



- Home
- Arts
- Events
- Music
- Movies
- Television
- Food & Drink
- News wire
- Your Reviews
- About this site

## [DEEP DISH: Cuban Soul](#)

**By Todd Lyon**  
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Wait. Don't get too excited, just yet: Though you may be ready for the energetic cuisine of Soul de Cuba, Soul de Cuba is not quite ready for you.

The Cuban cafe opened just last week on the corner of Crown and High streets in downtown New Haven, occupying the space that, until September, housed Mom's Indian Kitchen.

Early visitors to Soul de Cuba were introduced to a petite dining room with neutral-colored walls, tiled floors, dark-wood furniture and a mix of artwork combining vintage photos and vivid renditions of patron saints from the mother land.

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Two steps up, there is a bar with six stools hugging a surface made of laminated cigar boxes — the perfect landing strip for mojitos and pitchers of sangria made from scratch.

Rhythmic music fills the air, mingling with spicy aromas wafting from traditional Cuban dishes like Sopa de Frijoles Negros (black bean soup), Bistec Palomilla (pan-seared sirloin with caramelized onions), Crab Anchala (lump crab meat with tomatoes and garlic) and pressed sandwiches, including the famous Cubano (ham, roast pork, Swiss cheese and pickles on Cuban bread).

Soul de Cuba is the fruit of an alliance between three remarkable men: brothers Jesus and Robert Puerto, who grew up in a Cuban community in Tampa, Fla., and their honorary brother, Yoon Kim, who was born in Korea and reared in Connecticut.

Let's start with Jesus. He came to the Northeast in the summer of 2003, when he was recruited by Paul Newman's Hole-In-the-Wall organization; before that, Jesus had worked for the Peace Corps, the U.N., and Habitat for Humanity. His most recent project was developing a retreat in Thailand for 100 Thai orphans afflicted with AIDS.

Jesus's brother, Robert, followed a path more familiar to the Puerto clan. "All the men in my family cook," he says. "Our great-grandfather was a baker who came to the U.S. from Cuba in the early 1900s, and my father was the cook in our household." Robert started working in restaurants at the age of 19, and eventually earned a degree in culinary arts at the Ft. Lauderdale Art Institute.

He cooked for several years in Miami and Puerto Rico, and along the way learned the intricacies of French and Equatorial cuisine from master chefs.

Robert found enviable success as a chef in established restaurants, yet he and his brother had a dream of opening their own place — a friendly, casual eatery offering the Cuban dishes that defined their early lives. "We've wanted to do this for 10 years at least," says Jesus. Their future plans started to fall into place when Jesus moved to Connecticut and met Yoon Kim.

Yoon is the son of Sung Kim, who has operated Seoul Restaurant on Crown Street for many years. "My mom's an inspiration," says the 23-year-old Yoon. He helped out at his mother's place even while he was earning a degree in hotel and restaurant management at Johnson and Wales College in Providence. "I worked at Seoul from Thursday to Sunday, then went back to school on Monday," he recalls.

Jesus Puerto had recently moved from Washington, DC, and missed the Korean restaurants he'd known there. He discovered Seoul, and became a permanent fixture. "Jesus was a good customer," recalls Yoon. The two became friends, then started talking about opening a Cuban restaurant in the neighborhood. "I knew it was the only thing I wanted to do," Yoon says.

When Mom's Indian Kitchen closed its doors in September, the three partners swooped down on the property, cleaning and painting and concocting an identity for Soul de Cuba Cafe. When it came to inventing the menu, the partners made a master list of dream dishes, then experimented with them in the kitchen. "Many of our dishes are home recipes," explains Executive Chef Robert. "Once in a while, I'd have to call my dad or my aunt and say, 'Hey, how do you do this?' It was all trial and error, and all of us had to agree on which items made it to the final menu."

Chef Robert insists that Soul de Cuba's menu is "a work in progress," but I suspect his disclaimer is a product of new-restaurant jitters.

There's no shame in appetizers such as Yuca Frita con Chili, a generous serving of fried yuca topped with black bean chili, or entrees like Ropa Vieja, featuring shredded flank steak simmered with onions and tomatoes, served with white rice, black beans and collards; Pollo Asado con Arroz Amarillo, marinated chicken served Cuban-style with saffron rice and plantains; or Camarones con Salsa, breaded shrimp sauteed with a tomato-caper salsa and served over rice and yuca.

"We want a cozy atmosphere, nothing posh," says Yoon. Soul de Cuba's price points reflect this modest wish; at dinner, entrees are priced from \$9-\$16, and lunch is even cheaper. "We already have regulars," according to Robert. "I met a family this week who'd eaten here three times in eight days."

I think you're going to love discovering the authentic Cuban flavors that are warming up our chilly city. Classic "pressed" sandwiches are served at lunch time and meaty, satisfying entrees are served for dinner. In the afternoon, Cafe con Leche will be brewed for students who appreciate caffeine and wireless Internet hook-ups; after midnight, cocktails and snacks will surely lure the nocturnal crowd.

But please, give Soul de Cuba a week or two or three to get its systems in order and polish its vision. "We're superstitious," says Jesus. "We're having a lot of fun and we feel blessed, but we don't want to jinx ourselves."

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*Todd Lyon of New Haven is a free-lance writer.*

#### THE ESSENTIALS

- Place: Soul de Cuba Cafe, 283 Crown St., New Haven.
- Phone: (203) 498-CUBA (2822).
- Web site: [www.souldecuba.com](http://www.souldecuba.com).
- Hours: Lunch: 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday through Friday. Dinner: 5:30-10 p.m. Tuesday through Friday; noon to 10 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. As of this writing, the partners intend to keep the bar open after midnight and offer sandwiches and snacks from 10 p.m. to closing. Call ahead for confirmation of schedule.
- Reservations: Requested; required for parties of four or more. "With only 10 tables, the place fills up fast," warns Yoon Kim.
- Food: Traditional Cuban fare is served in a tidy, casual, good-looking little eatery where diners happily sit elbow-to-elbow at tables and a bar. At dinner, seven appetizers are offered in the \$5-\$8 range. Three soups grace the menu;

don't miss Chef Robert's signature Black Bean Chili (\$3 cup, \$5 bowl).

- Favorite entrees are Bistec Palomilla, pan-seared sirloin with caramelized onions over white rice, black beans and plantains (\$12); Lechon Asado, marinated roast pork thin-sliced and fried with onions, black beans and yuca (\$12); and Crab Anchala, an Old Tampa recipe featuring white lump crab meat cooked in a sweet tomato and garlic sauce, served with pasta (\$12).

At lunch time, Cuban sandwiches rule. These are priced from \$6-\$8. Dessert is all about flan; specifically, Flan de Queso (cheese flan, \$4).

- Drink: A full bar is highlighted by a small menu of special drinks, including the Soul Mojito (\$6) made with Matusalem Patino Rum, and the Soul Sangria, a secret recipe concocted by the Puerto brothers' dad, featuring red wine, fresh fruit and juices, priced at \$6 per glass, \$15 per half-pitcher, and \$29 per pitcher. Four wines are on the printed list, hailing from Chile, Spain and South Africa. The coffee is divine.

- Wheelchair access: The entrance can be navigated; however, there are a few difficult steps leading up to the bar area and the restroom.

- Smoking: Soul de Cuba will soon be selling a selection of fine Dominican cigars by Arturo Fuente. Jesus says, "I will be happy to go outside and smoke cigars with anyone who asks."

- Credit cards: Visa, MasterCard, Amex, Discover.

- Kid-friendliness: Will cook to please.

- Parking: A parking garage directly across the street on Crown.

- Private parties: Soul de Cuba has already done a few catering gigs and will expand in the future to include take-home catering menus and off-site parties featuring pig roasts and the like.

990 Reads

Rating 