

Downtown Planet

VOLUME 28 No. 15 the week of July 17, 2006

HEART AND SOUL

There's nothing like good home cooking

Soul de Cuba Cafe, which opened on Bethel Street almost two weeks ago to large crowds, is owned by Jesus Puerto, a fourth-generation Cuban American from Tampa, Fla.

It's Puerto's second restaurant, which serves up traditional Cuban food. He opened the first Soul in New Haven, Conn., two years ago with his brother, Robert, and their friend, Yoon Kim.

After just six months in operation, the partners knew that they had a winning concept and started to look at other locations. They briefly considered other Mainland cities, including Atlanta, Los Angeles and Philadelphia, but they ended up choosing Honolulu.

According to Puerto, they had three reasons: 1) There are no Cuban restaurants in Hawaii 2) Cuban food, which is a fusion of Spanish, African and Chinese cuisines, is reminiscent of local-style food 3) Puerto just loves the Islands.

Soul de Cuba Cafe is located right across from the Hawaii Theatre. It occupies a cozy space that seats about 40 diners. The walls are painted in warm earth tones and are decorated with photographs and vibrant Afro-Cuban religious artwork. It's casual, classy and comfortable – much like its food.

I didn't have much trouble navigating Soul's menu. There are four different appetizers, three different soups and three salads. The 17 entrées are broken up into chicken, beef/pork and seafood. A handful of sandwiches only are available during lunch.

We started our meal with the Soul Sampler (\$15), which featured a pair of veggie and beef *empanadas*, a trio of shrimp, black beans and two large *croquetas*.

I really enjoyed the *empanadas*, which had a wonderfully crispy and tender pastry on the outside and satisfyingly savory fillings on the inside. The shrimp was very good, too, and cooked with plenty of garlic, cumin and black beans. The beans gave the shellfish a muddy look, but the simple dish was full of flavor.

I wasn't too crazy about the *croquetas*. I had to work through a substantial fried outer layer before I got to the filling, which I think was crab and vegetables. The *croquetas*, which resembled a fried cone sushi, were on the heavy side for an appetizer and seemed like they had a little too much going on.

Our entrées, however, were the pictures of simplicity. I had the *Ropa Vieja* (\$13), which the menu described as a "favorite among visitors to Cuba!" It featured shredded beef cooked with onions in a light tomato sauce, and it was served beside a bed of white rice and a handful of broccoli.

My dining companion had the *Picadillo* (\$9), which featured seasoned minced ground beef cooked in a tomato sauce with Spanish olives, onions, peppers, capers and tomatoes. The dish was served over rice and with a side of black beans.

When our waitress delivered them to our table, there was something instantly familiar and appealing to me. This was home cooking. Unpretentious, unapologetic comfort food.

My beef had a smooth, uncomplicated sauce with the slightly sweet and slightly salty flavors of tomato. It went very well with the rice. As pleasing as it was, I think I preferred the more exciting

tastes of the *picadillo*. The ground beef had a zestiness from the garlic, a sourness from the capers and maybe some lemon, and a sharpness from Spanish olives. The black beans tasted like they had been soaked and simmered in spoonfuls of cumin.

Delicious. Again, it was killer with rice.

A half a day later, I'm still a little mystified by my visit to Soul de Cuba Cafe. I really enjoyed my food, as simple and straightforward as it was. I guess good home cooking is good home cooking no matter where you call home. ☑

Soul de Cuba Cafe

545-2822

1121 Bethel St.

Tue to Sat,

11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.;

Sun, 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

BYOB

Planet



A FAVORITE DISH at Soul de Cuba Cafe is "Pollo Soul de Cuba" – chicken breast breaded and fried, then served with the chef's special salsa made of mango, guava, black beans, pineapple and rum. The dish also comes with *arroz blanco* and *platanos maduros*. TOP: Soul de Cuba Cafe features a warm, inviting atmosphere.