*—the noon and evening meals were more substantial. Lack of refrigeration meant that the cooks often prepared meals using chorizo, canned meats or

sardines, and they relied heavily, as most Cuban families do, on the Cuban staples of yuca, malanga, plantains, potatoes, sweet potatoes, rice and beans. These starches were supplemented by cucumbers, carrots, avocados, pineapples, mangoes and chiles. While chiles are used in

Cuban cooking, these are not the fiery chiles of the Caribbean, but milder, almost sweet, red ones.

Local fishermen came to the research station to trade some of their fresh fish for our stash of rum and Bucanero beer. Thanks to them, we often feasted on whole deep-fried *liseta*, *mojara* and *ausa*, served with a simple *mojo* of garlic and onions sautéed in olive oil with chile and a splash of vinegar.

When the cooks found out that Julio was a chef and that we were interested in their traditional cuisine, they involved him in their daily cooking, and an interchange of recipes and techniques ensued. Because of our interest in Cuban cuisine, Nuñez and Cantallops began planning a Cuban feast. Everyone took turns turning the spit while a small pig went from white to a golden roasted brown, its skin crackling and juices running down its sides. It was so juicy that we ate it with our hands, with *mojo de yuca*, rice and beans.

When they saw our enthusiasm for the pig, the cooks prepared another wonderful meal: fricassee of goat—a succulent, flavorful stew made from machete-chopped goat simmered in Bucanero beer with onions, garlic, Cuban red peppers and tomatoes.

In Cuba, committed chefs have to deal with a lack of incentive to shine, inconsistent products, a poor distribution system, food shortages and poor or unreliable refrigeration, but they are proud of their culinary traditions and their careers. They have a passion for their profession. From the Havana chef who cooked us a five-course *criollo* meal to the rural cooks who celebrated our visit with a pig and a goat, we were impressed with the warm hospitality, the high personal standards and the pride of Cuban culinarians. □



Julio Ramirez samples chiles from a vendor in Havana's central market.

tive about traditional Cuban cooking, probably the most outstanding is the use of wine, red vinegar, olive oil and bay leaf in many dishes—the legacy of Spain—which gives sauces, stews and beans a distinctive taste. Olives, raisins and capers are also used frequently. Okra and plantains, found in