

MidWeek

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A Little Taste Of Cuba Downtown



By [Jo McGarry](#)

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I have these rules that I try to follow when new restaurants open. I don't go within the first month, and then I try to go back three or four times before I write anything about the food. It easily takes that long for a new restaurant to find its stride and fall into a comfortable space between service and kitchen.

But every so often a new restaurant looks so enticing that I just can't wait.

I felt that way about Soul de Cuba Cafe, the latest restaurant to open downtown. Directly opposite Hawaii Theatre on Bethel Street, the location is fabulous for those wishing to drink wine and nibble pre- or post-performance. The downside is the restaurant is tiny, and while I can imagine it bursting at the seams when the theater crowd descends, there's not room for more than about 50 people. Still, it's a great location - expect it to be the hot new place to visit on the next First Friday. The décor is just beautiful. Muted colors on the walls are a background to family black-and-white photos, pictures of Cuba and framed cigar labels. There's a video screen that shows some dramatic photos of the streets of Cuba, and there's the typically energetic salsa music you'd expect playing in the background.

And the food? Well, it's interesting. Our waitress Carolina explained that while she was from Argentina, the cook is from Morocco and that Cuban food and Moroccan food have lots of similarities. I'm not sure that I found any of them, but I did really enjoy some of the flavors that are obviously bursting to get out of the

kitchen. On the whole, the plates have too much white rice - more a nod to Hawaii plate lunches than a Cuban staple, I think - and need a little work on their presentation. An appetizer sampler with a taste of empanadas, devil crab and tostones (shrimp) was nice enough. The shrimp were excellent, and served on a bed of black beans. But the crab was a bit bland and mushy for me.

I just loved the black bean chili - it's absolutely a winner with a great balance of spice and heat and texture. I'd be back for this in a heartbeat, and at \$3 a cup it's terrific value. It's easy to get a taste of Cuba, and of what is different about this food, in the excellent Pollo Soul De Cuba (\$16), where a salsa of mango, guava, black beans, pineapple and rum over a lightly breaded chicken breast is different enough to make you sit up and take notice.

We had the fish special of the day too, a red snapper that was nicely put together (\$23) but seemed a little pricy compared to other entrees. The average entrée price is about \$14.

There are two desserts, and neither of them appealed, so we left with a check of \$92 for two. It's BYOB with a \$5 corkage fee per person.

On the whole, I love the ambience, and I'm just thrilled that we can add another cultural dining experience to our melting pot. There's a great small bar with six seats that should be lots of fun once the restaurant gets its liquor license and starts serving up mojitos and more, and the owners obviously have a great idea about style and design. I'd like to let them see the chef be a little bolder with his flavors.

Should you go? Absolutely. Would I go back? I'm headed over there right now for another bowl of chili.

Soul De Cuba Café 1121 Bethel St. 808-545-CUBA