

[ HAVANA, CUBA ]

# TASTE MAKERS

*It isn't easy opening an independent restaurant in Havana, but Lydia Bell meets the creative cooks flying in the face of austerity*

**10HR 30MIN**

Flight time  
from London to  
Havana

**23°C**

Average  
temperature in  
December

IT'S A BLUE-SKY morning in Havana's golden colonial old town, and I'm eating American pancakes drizzled with honey (number of times I've seen these in Havana: zero) and a classic BLT pimped up with smoky roasted aubergine. The usual crowd of foreign hipsters on holiday and Cuban artists from nearby studios are hanging out here at El Café, a simple, whitewashed, high-ceilinged space with pretty tiled floors.

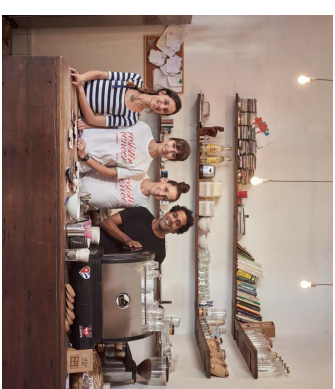
The café is something of an anomaly in the Cuban capital. It serves healthy salads, doorstep sourdough sandwiches, creative juices and decent coffee. It's the sort

**STREET EATS:**

Havana's old-school streets have seen a recent influx of resourceful restaurateurs plating up great dishes using Cuba's slender larder

of menu you'll often encounter in Hackney, and never in Habana Vieja. It's probably the only place in the city that doesn't sell canned soft drinks, just tart homemade lemonade, and fiery-fresh fizzy ginger. And it's definitely the only place where you can get a decent flat white (its welcoming owner Nelson Rodríguez used to work at Allpress, the fancy, much-loved craft roasters in Dalston) in spite of the fact that the only milk that you can find in Havana is powdered. I'm sitting here with Rodríguez's wife, British-born Finnish-Italian Marinella Abbondati, and the café's resident ginger cat. >





economy; and the fact that the American administration is trying to make it impossible for Cuba to pay its foreign food bills by penalising global banks that permit Cuban transactions. Meanwhile, Cuba imports over 70% of its food – because this fertile land is, more or less, an agricultural wasteland. Basically it's a dog's dinner destroyed by politics. Amid all this, restaurateurs have no access to wholesale markets, nor the right to import and export. They have to go down the shops like everyone else, but there's nothing much in the shops, which is where the black-market contacts and suitcase-wielding friends come in. Plus, certain ingredients sit on a 'not exactly legal' list issued by the government so as not to threaten state restaurants, so there's a constant worry of being shut down. Even the equipment needed to run a professional kitchen is very hard to source, as there are no catering supplier importers – everything has to be brought in a suitcase on a plane. Plus, there are frequent gas, electricity and water outages. The limitations are, to put it mildly, discouraging to prospective restaurateurs.

El Café, though, makes a virtue of the rules by putting local ingredients to good use. Hummus is barely on offer in Havana, but the ingredients – chickpeas, sesame seeds, olive oil, garlic and cumin – are available year round and form the base of their vegan sandwich. Other tidbits found here that are rare in Havana but easy to make are the sourdough, American pancakes and homemade granola. Abondanti and Nodriguez don't bring in things from abroad: they prefer a simpler life. "Just the almonds for the granola and the coriander seeds for our homemade cola recipe," says Abondanti.

That said, "Sourcing the ingredients is a pretty frustrating full-time job," she says. They closed down >

**LOCAL FLAVOUR:** (above, left to right) Chef Paulito Bazuk behind the counter at his restaurant Grades; the team at inventive Havana coffee shop El Café

## IT'S HARD TO DECIDE IF BEING A RESTAURATEUR IN HAVANA IS AN ACT OF BRAVERY OR MASOCHISM

with international experience and money return home to realise long-held dreams. Because of the embargo, it's hard for them to acquire global ingredients, so they go to extreme lengths to keep their menus fresh, relying on a complex patchwork of black-market contacts and friends packing suitcases full of herbs and spices.

However, the fact is, running a restaurant in Havana is so maddeningly complicated that it's hard to decide whether to be a restaurateur is an act of bravery or masochism. The top reason is food shortages. The reasons for these are many but clear: Sixty years of a savage US embargo; an unwieldy Cuban agricultural system (to put it politely), not aided by current petrol shortages caused by American blockading of Venezuelan oil tankers to Cuba; a creaking centralised Cuban

reversed the Cuban-American political *détente*, re-tightened sanctions and dissuaded American travel to Cuba, effectively killing profits from American tourism. Since the summer, petrol and food shortages have been visibly worse because of American blockading of oil tankers to Cuba, a severe reduction of US-originating remittances and the Trump administration's penalisation of Cuba through the international banks, which is making it harder for Cuba to pay its food bills in regards to imports. However, Havana's resourceful restaurateurs are managing to survive these harsh external forces and their overbearing government, exuding innovation, creativity and even sophistication to celebrate Cuba's rich cuisine. There has been an explosion of openings on the upper end of the scale on the private restaurant scene as chefs

> Havana's *paladares* – private restaurants – were legalised in the 1990s, but prohibitive taxes and regulations, ignorance about entrepreneurship and a dearth of ingredients meant that most remained uninspired front-room affairs. This was during the notorious 'Special Period' in the 1990s, when the Cuban GDP tumbled by about 33% in three years after the Soviet Union dissolved and the sugar market bombed. But from 2008, under the presidency of Raúl Castro, certain private businesses were legalised. This time it was a different story. Tourism has boomed over this decade, and remittances poured in. From 2015, the Barack Obama presidency brought a softening between the United States and Cuba, ushering in optimism and hope. Sadly, that was not to last. The Trump presidency

**Not so special:** Cuba experienced an economic crisis after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, which caused extreme power and food shortages.





➤ the café for a week last year because there was no flour in Havana. “Most people were understanding, though one flabbergasted TripAdvisor review complained: ‘how can a sandwich place run out of bread? Why don’t they just make more?’” When an egg crisis hit, she says, “We invented a sweet potato hash brown to replace the eggs in our breakfast plate, and made egg-free pancakes.”

Over in the central neighbourhood of Vedado, old cedars split the pavement in half, shading dilapidated, Republican-era mansions. Here, I’m meeting Raulito Bazuk from Grados restaurant, who runs gourmet tours that open up Cuba’s idiosyncratic food scene. The experiences are not-in-the-guidebook: a day trip into the countryside, including lunch with a farmer, or an exploration of Havana’s food contacts. Together we visit Cuba’s biggest *organopónico* in Alamar, an eastern satellite town.

**High point:** Found in the island’s south, these mountains are home to the *Topes de Collantes* nature reserve, where you can hike trails to hidden caves and grottos.

Organopónicos are Cuba’s ubiquitous urban vegetable gardens. After the fall of the USSR in 1990, vacant state property turned into “people’s plots” and this urban agriculture proved indispensable. Now these high-yield kitchen gardens produce a staggering 90% of the vegetables used by Habaneros.

We tread red, iron-rich earth while the organopónico gardeners explain about growing seedlings in greenhouses then transplanting them to growing beds over a 21-day cycle, choosing fast-growing vegetables, and using natural pesticides and insecticides.

Lunches here are a celebration of Cuban produce, from fried sweet plantains, boiled yuca dressed with a sauce of mashed garlic, salt and lime, and plentiful salads. But today we return to Bazuk’s kitchen for lamb from the **Escambray Mountains** slow-cooked in *pru*, a herbal soft drink from Santiago that encourages a confit-like treacly quality in the more-ish meat.

That evening, I head over to another favourite, Tocamadera. This paladar is in 1950s-era Miramar, a quieter, spacious leafy zone inhabited by diplomats and affluent Cubans. You enter via saloon-style doors into a palmy, tropical garden adorned with rusty typewriters ➤

WHEN THE EGG CRISIS HIT, WE MADE SWEET POTATO HASH BROWNS TO REPLACE THE EGGS, AND MADE EGG-FREE PANCAKES

➤ and other *objets trouvés*. This evening, the chalked-up menu includes, variously, nachos, red tuna, fresh handmade pasta, striploin beef, teriyaki pork, platano puree, octopus, brownies and other delights.

I want to talk to the owner, Enrique Suárez, about just how bad things are for restaurant owners in Cuba right now. Suárez acknowledges that food issues in Cuba “aren’t new” but that “it has never been worse, and it started, immediately, with Trump”. He gets around it by designing a menu that is chalked up daily based on what’s available in state shops and local markets, and relying on private farms to stream in less obvious vegetables, such as broccoli – the height of vegetable sophistication in Havana – and rocket. “It’s about quality, not consistency,” he says.

I pick a beautifully fresh cold avocado soup, a ceviche, and a tasty, textured \$3 pork burger that I think is the best in the city. Then hurry home to my stretchy pants, wondering if they called this restaurant Tocamadera (which translates as ‘knock on wood’) because you need a ton of luck to make a restaurant work in Havana – and concluding that these restaurateurs are the quiet Cuban soldiers of the 21st-century. ♦

*Local Cuba travel experts Cuba Private Travel curate bespoke private journeys to Cuba including all restaurant bookings, expert advice, and food-focused experiences, from farm tours and market visits to private tastings. For more information: cubaprivatetravel.com*

#### FLYING THE FLAG:

The new wave of paladares are making the most of what’s fresh and local, showcasing homegrown produce



## SIX GREAT HAVANA PALADARES

*Here’s where to head to sample the new taste of Havana...*



### EL CAFÉ

Simple but pleasing café in Old Havana serving the best coffees in town, plus fresh salads and juices, and super-sized sourdough sandwiches.

*Calle Amargura 358 e/Villegas y Aguacate*

### GRADOS

An elegant, small restaurant in a Vedado backstreet carved out of a family home serving Cuban dishes with an eccentric twist.

*Calle E 562 e/ 23 y 25*

### TOCAMADERA

Super fresh, high-quality Cuban and Mediterranean plates, including ceviche, beautifully cooked meats and fresh pastas, that keep a core clientele on repeat.

*Calle 38 e/1ra y 3ra*

### SENTIDOS

Old Havana restaurant serving Spanish-accented Cuban dishes such as salmorejo (a tomato and bread purée), wok-cooked octopus and lobster.

*San Juan de Dios 67*

### SANTY PESCADOR

An atmospheric wooden shack perched on the banks of the Rio Jaimanitas in western Havana that serves some of the best sushi in the city.

*240A E/3raC y Rio*

### EL DEL FRENTE

Popular two-storey bar-restaurant in Old Havana with a vibrant rooftop, serving gin cocktails, and healthy plates including gazpacho, tuna tataki, lamb burgers and octopus salad.

*Calle O'Reilly 303*