

Soul de Cuba

283 Crown St., New Haven, (203) 498-2822

Open Tues.-Sun. 11:30am-2pm, 6pm-10pm (bar open later). Closed Mon.

www.souldecuba.com

After many months of papered windows and local conjecture, New Haven's newest restaurant is officially on the scene. And a scene it is: stylish and cozy, Soul de Cuba has brought a new slice of urban aesthetics to downtown New Haven, capturing the feel of the hipper parts of New York's outer boroughs.

At the same time, though, this Cuban restaurant is a relaxing respite from the nearby Crown Street club antics, a laid back, grown-up place to eat along the strip. At lunch, the atmosphere is bright and laid back. At dinner, the vibe is warm and sophisticated, with mellow jazz music in the background. And we hear that soon the bar will be open until 2am on weeknights, with a limited menu of small plates and sandwiches, and until 1am on weeknights. Cheers to that.

When a "For Sale" sign appeared in the window of what was then Mom's Indian Kitchen, curious chatter filled the neighborhood, along with the occasional "hallelujah!". We all nursed blueballs until January, but it was worth the wait: the interior that was unveiled in January bears no resemblance to the drab linoleum and bleak lighting of Mom's.

Nor is this your mother's Cuban restaurant. Walls have been painted the deep, warm brown of dried tobacco, with dark wood trim. Upon them hangs a charming collection of sepia-toned original family photographs. Multi-level table seating and a step-up bar, whose handmade surface is a patchwork of cigar box insignias lacquered to a warm gloss, are artfully designed to make the place seem much larger than it actually is. There are a scant 35 seats in the house.

Aside from its ethnic uniqueness in the local dining landscape, the Cuban menu at Soul de Cuba hits a sweet spot with its eminently reasonable prices. Most entrees are under \$15. There is scarcely a better atmosphere-to-price ratio anywhere in New Haven. That is exciting.

The restaurant is an ambitious debut by a trio of young restaurateurs who seem destined to make their mark on New Haven's culinary scene.

Yoon Kim, the youngest, is a veteran of his mother's Korean restaurant, Seoul, just up the street. That's where he met Jesús Puerto, who was a regular there. At the time, Jesús was in the nonprofit world, and his younger brother Robert had been cooking in Puerto Rico. The Puerto brothers contributed their vision of a comfortable space that would celebrate elements of their Afro-Cuban heritage, and the three became partners. Jesús and Yoon now dart back and forth between bar and dining room, while Robert leads the kitchen in back.

Among Robert's appetizers, which are also offered at lunch, we liked the yuca frita, a starchy fried indulgence that eats like a bar snack, with a crispy coating and a dense, almost creamy, center. The yuca can be topped with black bean chili, a full-flavored and hearty version in which green olives make an unexpected but not unwelcome appearance. Vying for starter supremacy with the yuca, the warm and comfortable papa rellena was a deep-fried ball of mashed potato stuffed with ground beef—the kind of appetizer that you don't talk about much but then nonchalantly steal the rest of when nobody's looking.

Empanadas, on a recent visit, were filled with similarly fully flavored ground beef. The pastry was delightfully rich and flaky. Camarones bailando was like a play on shrimp cocktail. Here, the shrimps were marinated, thoroughly sautéed (perhaps a bit too thoroughly), and then melodramatically draped over the rim of a martini glass half filled with yellow rice. The shrimp had a straightforward, slightly sweet flavor.

One of our favorite mains has been the pollo soul de cuba, which the menu calls "Cuban-Chinois style." It is a juicy, well-pounded breaded cutlet covered by a surprisingly sweet fruit salsa. An inspired sprinkle of cilantro harmonized with the dish unexpectedly well. The rabo encendido was an admirable rendition of oxtail, soft and meaty, and especially satisfying if you aren't too shy to gnaw at the bone a little.

Bistec empanizado, a thin cut of sirloin that's marinated, breaded, and pan-fried, was also satisfying comfort food. It was well seasoned and tender, which is more difficult to pull off than it sounds. Picadillo, too, was tasty in an elemental way, offering the comfortably familiar flavors of stewed onions and tomatoes.

Boliche, which is essentially marinated pot roast, is a staple on Cuban menus; we last had one at Versailles, a Cuban diner in Miami. The meat had a solid depth of flavor, although we would have liked more of the chorizo stuffing. (We liked it with hot sauce.) The only disappointment among mains was pargo, a broiled filet of red snapper that was overcooked. Most dishes are served with a mixed bag of accoutrements, among which we have loved the soupy, satisfying black beans and the exemplary maduros—plump, beautifully caramelized sweet plantains.

Our favorite dessert was the apple caramel cheesecake, which was like a cheesecake stuffed inside an extremely sweet apple crisp. Not a bad

idea—not bad at all. Tres leches was fine, but we would have liked it more thoroughly drenched. The coffee is good and assertive, whether served straight up or con leche. And although, unfortunately, smoking is not permitted in restaurants in Connecticut, Jesús and his crew also sell elite, hard-to-find, hand-rolled cigars that are absolutely top-notch. Smoke one on the way home.

Lunch at Soul de Cuba features hot pressed sandwiches, of which our favorite has been the pan con bistec. Elegant in its simplicity, it featured thin strips of beef nestled in fresh, crusty bread along with mayonnaise and caramelized onions that commingled into an unctuous condiment under the heat of the sandwich press.

Soul de Cuba has already shown promise as a bar: reasonably-priced mojitos are excellent, and the bar has few seats but lots of...um...soul. The wine list is well-priced but slight; at our last visit, there were two whites, two decent South African reds, and the “soul sangria,” which features watermelon, goes down easy. (Dating 101: Robin notes that Sangria is the world’s most perfect first-date drink. Just trust him.)

The waitstaff are still finding their sea legs, but we’re confident that service will get smoother over time, as it does at any new restaurant. Regardless, rarely is a restaurant so successful—especially without having done any PR—in its first couple of weeks. It’s a testament to how well thought out the concept really was, and how alluring the vibe is to passers-by. We are clearly not alone in our delight for this new arrival in town.

Soul de Cuba aims to be much more than just another restaurant. Its owners are hoping it will also become a center of gravity for late night socializing, and even a showcase for Afro and Cuban culture; Jesús is already planning a late night African film series. And, yes, we’re told that eventually the folks here will also be serving brunch, ameliorating the inexplicable dearth of Sunday eggs and cocktails in the downtown area. Excuse us please, I think we’d better go and get in line.