

The Myth of Cafe Con Leche and Other Heartbreak

By V. Lazaro Zamora

A thin film of grease covers Ellegua and Chango' who stand watch above the counter on a high shelf, over a partially smoked "tábacco" and a half filled glass of rum. An aura of decades old burnt oil stains the walls with the fried remainder from piles of croquetas, empanadas and pork. The smell of Café Cubano (no, not espresso) hangs between the scent of garlic, lime and black pepper where it lingers for a moment before subjugating them and dominating the air I breath. This is what my abuela's kitchen smelled like. This restaurant might actually be as genuine in flavor, as it is smell, making it worth the aggravating drive on the 405 from Torrance to downtown LA and the pre-trip fumbling around with the GPS.

I have given up on finding an outstanding Mexican restaurant in Southern California. It's good enough but, I've decided, nothing compares to The Nuevo Leon on 18th in the Chi. However, the search for Cuban food in LA is not something I am willing to abandon. I'm only half Cuban; born a *Jankee* in the states, but it is a good half and it won't go for long without a decent media noche. LA was a second home to Desi Arnaz and he brought Babalu into American living rooms before Billy Graham brought in *Jesus*; ergo there must be good Cuban food here somewhere. I'm certain that every LA transplant has sat through meals of blasphemous bacalo, misrepresenting moros and fraudulent flan. We have endured uglier things in our people's history.

I have had to put up with the posers, fakes and charlatans of the Cuban culinary world, here and elsewhere. Two things make an imposter Cuban restaurant easy to spot; Mexican cooks in the kitchen and a quiet counter. I have nothing against Mexicans, their food or the way they cook it, but, the onion is a very delicate vegetable and can easily unbalance a dish. Mexican cooks use too many onions in preparing our dishes. Cuban food is about garlic, citrus and spice; substituting intimate knowledge of the discerning Cuban palette with a heap of chopped bulbs – no disrespect meant to what is considered the "oldest vegetable known to humankind"- is a dead giveaway that the chef probably hails from South of Texas not Miami, and that the restaurant is as Cuban as chili con carne.

A quiet counter is anathema to a good Cuban restaurant. Where there is good Cuban food, there are Cubans. Where there are Cubans, there is scandalous racket; people arguing, cursing, commenting on how fat everyone else is, airing of personal laundry, the occasional threat to politicians and ill-conceived plan to hit "the beard." It's inherent to our culture to gossip and complain; we live for knowing who has cancer, arguing about how Kennedy screwed us over

back in the 50s or yelling at the chef over the amount of salt used in the dishes. This place is only at a hum. I start to think maybe I've called it too early.

This café is different from the others I've visited. The ones with palm trees on their menus are condescending, but nowhere as bad as the ones with waitresses who pronounce *Ironbeer* like it's written –the slogan was "*Iron-ber, O' no beber!*" It's supposed to rhyme! I watch admiringly as plates of black beans and rice, ropa vieja, yucca and tostones are passed from behind the counter, now lined with patrons devouring roasted pork and potaje de garbanzo, and end up being placed in front of eagerly awaiting diners by a young, dark-haired woman in a stained apron. There are only four tables in the restaurant and no place to stand, so I wait for a place to open up. An older couple gets up from the counter and leaves and I end up sitting next to a large man with a trucker hat and a bushy "pancho villa" moustache eating un "sandwiche" Cubano. He doesn't look up to notice me and I have to nudge him as I get comfortable; I am larger, younger and stronger and considering that I am Cuban and his moustache clearly signals that he is not, I have the right of way here.

The floor could have been swept and mopped only hours ago, but it's not likely that it was. It has been some time since the plastic tiles have been replaced and at least of decade of city grime has been embedded into the once white linoleum floor. The smoked-grease, stained, ceilings and walls absorb the light coming from the fluorescent fixtures and hardly any brightness is spread from the wall length mirrors of the adjacent dining area. It is difficult to distinguish the etching on the glass of the mirrors from the grungy streaks left during the last attempt to polish them. *What is it about Cubans and ceiling to floor mirrors* I ask myself.

The grill is directly in front of the counter. I am sitting in front of a barrel-chested man in a bright red shirt and stained white apron who grills bread and refills the coffee cups of people sitting at the counter. The blood vessels in his nose have ruptured with age and a Dodgers ball cap partially reveals a thick crop of white, wavy hair. He looks at me and with the slight lisp of ancient Castilian aristocracy asks, "Que quieres comer?" The nasally twang in his voice and the abruptness of how he asks what I want to eat, is a sure sign I have hit pay dirt.

I long to hear him swallow the last "r" in *comer*, so, I ask "que?" I cup my ear and feign deafness for effect. He asks again and I bathe in the familiar growl of a grumpy old Cuban who is forced to repeat himself. "Café con leche," I say to him. "Quieres pan?" the *s* fades abruptly at the end of quieres and is replaced by a soft exhale. I nod patiently though, really, I would beg for the hot buttered bread he has toasting on the plancha. "Orita," he says.

Moments later one of the women from behind the counter steps up and pours the café con leche from a small, metallic, stove-top kettle into a tall glass in front of me and the white haired viejo lays a red basket with a quartered end of pan de bollio. Soft, rainbow colored spots form on the surface of a midnight, childhood memory as I alternate dipping the bread into the glass and softly sucking the warm pulp into my mouth.

I finish my food and get up from the counter. El viejo nods to me while continuing to work the magic of his plancha. The same woman who served me my café con leche has just served another diner a heaping plate of yucca con mojo de ajo, the burnt cloves of garlic is an aroma which will stay in her hair long after she has left this place and gone home. She steps through the opening at the counter and asks how everything was. I don't hear a nasally twang and she has gold capped teeth, which is another tell; Cubans do not rock gold unless it is thick, gaudy chains. I fear this whole outing may have been an illusion. Maybe the old man is a Hollywood washout who could only find a gig imitating an old Cuban man in this restaurant? "Bien," I answer; a slight crack in my voice betraying nervousness.

I spot some empanadas in a small, glass case directly beside the cash register. They are the remnants of a busy morning. Their brethren were snatched up by split bellied diners wanting to prolong their Caribbean culinary experience. I ask about their origin; another way to spot a poser Cuban restaurant is that they outsource their pastry making to local bakeries. She tells me that they make them on site and I ask for the few that are left in the case and decide to take the last three remaining croquettas as well, even though they look a little soft and moist, not crisp and firmly oblong like they should. She puts them in a large pink box and when I ask for a bag she apologizes for not having one for me. I ask the woman where she is from. She is Guatemalan and without being asked she tells me that the other lady is Ecuadorian. "Is the owner Cuban?" I ask. It's imperative that he is and I must know to set my mind at ease and to help me decide if I will come back. She tells me that el viejo is not the owner, but he is Cuban and so is the owner. I look to the Orishas one last time before leaving and I am grateful that I have not been forsaken by them once again.

I walk out through the wrought-iron, decorative front door and peer back inside through the storefront window. It is too obscured by painted letters that have chipped and faded in the sun. Next door there is a Pentecostal, storefront, church. A brightly dressed woman in gaudy, gold jewelry and what is clearly a blond wig stands in front of the opened door revealing empty pews. She follows me with her eyes as I walk past her and loudly complains, in Spanish, that people only come to Jesus when they need things. I get into my car and weep uncontrollably over the memories of all that I have lost.