



MIAMI



FEEL THE BEAT

The heady culture and exotic flavours of Cuba have found a home in Miami, as CATHERINE MCGREGOR discovers.



At 3.05pm you're maybe expecting the kids home from school, or you're sneaking to the vending machine for something you'll likely regret. In Miami, it's coffee-break time – officially. Five past three has been designated city-wide “cafecito time”, a tribute to the coffee that keeps this part of South Florida hopping. Known more widely as “Cuban coffee”, a cafecito is a strong and syrupy espresso served from walk-up counters all over Miami. I tried it for the first time at Las Olas cafe in Miami's tourist mecca South Beach, where the server – it's nearly always a middle-aged woman – measured a teaspoon of demerara sugar into a metal jug and set it below the espresso spouts.

Once the coffee had been pulled, she used a spoon to whip the mixture in the jug before pouring it into a demitasse cup of white china. Coffee made this way is more viscous, with a more pronounced caramel flavour than you'd get from simply stirring sugar into your cup.

Together, the darkly potent espresso and cloying sweetness had me wired well into the evening. The next morning, lesson learned, I asked for “half sugar” in my café con leche, a sort of Latin American latte. I still felt my blood sugar spiking with every sip. This time I was in downtown Miami, at Versailles, the city's most famous Cuban restaurant. For more than 40 years, Cuban exiles have gathered here to discuss Castro and communism over dishes like *bolicho* (pot roast), *maduros* (fried plantain) and *Moros y Cristianos*, or “Moors and Christians”, a combination of black beans and white rice. If you're looking for a quick bite you can join the locals at the to-go counter, where the cafecitos are accompanied by ham and cheese croquetas, fried empanadas stuffed with *pastillo* (a spicy beef mixture) and sugary *pastelitos*, a puff pastry with a sticky guava filling.

Named for its etched-glass mirrored walls, Versailles sits on the outskirts of the inner-city neighbourhood known as Little Havana. Since

OPPOSITE PAGE: You can't go to Miami and not try a famed Cuban sandwich.

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: It's hard to miss Azucar, one of Miami's best ice cream stores – the avocado option is a must-have; come 3.05pm it's coffee-break time; Calle Ocho (8) is the main thoroughfare of Little Havana.



“Dozens of Cuban retirees gather here daily to play dominoes, filling the air with the snap of plastic tiles against tabletops and the smell of cigar smoke.”



FROM TOP: Ball & Chain is a classic Little Havana night spot; Máximo Gómez Park aka Domino Park; service with a smile in Little Havana.

the Cuban Revolution of 1959, hundreds of thousands of that country’s people have made the short but perilous boat journey to Miami in search of a better life. On Calle Ocho, a stretch of road that runs through the heart of Little Havana, Cubans recreate the sounds, smells and tastes of the home they left behind.

You can hear Máximo Gómez Park, commonly known as Domino Park, almost before you see it. Dozens of Cuban retirees gather here daily to play dominoes, filling the air with the snap of plastic tiles against tabletops and the smell of cigar smoke. Cuban cigars are still illegal in the United States, but the next best thing is made in the cigar factories of Little Havana. Tobacco is grown on farms throughout Central America from Cuban seeds, then shipped to Miami to be prepared by expert Cuban-trained cigar rollers.

The Little Havana locals are welcoming to tourists – there are even benches around the edges of Domino Park for curious onlookers – but the area is still the sort of place where a knowledgeable guide comes in handy. I joined a tour of Calle Ocho with Miami Culinary Tours, which offers walking tours of many of the city’s neighbourhoods, including trendy Wynwood and touristy South Beach.

We began with perhaps Cuba’s most famous culinary export: the Cuban sandwich. It’s thought the hearty snack – a gut-busting combination of ham, roast pork and Swiss cheese, often with a layer of salami – has its roots in the lunchboxes of tobacco and sugar workers around the turn of the century. At El Pub, a Calle Ocho restaurant where the walls are lined with pre-Revolution memorabilia, we ate *medianoche*, or “midnight” sandwiches

(so named for their popularity with late-night Havana revellers), a variant on the original made with sweet yellow egg dough bread, similar to Jewish challah.

Down the road at the Cuban Memorial Boulevard Park, a flame burns for lives lost in the Bay of Pigs invasion, the failed US-backed attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro in 1961. A few metres away is a gnarled ceiba tree, which has become a makeshift shrine for local adherents of Santería, a religion popular with Caribbeans of West African descent. The faithful make blood sacrifices of chickens and pigeons below the tree, or leave offerings of fruit.

Some of those offerings no doubt come from Los Pinareños Frutería, a fruit stand/cafe across the road. This is a good place to find *mamey*, a Cuban fruit with a taste that’s a cross between sweet potato, papaya and maraschino cherry. Try it in a batido, or smoothie, whizzed up by Guillermina Hernandez, who opened the store in 1965 alongside her husband, Angel. Out the back is an outdoor oasis where you can drink your batido (or coffee, sugarcane juice, or coconut water straight from the shell) among pecking roosters and the snuffles of Chucha the pig, a family pet with an enviable diet of watermelon, mango and avocado.

“Azucar!” (“Sugar!”) was the on-stage catchcry of Celia Cruz, Cuba’s beloved “Queen of Salsa”. It’s also the name of Miami’s best new ice cream store. You can’t miss Azucar – it’s the place with an immense fibreglass five-scoop cone hanging over the entrance. The shop specialises in Cuban and tropical flavours, like *guarapiña* (sugarcane and pineapple), café con leche, and the best avocado ice cream I’ve ever had. Their most popular flavour is *Abuela Maria*, homemade vanilla ice cream studded with candied guava and pieces of *Galletas Marias*, Latin American cookies similar to wine biscuits.

Next door to Azucar is one of Calle Ocho’s original nightlife landmarks. In the decades before Cuban immigration transformed the area, the Ball & Chain was a gangster hangout and one of the only places in the city that allowed African-American jazz and blues musicians to play to white crowds. Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong and Count Basie performed regularly at the Ball & Chain until its closure in 1957. Last year it reopened as an all-day restaurant, bar and venue, with Cuban music now sharing the stage with American jazz and blues. Every afternoon a live band plays renditions of Cuban standards, the joyous rhythms spilling out onto the street



beyond. The bar food here is a modern take on Cuban and Latin American culinary classics: fried arancini-style balls of Moros y Cristianos, Cuban sandwich “spring rolls”, and crunchy *chicarrones* (pork rinds) with spicy mayo. With its tropical climate and abundant fish, it’s no surprise that Miamians are mad for ceviche: Ball & Chain’s conch version with lime and mango is an excellent option if you’re in the mood for something lighter.

Me, I was in the mood for a drink. It wasn’t even *cafecito* time and already the Ball & Chain felt like a party, bodies swaying to the music while the bartender banged out percussion with a knife against his ice scoop. The signature cocktail here is a strong and smoky Calle Ocho Old-Fashioned made with Cuban Bacardi rum and tobacco leaves, but that’s a drink best left to the sultry night-time. I ordered a lime and mint mojito, Cuba’s most famous cocktail, and found a seat in the sun.

Nicola Edmonds visited Sicily as a guest of Antonio Gacace and La Bella Italia. For more details of Antonio’s Food & Culture Tours:

- www.labellaitalia.co.nz
- ciao@labellaitalia.co.nz
- 04-566-9303 ext 4



CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT: Miami local; vanilla ice cream with candied guava and Latin American biscuit from Azucar; a Cuban sandwich is a meaty affair with ham, roast pork and often salami too; El Pub restaurant in Little Havana.



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