



Five Dollars

chefs' news

March/April 2007

The official magazine of the British Columbia Chefs' Association

Photo by Brent Carbrey

Some Very 'Healthy' Chefs *Ramada Abbotsford wins BCPMA's Competition*



Island Scallops



Chefs invade Cuba!



'Kitchen Pick' Herbs

CUBA!

Christophe Kwiatkowski –
Contributing Writer



The name, its history, the renegade state has always intrigued me, and having done the “tourist thing” lying on a Varadero Beach in 2005 only increased my interest for this communist experiment in progress.



The pastry chef was introduced, and like most chefs, was more interested in disappearing quickly to plate the dessert than to socialize.

If you like cooking, baking, wine and good eating, then The Culinary Institute of America, considered the world’s premier culinary college, will appeal to you. The CIA – Greystone Campus, located in St. Helena in the heart of Napa Valley, is a 2-hour bus ride from Sacramento, past walnut, olive and pistachios groves. Greystone Campus was established in 1995. The CIA has been around for sixty years with its main campus now located in Hyde Park, New York. Some 37,000 alumni have graduated from CIA programs.

Twelve of us, with diverse culinary interests--from chefs, food writers and foodies, joined Wendy Holms’ Cooks Tour of Cuba. Wendy, a world renowned agrologist based in Vancouver (thholmteam.ca), has organized dozens of famous tours to Cuba over the last eight years. She was the right contact to open doors in Cuba.

The 14-day tour promised visits and exchanges with five different chapters of the Cuban Chefs’

Association headed by Chef Eddy Fernandez of Havana. Cuban cuisine . . . Like most people, I had a few preconceived ideas about it. Even though the resort dining in 2005 was up to standard, I had not had the opportunity to taste Cuban food, and the stories of boring, plain international fare seemed to be the only feedback I heard. “Don’t forget your Tabasco!” seemed to be common last-minute advice from past travellers.

Our first exposure to Cuban fare was at Melia Varadero, where we spent two days acclimatizing ourselves to the mid-high twenties temperature. Chef Americo prepared the first of several memorable Cuban meals. We were treated to a lunch of sliced shell-on Langouste (rock lobster) braised in bisque, several salads and the ‘pièce de résistance’—2 boneless suckling pigs stuffed with beans and rice. With pride, Chef Americo tells me that the suckling pigs were no more than two months old. I eyed my Pacific Northwest comrades ... but after a few comments on how ‘cute’ they are, the chef cut the beast and serves us a healthy portion with the crispiest and most succulent skin I ever had. We dig in!

During the meal, two official translators kept the conversation going. The pastry chef was introduced, and like most chefs, was more interested in disappearing quickly to plate the dessert than to socialize. To welcome us, dessert that day was a slice of lemon sponge cake as well as sweet potato pudding.

It became evident early in the tour that pastries and desserts are very basic in Cuba. One must remember that after the Soviet meltdown in 1991, Cuba, a one food crop island (sugar cane), saw from one day to the next, the last ship leaving full of sugar



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BC CULINARY TOURISM

to the USSR, and the last ship arriving with all other necessities. It was a hard lesson to learn when a country is so dependent on another for everything from petroleum, food products, medical supplies and more. That dependence hurts when the other party drops you.

Fidel's Cuban Revolution was on the brink of collapse when Cuba had to operate on only 8% of the petrol it needed and produced; the other 92% stayed with newly formed Mother Russia. Cubans went from a diet of 3000 calories/day to 1700/day (UN figures), so one can easily understand that cooking, especially pastry making, took a back seat to basic survival . . . people had so little to eat that one of the dishes they "created" was braising grapefruit's thick skin and eating it as a steak! In order to survive, some rules were bent; the focus was now on diversifying agriculture to feed themselves, and tourism, to inject some hard currency into the economy.

Since Cuba had been a single crop island for so long, a whole generation of farmers had become bureaucrats. These farmers turned bureaucrats, as well as plows and artisan tools, had to be dusted off. No petroleum was available to operate the old Soviet farm machinery. Also gone were the chemical fertilizers and pest control, so by default, over the last sixteen years, Cuba became an "organic farming model" that the Western world is studying with interest. Slowly but surely, Cuba met the challenges of the "Special Period." Food markets seemed to carry most of the basics, farmers are allowed to sell directly to the population anything produced above the food quota set by the State, thus sprinkling a few grains of capitalism in a communist soup tureen. This symposium of the Special Period is necessary if one wants to understand and appreciate where Cuban food is at.

In Varadero, our first official stop was at "la casa del chef." We were given a culinary course history of Cuban food, starting in the Ice Age. I will spare you the first few million years, but must point out that Cuban food is also called Creole food. Cuban food has been influenced by not only local native people, the Spaniards and the African slaves, but also by the Jews escaping the European

Inquisition on their way to the US, the French who were "invited" to Cuba after Haiti became the first black governed country, and by about 130,000 Chinese who came from San Francisco to become "cheap" labour once slavery was abolished in Cuba. Cubans are very proud to say that they feel they are the most ethnically mixed group on Earth.

On the walls of the casa del chef I was surprised to see a picture of the ex-president of the CCF, Chef Cornelia Volino. Several chefs referred to Bruno Marti as "my brother" from an earlier visit. Since Pierre Trudeau spent some time vacationing with his family in Cuba (to the great annoyance of Jimmy Carter), a special bond exist between the two people. It is a special feeling to be received as a friend just because "you are Canadian!"


Canadian farmers, especially those in the dairy farm industry, have helped their Cuban counterparts a great deal with tools and knowledge. Lately, it seems that Canadian farmers are also going to Cuba to learn about organic farming on a grand scale. Every teacher will tell you there is no greater joy to



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Chef/Author Christophe Kwaitkowsky presents a smock to Cuban chef.


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have your “pupils” in one sector become your teachers in another.

After lunch we are off in our air-conditioned Brazilian-made bus to Cienfuego, on our way to the first taste of the real Cuba, away from the Varadero hotel strip. Most hotels in Varadero and some in other main cities are joint ventures between the Cuban state and hotel chains primarily from Spain, Italy and Canada. Of course, the State owns 51% of the property and the “invited” partner has a 20 year permission to do business, to be renegotiated by the State. These joint venture hotels are usually 4 or 5 stars, and to some degree, one can expect the same standards as a hotel on the Spanish Coast.

Now the state hotels that is a different story! Toilet seats and paper may or may not be there, beds have been around since Batista (Cuban President until Castro’s Revolution in 1959). Air conditioning units are usually just a decoration and the food—well, let’s just say that in one instance we had spaghetti in ketchup sauce and mini-wieners at the breakfast buffet. Thankfully, fresh juices and a busy omelette station (2 egg omelettes only) got our day started.

After a brief visit to the city center, my wife, Andrea, and I escaped the tour to find (after two banks, and a mistaken visit to the Communist Committee Office) a bank that would take our CUC or convertible pesos and exchange them, at the rate

of 1:24, to Cuban pesos. For us, the fun was to try to find where the Cubans buy food and commodities. For that we needed Cuban pesos, not the tourist ones.

Cuba’s dual economy is creating some disparity among the population and it is not difficult to understand why a professional (teacher, doctor), making \$15-20/month (yes, a month), decides to work in the tourism industry where foreigners often tip \$1-2 in a resort restaurant per meal. The Cuban state, among other things, had to deal with an exodus of professionals’ wannabe waiters.

In Cienfuego, after some formal introduction, we were treated to Cuban music followed by lunch, of course at “la casa del chef.” Sitting beside the President of the Cienfuego Chapter (Cuba has 14 provinces, thus 14 chapters), he explained some of the dishes. The dishes had one main purpose—to satisfy one’s appetite, often heavy in starch, little meat, and very few vegetables.

One example was a very rich and thick type of corn grit polenta cooked in seafood stock. Very tasty, but be careful not to fill your plate so that you can select other items such as stuffed blue crab salad, plantain chips, stuffed chicken legs, and a salad of tomato, cucumber and cabbage.

At this time it was explained that vegetable ‘appreciation’ was going through a revolution (Cubans seem to use the word ‘revolution’ every time we would use the word ‘change’). No wonder that every time I listened to a conversation there was hardly more than a few sentences said without “la revolution ...” Vegetables are usually regarded as cattle food, but since the vegetable revolution was imposed by the State, many campaigns have started to change the perception of ‘verdooras’ and people seem to accept that vegetables are part of a healthy diet. The President concluded, “I like my vegetables with lots of meat!”

After lunch, which was punctuated by a singing chef, we visited the kitchens. There I meet Migel, a culinary student who also does some training at ‘La Casa’, during his one year program where he tells me he learns Cuban, Italian and Chinese food. He, like most Cubans, is all smiles and not shy. Migel showed me the oil stove that surely belongs to a museum, and a 15 year old propane stove that uses a

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Welcome at Casa del Chefs, Santiago de Cuba

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wooden stick as an oven door jam. He was most proud of a pre-revolution (1959) American GE fridge, household size, "Look, still working!"

Back in the courtyard we exchanged our thanks and donated a 20 kg. bag of tools and uniforms to the Chefs' Association to make use of. We will repeat this type of donation a total of five times. At this time, I thank Blackwood Uniforms, Belcarra, and Smico for having donated the bulk of the 100 kg. of goods. The balance was brought to Cuba by the other chefs.

In the afternoon, we made our way to the city of Trinidad (World Heritage site by UNESCO) where the streets are built of cobblestones from Spain, used as ballast on the Spanish flotilla. Trinidad is buzzing with music, artists, and paladores, where the 20-40 year old fringe European crowds spend their time. Interesting to me is that even with a very visible police presence at 11 pm, the main square of the town is full of people, local and foreigners, listening and dancing to band after band, rum is poured from bottles brought by the crowd and I observe the police ignoring anyone doing so.

The next morning we are on our way, in Old Russian army trucks, up to the mountains. At a consumption of 70 litres of gas per 100 km, these trucks are unlikely to be endorsed under Kyoto! Up in the flora, we visited a coffee plantation and are hosted to a very simple but succulent lunch of braised pork, rice and beans cooked on a wood burning stove, steamed yucca and salads.

That evening we enjoyed a superb meal of local Cuban cuisine in one of the few paladores. These paladores are "capitalist concessions." Privately owned homes are allowed to receive guests in extra bedrooms, use extra living space and the outdoors to cater food to tourists. Casa de Estela Paladore is a family affair, employing eight members from three generations. Paladores can be hit and miss like restaurants anywhere so it is best to get some recommendations from other travellers.

The next morning we are on our way to Ciego de Avilla where we visited one of several city co-operative farms called organoponicos. At the organoponico El Rabinito (little radish) we learned about crop rotation, crop combination, and how

one may sacrifice a corn plant to pests to have a row of pest-free lettuce. Numbers of kilograms of food produced per square meter was given to us, 30!! Chefs on our tour who also farm did raise their eyebrows in somewhat disbelief... after all we must realize that they enjoy a year around growing season. Senor Losada who came to Canada in 1999 learned among other things the concept of mist irrigation rather than drip, which may explain his high kg. per m² which normally is at 15-20 kg. in Cuba.

Camaguey (pronounced 'Camaway) here we come! This jewel of a town has been relocated several times to finally be in the exact middle of the island, between the Atlantic and Caribbean Sea, as far away as possible from the pirates. There, Chef Teofilo meets five of us who will cook with him and other local chefs in preparation for the dinner at 'la casa del chef'.

After explaining to me that the pork loin that I asked for three days ago cannot be had with local money, we all stop at a hard currency store to find a loin, yes, but frozen, so after more broken Spanish, I decide that I can work with any protein as long as it is not frozen hard. The chefs seem excited to share their kitchen for the event and share we had to— one beat up convection oven, four burner stove, two pots, two pans, one cookie sheet and a total of eight kitchen utensils, including two dull knives. Two hours later and a lot of laughter (what else can you

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Canadian and American Chefs holding certificates presented to us by Cuban Chefs in Casa del Chefs, Santiago de Cuba.

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Once again, self-reliability gets a boost of hard currency as Las Terrazas has a small hotel, all-inclusive with four restaurants for guests to choose from.

do!) we enjoy a few mojitos before the dinner. In retrospect, we should have given them their 20 kg. of goodies before the cooking as it included a full knife kit and several utensils. As I head back for a shower before dinner, I help the chefs load the back platforms of two bicycles with all the dishes to be taxied a few blocks to 'La Casa'.

That evening, around the meal, Chef Teofilo was anxious to know how he and other chefs could come to visit us in Canada. We discussed the possibility of being hosted by a Vancouver hotel, to do a Cuban food festival. He thinks he can get the State, once a formal invitation as been received, to pay for their airfare to Toronto on Cubanair. Discussion carries into the night under the rhythm of 'Todo Caribe' a local 8-piece Cuban band.

We meet Frederico in Bayamo who is hosting us in his 'private' cooking school. Private in Cuba, seems like an oxymoron to me. We decide to converse in French, which is better than his English and my Spanish. Indeed, it is private, but the rules of the game are monitored by the State, and there is only ever enough "profit" to draw a monthly salary for himself (the manager) of 380 Cuban pesos or \$17 Canadian. Capitalism on a leash is another interesting experiment.

We drive early for Santiago de Cuba to the southern tip of the Island, about 900 km. from

Havana. Once again we are received in grand style at La casa del chef by chapter president Santiago, several chefs, and ministers of the tourism association. We definitely feel like dignitaries—lots of presentations, dance performance and so on.

Unfortunately, once again there is no time for chefs to sit with chefs and discuss open heartily their challenges, where education is going, food production, and all other food related topics that we really would like to pursue further. We leave this wonderful city, overlooked by tourists, on a late flight to Havana aboard a Soviet-made Yak 42, where we are explained that it naturally produces a dense cabin smoke on departure (which is actually condensation forced up because of pressurization). Sure enough, after a few minutes, I cannot see my wife across the aisle.

After we check in at Hotel National in Havana, the tour winds down. We have two free days to explore the city on our own before the final reception at La casa del chef in Havana. I arrange to go visit Chef Tito at 'Las Terrazas', about 1.5 hours west of Havana. Chef Tito, whom Marla (the Academy's administrator, www.nwcav.com) met on a previous trip, is in charge of El Romero. Las Terrazas is a pilot project on total sustainability that Fidel Castro himself commissioned in the 70's. Las Terrazas is a community of about 195 families that produces its own food, has its own schools, doctors, and so on. The idea was to see if a community could be totally self-reliable.

Once again, self-reliability gets a boost of hard currency as Las Terrazas has a small hotel, all-inclusive with four restaurants for guests to choose from. El Romero is one of these four restaurants. Chef/Manager Tito, grows all of his own food (menu is vegetarian), and he is just back from a Slow Food Conference in Italy. He is very proud to show us his garden. Lunch is served on the terrace of this 25 seat restaurant; the plates we receive have definitely some flair presentation-wise. The food is either under seasoned or true to their original flavours, depending on your opinion.

Back in the taxi (\$150) for a comfortable minivan and driver for the day, I am amazed at not seeing any other vehicles for minutes at a time on this three



Chefs learn about urban agriculture at El Rabinito, one of Cuba's top producing Organoponicos, located in the city of Ciego de Avila.

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lane highway. The driver makes an unplanned stop on the side of the highway where he spotted a lonely farmer holding garlic braids. After a sniff and a squeeze of the goods, he decides to buy one and off we go! I tip him with a used baseball; he is genuinely thrilled and keeps on driving while rolling the ball in his hand.

The next day begun with a tour of the sites of Havana in a three-wheeler called a 'coco' taxi. We walked the rest of the day in this very intriguing city between two worlds--the old Colonial one (falling apart) and newer Soviet-made buildings (also falling apart).

It is amazing that even though we must look like walking 'gold mines', not once over three days in Havana, do we get solicited for money, or pressured to buy anything. We are approached by locals and they are mostly interested to know where we are from, where we have been in Cuba, if we like it, and then perhaps we will be asked if we want some cigars. We spend our last Cuban pesos following the locals and eating pork sandwiches at \$0.20 each and drinking Tinimas (local beer) at \$0.70. I also find a state ration store that advertises 'vente libre.' There I buy cigarettes at \$0.07 a pack, good quality cocoa powder for \$0.20/250 grams, and local cola for \$0.25.

Back in 'main' Havana, I marvel at the Malecon, this amazing promenade that reminds me of 'la promenade des Anglais' in Nice, France. Colonial buildings, one after another, in mostly great need of repairs, what is next for Cuba? Is it true that some of these are already in the hands of Miami Cubans waiting for Fidel to pass on? How will his brother, Raoul, keep the island isolated or will he?

The last evening in one of the grand galas at La casa del chef. Prior to it, a group of us are given a tour of a new cooking school that, according to Chef Eddy Fernandez, was built only from members' donations. The school has a well equipped 'demo' station, but sadly, only desks for students. It will be a school for already accomplished chefs to do some additional education, and Chef Eddy is quick to point out that he hopes to have international chefs teaching seminars. However, at this time, he can only offer one's meals. Visiting chefs will have to pay for their airfare and hotel!

Back at la casa we are treated to a grand family-style dinner. However, some of us feel uncomfortable, as our table gorged on rock lobster and paella; the adjacent tables of local chefs eat a much simpler fare. Time for one more café cubano and last minute card exchanges before we must all return to our wealthy but complicated lives.

Cuba is like a brother that we reconnected with after he just spent five years living in the bush in northern BC. We must reconnect with events that have happened in the last 5 years (almost 50 for Cuba). Differences are enormous, priorities are different but the genuine interest in each other and la cucina remains. ☺



A quiet moment on the Caribbean Sea, Trinidad Cuba.

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*Special thanks to **Wendy Holm, P.Ag** for supplying most of the photographs. Wendy is an Economist, Agrologist and Writer living on Bowen Island. She is hoping to bring 6 Cuban chefs to Vancouver for a Cuban Festival in the next eighteen months and is looking for billeting or hotel accommodation.*



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