



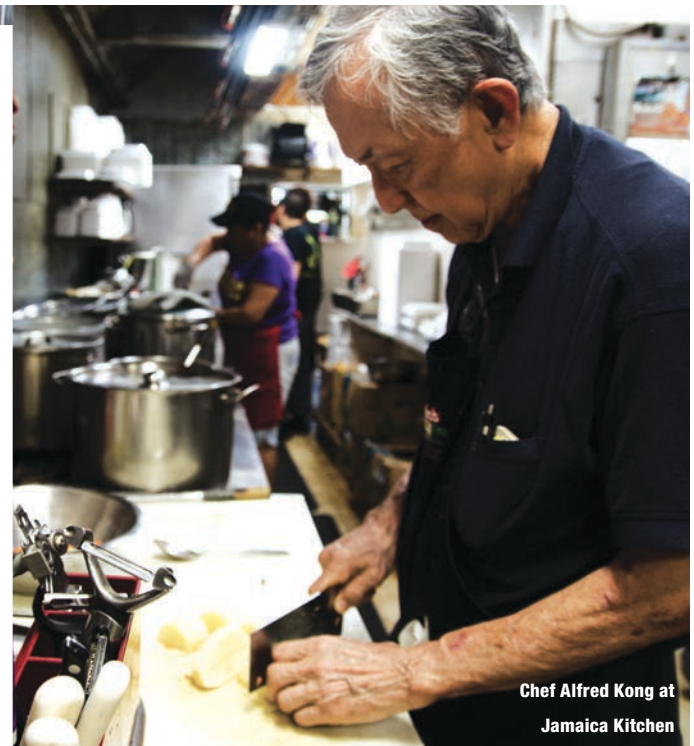
# MIAMI HEAT

PHOTOS AND STORY BY LIZ GROSSMAN





Street-side cigars in  
Little Havana

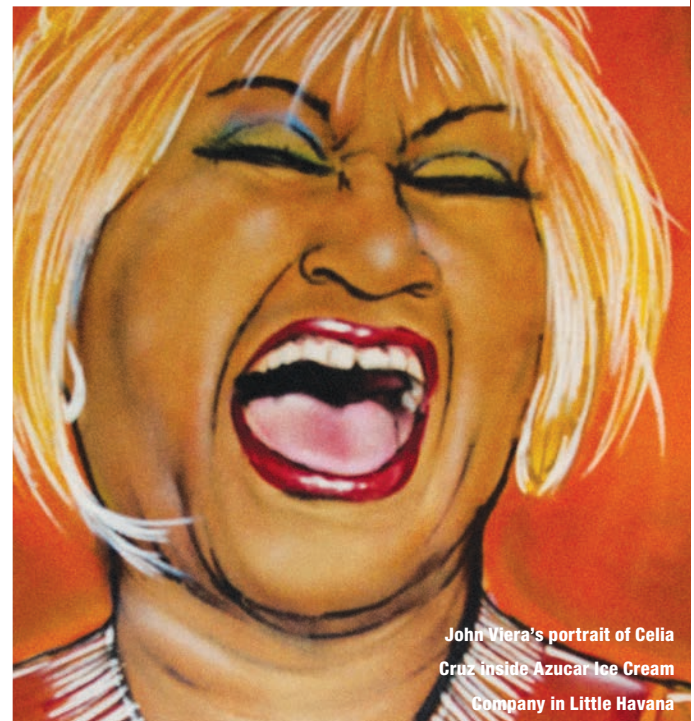


Chef Alfred Kong at  
Jamaica Kitchen

CUBAN, HAITIAN AND JAMAICAN-CHINESE DISHES SHARE A HOME IN SOUTH FLORIDA



Roast chicken at  
Sango's



John Wiera's portrait of Celia  
Cruz inside Azucar Ice Cream  
Company in Little Havana

**IF THE DENSE, TROPICAL AIR AND INTENSE SUN DON'T DO IT**, a drive through the Miami neighborhoods where Spanish, Creole and even Hakka are still spoken will transport you to the Caribbean. Make your way down Little Havana's Calle Ocho, past the ladies with tobacco-stained fingers rolling cigars and men slapping down dominoes on park tables to landmark restaurants like Versailles, La Carreta and El Exquisito—which still serves Cuban coffee and pastries from the original *ventanita* (window) once marked by a makeshift wooden sign. North of downtown in the more subdued Little Haiti, you'll find bright murals (like those inside the popular-with-the-tourists Tap Tap) and Haitian flags painted on the sun-drenched façades of Lakay Tropical Ice Cream and New Florida





Empanadas at El Exquisito

Bakery, where locals line up for savory *pate* (patties), hearty breads and corn shakes. And in nondescript strip malls south of downtown, you'll spot perhaps the most interesting mash-up of all—Jamaican-Chinese restaurants opened by immigrants of Chinese heritage who found their way to Florida via Jamaica.

Yet, “a lot of that Caribbean flair got lost in translation, because Miami likes to kill its history a bit,” says Miami food historian Mandy Baca, author of *The Sizzling History of Miami Cuisine*. “I hate to say it, but it’s sort of true—that’s why the cuisine in some of the iconic places hasn’t changed much,” she continues. “Every time a new culture comes in, it’s not like in other cities where the culture assimilates. Here, it doesn’t mix with the cultures already there.”

One of the first groups to immigrate to Miami were Bahamians, who arrived via boats and rafts in the early 1800s. “They not only brought ingredients from the Bahamas, but recognized products already in existence, and set that food movement forward to teach people from the north how to use these products and deal with the soil. People coming to Florida didn’t even know what a mango was,” Baca explains. Besides mangos, they cooked with Rangpur limes, sour-sop, Jamaican apples and other fruits indigenous to the South Florida swamp-land. But as other cultures migrated to Florida in the 1900s, the bounty of the tropical *terroir* was overshadowed by Americanized versions of these transplanted cuisines. “[The cuisine] was all about the land, but it started to change



Menecier de guayaba  
destapado at Versailles

to American-Jewish or American-Chinese, so that care about eating locally was lost,” says Baca. Even areas like Little Havana evolved; Bahamians were actually there first, followed by a kosher community. “Now other Latin American countries are coming, and it’s becoming less Cuban,” says Baca. “Each time a new group comes in, they change a neighborhood or part of Miami and the way people eat. And in that process, cuisines get lost.”

#### CALLE OCHO CULTURE

While Little Havana may not be as saturated with Cubans as it was in the 1960s, when exiles arrived to work in warehouses and settled in the affordable area near downtown, a visit to some of the original restaurants reveals that



Whole fish at El Exquisito

**“OTHER HISPANIC IMMIGRANTS THAT COME TO THE U.S. TRY TO ASSIMILATE, BUT CUBANS STUCK WITH THEIR FOOD, CULTURE, LANGUAGE AND MUSIC.**

That’s why when you come here, everyone speaks Spanish. It stayed as a little mini Cuba.”

—Nicole Valls, Versailles

Cuban food culture is alive and well. Having grown up in the once rough-and-tumble neighborhood, Alex Hernandez, the owner of El Exquisito, remembers what the diner was like when it opened in 1974. “The original owner, Heliodoro Coro, established a nice relationship with the exiled community,” Hernandez recalls. “He had a lot of regulars; he was busy every day.” A sign outside advertised Cuban sandwiches and coffee, and diners walked through the kitchen to get to their tables. “It was very plain,

almost like a speakeasy, which is what people liked,” says Hernandez. Today, the *ventanita* sees a stream of locals and tourists (Gordon Ramsay was recently spotted filming outside) stopping by for Cuban coffee and *pastelitos*, but the menu is made up of much of the original classic Cuban fare, like *milanesa de pollo*, *lechón*, *ropa vieja*, *vaca frita*, whole fried snapper and the *medianoche*, a classic sandwich composed of egg bread, roasted pork, ham, cheese, pickles and mustard that Hernandez says is

“just enough to fill you up and still let you sleep at night.”

Hernandez embraces classic dishes but laments that Cuban cuisine “has lost a lot of its traditional cooking along the way when people migrated out of there. I think that hurt them a lot.” Cuban food was influenced by Spanish, African and Taino Indian cultures, and those flavors made their way to Miami with the immigrants who fled Cuba when Fidel Castro took over Cuba in 1959. “Most of our ingredients come from the island, like sour oranges for mojo and mamey,” Hernandez notes. “We cook with cumin, bay leaves, red and green peppers, saffron, things derived from Spain and Africa. We don’t cook with chilies or jalapeños. We don’t do spice, we do flavor. We eat a lot of Cuban sweet potato, okra, papayas, dragon fruit and cassava—things already grown here in South Florida.”

Just a few years before El Exquisito opened, another café was already serving Cuban coffee, sandwiches and pastries out of a window on Calle Ocho. Nicole Valls’ grandfather arrived in Miami as an exile in 1961, and turned his espresso-machine import business into a café he called Versailles for the etched glass mirrors on the walls. Now a Little Havana landmark, the café is known as a meeting place for political discussions and press conferences, and has been a historic stop for Cuban musicians like the late Celia Cruz and Tito Puente (more recent visits have been paid by Pitbull and Beyoncé). A crowd hovers around the massive pastry case bursting with guava and cream cheese *pastelitos*, *croquetas* and bread pudding, and the menu of classic Cuban dishes like codfish fritters, *vaca frita de pollo* (fried shredded chicken) and *masitas de puerco fritas* (fried pork chunks). “There are a few things you probably didn’t see in Cuba in the 1960s, like yucca fries and ceviche—which is more the Peruvian influence from Miami,” Valls points out. “We’ll do





Whole fish at Piman Bouk in Little Haiti

Argentinian styles of cooking meat, but for the most part, it's stayed authentic to how it was 40 years ago."

The food was kept classic in part because the original exiles thought their Florida stay was temporary. "The first wave was people who were able to leave when they realized what was happening in Cuba," says Valls. "They came to Miami thinking they'd go back once everything died down, but it didn't. Other Hispanic immigrants that come to the U.S. try to assimilate, but Cubans stuck with their food, culture, language and music. That's why when you come here, everyone speaks Spanish. It stayed as a little mini Cuba."

Baca agrees. "They're still using those same basic recipes," she says. "They're rich and complex, and they're being made by everyone with different touches here and there, but for the most part, they're the same." But Hernandez says the younger generation isn't as hardcore as their parents: "We don't eat liver and big pork shanks," he says. "We like pickled fish and *escabeche*, and I make *arroz con pollo* fritters for the holidays."

Updated takes like those can be found at Finka, Eileen Andrade's Korean-

Peruvian-, and Cuban-influenced restaurant. But you'll also find ham, chicken and fish *croquetas* inspired by her family's 40-year-old Cuban restaurant, *Islas Canarias*, and other riffs on updated Cuban cuisine. "I grew up on my mom's traditional Cuban food, so that cuisine reminds me of eating something homey," says Andrade, whose grandfather owned five restaurants in Cuba before he migrated with his family to Miami in 1969. "His favorite dish was fried pork chunks with mojo. He told me that you'd work on a farm in Cuba at a certain age and you'd get your lunch on a metal tray, so we serve it that way with rice, beans and plantains," says the chef, who puts her own signature spin on Cuban dishes but keeps *sofrito*, *vaca frita* and other Cuban classics traditional at the core. "You miss that homeyness after your grandparents have passed away. It's nostalgic, so you don't want to butcher it."

**"IT CAN TAKE 45 MINUTES TO GET YOUR FOOD IN HAITIAN RESTAURANTS, BECAUSE THEY MAKE EVERYTHING TO ORDER.**

**If they don't, there's hell to pay. Hell hath no fury like a disgruntled Haitian who gets bad food."**

— Carlos Olaechea

#### HAITIAN NATION

While Little Havana is a tourist attraction, Little Haiti is a different story. Haitian exiles started arriving to the U.S. in the 1960s, during the regime of Francois Duvalier. Some moved to New York, while others settled in Miami, especially in the '80s and '90s after discrimination from Jim Crow laws died down somewhat. But the exile community still faced discrimination, and "a lot

of them have this kind of generationally passed down mistrust for those outside of their community," says Miami food scholar Carlos Olaechea of the area in North Miami that isn't a tourist attraction, yet can't help but lure visitors curious about Haitian food and culture.

Leaman Bien-Aime immigrated to New York from Haiti in 1969, but a vacation to Miami prompted him to relocate there 10 years later. When he did he started selling Haitian *pate*—pastries filled with spiced and ground cod, herring or beef—at the



Pork griot at Piman Bouk

Haitian *pate* at New Florida Bakery

Caribbean marketplace in Miami and at Lakay Tropical Ice Cream, which he opened with his wife, Solange, in 1997. “*Lakay* is Creole for ‘home,’” says Bien-Aime, who offers *akasan*, a drink of boiled corn, condensed milk, ginger, star anise and cinnamon along with soursop, sugar apple and passion fruit ice cream. But the *pate* remind him the most of home. “In Haiti, people pass by yelling ‘*pate! pate! pate!*!’” he recalls of growing up eating the pastry, traditionally made with a combination of lard and margarine or butter. “The dough is made by hand, so the layers can be a little

thicker,” Olaechea notes. “The texture is between croissant and puff pastry dough.” Fillings vary but usually include onion, garlic, thyme, Scotch bonnets, cloves, green onion and parsley.

While *pate* are simple, Bien-Aime shows off with more complex dishes like *chaka*, a meat, cracked corn and vegetable stew served for the New Year. “As immigrants amass more than they had in their home country, it allows for festive foods to be offered more prominently, and that happens often with Haitian cuisine.” Besides *chaka*, that means crispy *griot* (braised

and fried pork). “The flavor profiles tend to be nuanced,” says Olaechea of ingredients like cashews that melt into sauces, *jute* leaves for *lalo* stew and *djon djon*, tiny Haitian dried mushrooms similar to porcini that are used to make a broth for a fragrant dish with rice, dried shrimp, cashews, and peas or lima beans. Since *djon djon* are expensive, the dish is offered as a special in Haitian restaurants. “It’s a weekend dish; you have to ask about it,” Olaechea explains. And once you do, expect to wait. “It can take 45 minutes to get your food in Haitian restaurants, because they make everything to order,” Olaechea laughs. “If they don’t, there’s hell to pay. Hell hath no fury like a disgruntled Haitian who gets bad food.”

#### CHINESE WITH A JAMAICAN ACCENT

You might expect the food in a strip mall restaurant to be premade or simple, but at Jamaica Kitchen, oxtail stew simmers for hours while chicken marinates overnight in Chinese spices before it’s roasted (\$11, recipe, [plateonline.com](http://plateonline.com)) and Chinese bitter melons are scooped and stuffed with ground pork or shrimp. The shoe-box-sized restaurant—where sweet plum Chinese candies are stocked next to Jamaican ginger and coconut chews, and Scotch bonnet hot sauces share shelf space with Chinese herb soup mixes and Jamaican herbal energy drinks—is smack-dab between a nail salon and an optometrist, but is a landmark for the Jamaican-Chinese, or Hakka, community. It was a pizza and sub shop before Jamaican-Chinese Anson Chin moved to Miami and bought it in 1976, adding his famous Jamaican patties. “He couldn’t make enough—he was making maybe 70 dozen a day—and had to open a factory to start selling them wholesale,” says Chin’s wife, Cheryl, who met him after she moved to Miami from Jamaica on a student visa in 1980. Her father is Chinese and her mother





Suey mein, \$11,  
Cheryl Chin,  
Jamaica Kitchen,  
Miami. RECIPE,  
plateonline.com.



Cheryl and Anson Chin



Jamaican curry chicken patty

is mixed Chinese and Jamaican: “I look Chinese, but I consider myself Jamaican. My mom could pass for Chinese, but growing up we always had Jamaican food.”

Chinese immigrants arrived in the Caribbean to work as contracted laborers in the sugar plantations after slavery was abolished. “After the contract labor ended, some stayed to open grocery stores, some got stuck in the Caribbean and others wanted to look for a better life,” Chin says, recalling a childhood eating fried rice, pork and ham choy, along with jerk and curry chicken and savory meat patties.

“The patty is the hamburger of Jamaica; it’s a signature lunch,” she says of the baked turnover stuffed with beef, cheese, jerk chicken or vegetables. They serve other Chinese and Jamaican dishes, like stewed pork, red pea soup, stewed cow foot and *suey mein*, a Caribbean Chinese soup with Chinese roast chicken, barbecue pork, ginger, shrimp, onions, mustard

greens, noodles and a Hakka-style egg roll (\$11, recipe, plateonline.com). “We don’t use wontons, so it’s not a crispy egg roll,” Chin notes. “It’s a crêpe rolled with ground pork or shrimp, steamed and sliced.” The Hakka-style pork and ham choy also takes a (relatively) lighter approach, with pork belly that’s stewed with soy sauce, onions, garlic, oyster sauce, sesame oil, fermented black beans and pickled mustard greens (\$14, recipe, plateonline.com). “The Spanish and Cubans fry their pork for *chicharróns*—we stew ours,” she says of the difference.

South of Jamaica Kitchen in Palmetto Bay is Sango’s, a Jamaican-Chinese spot where reggae sets the tone in the kitchen as Melvin “Bunny” Smith fires up tofu curry in massive black woks while cooks smother whole chickens with a dark, spice-laden marinade. Smith and the original owner of Sango’s, Rosie Hollingshead, worked in restaurants in Jamaica together before opening in

Miami. “Sango was my grandfather’s name,” says Terry Perrin, Rosie’s daughter and a partner in the restaurant. “My mom and grandma were Jamaican, and my grandfather was Chinese. Growing up in Jamaica, we ate Chinese and Jamaican food, but always with simple seasonings—Scotch bonnet, thyme, onions, scallions. There was heat, but you weren’t burning your mouth.”

Smith, who’s Jamaican, went to culinary school in Montego Bay and taught Chinese cooking in the Cayman Islands. He considers his version of Chinese food lighter and more flavorful than Americanized Chinese food. “I only know Chinese food from Jamaica, so I cook with a lot of vegetables and tofu and don’t use MSG,” he says. “Our sweet and sour chicken has less breading and more meat—it’s not as battered.”

The menu at Sango’s includes a Chinese section, with lo mein, fried rice and vegetarian dishes, and a Jamaican





Roast chicken at Sango's

menu of curry chicken, oxtail and more. “Everything is made from scratch,” says Perrin. “Even our curry powder. The Chinese food is cooked to order. The Jamaican food is cooked in the morning; it takes a long time.”

And no matter how long it takes to pull off Haitian rice, Cuban pastries or slow-simmering Hakka oxtail stew, even the most unassuming spots swear by taking time to do it properly. “And consistency,” says Chin. “People have come for years and if they come again next week, it’s the same.” According to Baca, no matter where they’re coming from, “if you don’t have your grandma making that food anymore, these are the places to go to find a taste of home.”

Liz Grossman is the managing editor of *Plate*.

### *Orecchiette with Cauliflower, Toasted Pine Nuts & Romano Cheese*

Orecchiette, or “little ears,” is the signature pasta of the Puglia region, on the heel of the Italian boot. It’s most often served in simple, flavorful dishes like the classic broccoli rabe and Italian sausage, or this vegetarian take with cauliflower, toasted pine nuts and pecorino Romano. It’s a great example of how the sparse, rustic cooking of Southern Italy brings out the most flavor from a few simple ingredients.

Visit [BarillaFS.com](http://BarillaFS.com) for the full recipe.

