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Location, looks, flavors work well at Soul de Cuba

By [Wanda A. Adams](#)
Advertiser Food Editor

It's a no-brainer: Soul de Cuba Cafe is going to do very well in Honolulu.

It's got location, right across the street from the Hawai'i Theatre marquee in the ever-more-chic Chinatown district. It's way cute, with the walls lined with vintage Puerto family portraits and images of cigar box tops, TV screens looped with artful stills of Cuban scenes and giclee prints of richly colored Latin artwork. And the food is good, plentiful (important in this market), affordable — and the only thing like it in town.

The restaurant, with about 38 seats including some at the bar and on high cocktail tables, generated an expectant buzz among hip young things months before it opened in early July. It's already seeing capacity crowds at peak dining times. Like most new restaurants in Honolulu (and this annoys the heck out of me, but that's my problem), they don't take reservations except for large



Soul de Cuba's chef Jemmari Kamal, of Makiki, holds a guava empanada and Cubano sandwich.

Photos by REBECCA BREYER | The Honolulu Advertiser

SOUL DE CUBA CAFE

Rating: Three and a half forks out of five (Good to very good)

1121 Bethel St.

545-2822

www.souldecuba.com

(Web site refers to sister restaurant in New Haven, Conn.; some menu items not available here)

Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays.
Dinner: 5:30-10 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays, 5:30-10:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays.

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parties, so plan accordingly.

I wanted to fall in love with this place. I wanted the food to blow me away. I wanted to saunter in and salsa out.

It almost happened. Indeed, my shoulders were doing the mambo to the music, and the decor kept my eyes roaming throughout two pleasant meals. But the food was more plain and less exotic than I'd hoped — spiced but not spicy, comforting but not captivating. On the Web site of Soul de Cuba's sister restaurant in New Haven, Conn., I noted that some of the more unusual dishes (boliche, a stuffed pot roast; a fried yuca appetizer) aren't on the Honolulu menu.

Still, well-made homey-type food isn't to be sneered at. I'm looking forward to going back when it's chilly out and I'm hungry. I'll order the cumin-spiked Abuela's sopa de frijoles negros (Grandma's black-bean soup) with a side of rice and — OK, I shouldn't, but I probably will — the airy empanadas stuffed with ground pork. You get three of these delicious nuggets per serving (ignore the Thousand Island dressing-style dip).

Unless, of course, I choose to indulge in the plate of three dessert empanadas, stuffed with guava paste and cream cheese (three, with raspberry garnish). Empanadas here are unlike Mexican-style versions I've eaten, which were made with a heavier, pie-crust-type pastry.

Soul de Cuba uses thin stuff that bubbles up and crackles in the hot fat, turning beautifully golden. At first bite, with its impressions of crisp pastry, hot, candy-sweet guava and melting rich cheese, this confection went directly on to my list of top desserts in town. Uncomplicated but

Brunch: 11:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Sundays.

Overview: Cool cafe serves folksy Cuban food to the sound of Afro-Cuban music.

Details: No liquor license yet; corkage fee \$5 per person. Takeout available. Parking in municipal lots on Beretania and Smith. Reservations for parties of six or more.

Price: Soups, appetizers

\$3-\$15; entrees \$7-\$16; desserts \$5-\$6

Recommended: Black-bean soup; anything pork, particularly lechon asado; camarones bailando; empanadas (appetizer or dessert)



The classic Cubano includes ham, roasted pork, Swiss cheese and pickles on pressed Cuban-style bread.

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frighteningly delicious.

But then maybe I'd have my other menu favorite, the camarones bailando (dancing shrimp), crustaceans marinated in a "Cubano-chinois sauce," then sauteed in something buttery. They're part of the dinner Soul Sampler, which also includes four empanadas, three shrimp and two devil crab rolls.

Devil crab, a Tampa Bay favorite according to the menu, surprised me when I saw it at lunch on another diner's table. I couldn't figure out what it was, even though I'd read the menu description. From a distance, it looked for all the world like an unpeeled steamed sweet potato standing on end. The people who had ordered it were surprised, too. "Not what I expected," the woman whispered to me. But both she and I liked ol' devil crab when we got a taste of him, recognizing the dish as a crab-cake cousin — seasoned crab with mashed potatoes, rolled in bread crumbs and deep-fried. What's not to like? In fact, it is a croquette, a common appetizer or entree in the early 20th century, a way to use up scraps of meat, fish or vegetables.

I looked forward to my first Cuban sandwich, the panino of the Caribbean, only available at lunch. My husband's family, who lived in the Caribbean, rave about the delicate ham, the melting cheese, the tender seasoned pork, the crisp-edged bread. So I ordered a classic Cubano (ham, roast pork, Swiss cheese, pickle slices on pressed Cuban-style bread with mayo and mustard, with a good-sized side of potato chips) at lunch.

The sandwich bread is interesting: more densely textured than a baguette but still light. Baked, it's a rectangle perhaps six or seven inches by three; split and stuffed; then pressed in a waffle-like grill. It was delicious, but my dining companion, who has lived in New York and eaten many a Cubano, was thrown off by a salami-like meat that appeared along with the ham. "Lose the salami, put in more pork," she said. Happily ignorant, I munched away. I'm planning to go back for the media noche ("midnight" or "middle of the night") stuffed with marinated roasted pork and grilled onions.

My food-savvy pal had been craving ropa vieja for months. Despite the unlovely meaning of its name (old rags) this dish is a standard, the pot roast of Cuba. It's beef — sometimes flank steak, sometimes a pot-roast cut — slow-cooked with sofrito (sauteed onion, garlic, bell pepper) and tomato sauce, then shredded (thus the resemblance to bit of old, torn fabric). It arrived, as most Soul de Cuba entrees do, in an intimidatingly large platter

paved with arroz blanco (steamed long-grain white rice) with two florettes of steamed broccoli, the restaurant's standard vegetable, for reasons we could not fathom. The flavor? Just right, she said.

At dinner, my husband took the prize, ordering lechon asado, pork marinated in a mojo spice blend and fried with onions. Though it appeared a bit dry, the thick-sliced pork was tender and nicely flavored. I liked this much better than my picadillo, seasoned minced ground beef cooked in tomato sauce with Spanish olives, onions, peppers, capers and tomatoes. The picadillo tasted fine in a comfort-food sort of way but got boring fast. It needed more spicing, more gravy, more of the aforesaid olives, onions, peppers, capers and tomatoes — something.

On both visits, service was prompt and friendly, with owner Jesus Puerto and his staff buzzing about. Puerto founded the original Soul de Cuba in Hartford with his brother, Robert, and partner Yoon Kim, and came to Hawai'i to open another because — well, as the menu says, why not? (Actually, Puerto said, he lived in Samoa for a while and fell in love with the South Pacific and these Islands seemed like a great way to enjoy both worlds.)

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