

A surprising taste of Cuba downtown



By [Jo McGarry](#)

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Pollo Soul de Cuba

Here in Hawaii, we love to think of ourselves as the ultimate melting pot, but we're not the only place in the world with an incredibly diverse food culture. Take a tour of the menu at Soul de Cuba Cafe on Bethel Street and you'll find similar influences in many of the dishes.

"Cuban food IS fusion," says Soul de Cuba owner Jesus Puerto with an infectious smile. "Our Cuban food culture has been influenced by immigrants from West Africa, Portugal, Spain, North Africa and China who began coming to Cuba in the mid 1800s," he explains.

Today, Cuban food is an amalgamation of all of these influences - and there's lots of it on display at Soul de Cuba Café.

Jesus opened the restaurant just over a year ago, and he's been overwhelmed by the response.

“It’s been amazing, the support and response from the community,” he says of the tiny, intimate café that sits next to Brasserie Du Vin and opposite Hawaii Theater. “On weekends there are people lined up in the street waiting for a table.”

The popularity of Soul de Cuba has come largely through word of mouth.

“I think that our food has something in common with the food that local people enjoy,” says Jesus, speaking of dishes like marinated roast pork, sides

of rice and beans and an outstanding oxtail stew.

The warmth of Soul de Cuba is apparent the moment you walk in. Spice-colored walls bathed in cumin and saffron are a backdrop for photographs of Jesus’ family and his collection of cigar box labels, many dating back more than 100 years. And while you’ll find comfortably recognizable dishes in marinated roast pork, sautéed chicken, stewed oxtails at Soul de Cuba, what you won’t find is a lot of heat or overwhelming spice. “There’s a misconception that Cuban food is spicy,” says Jesus, “but it’s not at all. One of the most popular dishes on the menu is the Lechon Assada - thinly sliced roast pork marinated with mojo (a citrus-based marinade) and served with the customary black beans, white rice and plantains.

At lunch there’s an incredibly good fried catfish sandwich (again, add a little hot sauce to tease more flavor from the thick, white fish), and there’s a perfectly balanced black bean chili that works as an appetizer, entrée or shared side.

I loved the Pollo Soul de Cuba (\$18) a breaded chicken breast with a salsa made from mango, black beans, guava, pineapple and rum.

Media Noche (\$7) is a sumptuous, slow roasted pork with grilled onions, Swiss cheese and pickles on pressed Cuban bread with mayonnaise, or try the Cubano (\$7) with baked ham, marinated pork, cheese and pickles. Seafood dishes including snapper and shrimp are offered at market price.

And if you really want to taste a dish that combines a local favorite with Cuban soul, then go for the warming, comforting Rabo Encindido (\$16) - oxtails simmered in a red wine sauce.

What Soul de Cuba manages to pack into a tiny space (the restaurant seats about 40 people) is quite remarkable. Go early in the week if you don't want to wait in line. Weekends and nights when Hawaii Theatre has a performance can be hectic.

Soul de Cuba Café

1121 Bethel St.

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