

From

A clear glass filled with a shrimp and avocado cocktail. The mixture includes cooked shrimp, diced tomatoes, avocado chunks, and a lemon wedge. The glass sits on a light green surface. In the background, another similar glass is blurred, and a silver fork is visible on the right.

Shrimp and
Avocado Cocktail

PHOTOGRAPHY BY YVONNE DUIVENVOORDEN
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Cuba, with Love



Warm smiles, trays of mojitos, ever-present maracas music and the nose-teasing aroma of grilling pork...such are my memories of Cuba.

BY ELIZABETH BAIRD

There were 11 of us, blinking as we got out of the mini-bus in the noon sunlight in front of Cocinerito, Asociacion Culinaria in Varadero, Cuba.

The welcome caught us by surprise. We had been anonymous for a few days at the nearby all-inclusive Melia Varadero – 10 members of Cuisine Canada on a tasting tour of Cuba: a grower, a professor, a handful of food and wine writers and a couple of chefs and caterers. Like all tourists, we dipped into surf, savoured paella and chilled Chilean white by the pool and, yes, sipped some seven-year-old rum – añejo – to the languid notes of a jazzy saxophone.

But this welcome was not just special; it was spectacular. We felt like brides on the big day, although the trio of guitar, drum and maracas were playing “La Guantanamera.” Instead of our carrying bouquets, a line of chefs, bemedalled and in blinding whites, formed a guard of honour offering us salmon-pink gladioli as we entered the courtyard, our steps automatically getting into the rhythm. Warm smiles, tables decked with red-checked cloths, trays of mojitos, a spread of seafood

and desserts and the nose-teasing aroma of grilling pork was a joyful introduction to the first of five visits to chefs’ organizations in Cuba’s major cities: Varadero, Cienfuegos, Camaguey, Santiago de Cuba and Havana.

The culinarians’ tour, arranged by agrologist Wendy Holm, had a purpose: to enjoy a taste of Cuba and to make connections with Cuban chefs. The stop at Varadero, as at each region’s headquarters, called Casa del Chef, showcased local specialties. Varadero’s feast starred seafood, such as langoustines, or Caribbean lobsters, atop traditional rice and black beans or in a sea-style paella, fish steaks, crab, shrimp in tomato sauce and octopus. Next stop Cienfuegos, where we savoured shrimp again, unexpected lamb and a corn-and-crab pudding. At Camaguey, where curved streets and dead ends were designed to foil marauding pirates, the pride of the table was ajiao, a thick vegetable-and-meat soup, and rollito de tasajo, beef jerky in a crisp crêpe.

In a shady courtyard in Santiago de Cuba, we feasted on stuffed rolled pork and crispy chicken plus side dishes that we encountered everywhere: rice, yuca with

From left: The magic of food and music as presented by the chefs of Camaguey; a paella lunch under the palms at the Melia Varadero would make you smile as broadly as I am.



garlic dressing and chunks of fried plantains and, always, an abundance of organically grown fruits and vegetables.

These touchingly hospitable lunches were interspersed with Cuba's celebration feast: spit-roasted pigs with mojo, a wake-up citrus sauce that stood nose-to-nose with the richness of the organically raised pork. We feasted in an outdoor community hall on a collective farm close to Ciego de Avila in the Escambray Mountains, where shade coffee is grown. We lunched on roasted lobster on the silvery sands at Caya Coco. We dined at Chansonniere and Cucina de Lilliam, two of Havana's best privately run restaurants, called paladares. And, alas, faced a couple of undistinguished dinners at hotels.

It's true that the experiences of visitors on a special food tour are going to be gastronomically more varied and interesting than the offerings at some all-inclusive hotels. But from our travels, it's clear that there are brigades of chefs bursting with pride for the traditions and products of their country and farmers raising first-quality produce. And all are ready to welcome Canadians to their warm and friendly island.

Did I mention that all our meals came with live music? And that the catchy rhythm that put the beat in our feet in Varadero kept us singing and dancing. Simply said, in Cuba, eating without music is as unthinkable as a shot of coffee without sugar.

From our Cuban culinary experience, here is a menu to put a little Caribbean sunshine into the next occasion you and friends gather together.

MENU

FOR 12

Mojito

Shrimp and Avocado Cocktail

Cuban Pork Roast
with Mojo Crillo

Rice and Black Beans

Yuca with Red Onion

Tostones

Tropical Fruit Pudding

Mojito

Canadians need no introduction to this refreshing mint and rum drink.

12	mint leaves	12
4 tsp	lime juice	20 mL
4 tsp	granulated sugar	20 mL
	Ice cubes	
2 oz	club soda	50 mL
1½ oz	white or amber rum	45 mL

Mint sprig

☞ In tall glass, muddle (mash) mint leaves with lime juice. Add sugar; stir until dissolved. Fill half full with ice. Add soda and rum; stir to combine. Garnish with mint sprig. Makes 1 serving.

PER SERVING: about 165 cal, trace pro, 0 g total fat (0 g sat. fat), 19 g carb, trace fibre, 0 mg chol, 14 mg sodium. % RDI: 2% calcium, 6% iron, 2% vit A, 12% vit C, 4% folate.

From left: Organic gardens, such as the Oganiponica El Rabinito, are the pride of Cuba; spices for sale in a Havana neighbourhood market; a quiet moment at Ciego de Avila's market; Paella anyone? It's one of the most popular dishes in Cuba.

Shrimp and Avocado Cocktail

This fresh tropical appetizer was inspired by the many shrimp dishes we savoured in Cuba.

Half	lemon	Half
Half	onion	Half
1½ tsp	salt	7 mL
2 lb	large raw shrimp	1 kg
½ cup	lime juice	125 mL
2 tbsp	extra-virgin olive oil	25 mL
1 tsp	hot pepper sauce	5 mL
2	avocados, peeled, pitted and cubed	2
1 cup	cherry tomatoes, quartered	250 mL
½ cup	chopped fresh coriander	125 mL
¼ cup	minced red onion	50 mL
8	sprigs fresh coriander	8

☞ Squeeze juice from lemon into large saucepan of water. Add lemon, onion and 1 tsp (5 mL) of the salt; bring to boil.

☞ Meanwhile, peel and devein shrimp; cut lengthwise down back almost but not

PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY OF DR. BILL SIEGEL AND ELIZABETH BAIRD



**Cuban Pork Roast with Mojo Crillo
with Rice and Black Beans, Yuca
with Red Onion and Tostones**

all the way through. Add to saucepan; cook until pink and firm, 2 to 3 minutes. Drain, discarding lemon and onion; let cool and cut into bite-size pieces.

☛ Meanwhile, in large bowl, whisk together lime juice, oil, hot pepper sauce and remaining salt. Add shrimp, avocados, tomatoes, chopped coriander and red onion. Garnish each serving with coriander sprig. **Makes 8 servings.** **PER SERVING:** about 209 cal, 19 g pro, 13 g total fat (2 g sat. fat), 7 g carb, 3 g fibre, 129 mg chol, 283 mg sodium. % RDI: 5% calcium, 19% iron, 8% vit A, 17% vit C, 19% folate.

Cuban Pork Roast with Mojo Crillo

If we close our eyes, the memories of mojo – citrus juice sauce spiked with gar-

lic and cumin – drizzled over spit-roasted pork are as alive as when we tasted it in Cuba. We've recreated the experience with a roast marinated in these ingredients and served with its own drippings. Cubans would use 1 cup (250 mL) sour orange juice from Seville oranges, but because they are impossible to find out-of-season in Canada, we have substituted lime and lemon juice. Be sure to use a roast with the backbone removed or ask the butcher to remove it for you. The slices are neater than if the butcher simply cuts between the chops.

1	pork rib roast rack (about 8 ribs), 4 lb (2 kg)	1
2	cloves garlic, slivered	2
½ cup	orange juice	125 mL

¼ cup	each lime and lemon juice	50 mL
2 tbsp	extra-virgin olive oil	25 mL
1 tsp	each dried oregano, ground cumin and pepper	5 mL
¾ cup	sodium-reduced chicken stock	175 mL

☛ Cut several slits around pork; insert garlic. Place roast in large resealable plastic bag. In glass measure, whisk together orange, lime and lemon juices, oil, oregano, cumin and pepper; pour over pork and seal bag. Place in large bowl and refrigerate for at least 8 hours or for up to 24 hours, turning occasionally.

☛ Place roast and marinade in roasting pan; cover and roast in 325°F (160°C) oven for 1 hour. Uncover and roast, basting ►

several times, until meat thermometer registers 160°F (70°C), about 1 hour. Broil until golden brown, about 3 minutes. Transfer to cutting board and tent with foil; let stand for 10 minutes before slicing between ribs.

☞ Meanwhile, skim fat from pan juices; add enough of the chicken stock to make about 1¼ cups (300 mL), adding more for less tangy sauce, if desired. Keep warm until serving with roast. **Makes about 8 servings.** PER SERVING: about 352 cal, 34 g pro, 22 g total fat (6 g sat. fat), 3 g carb, trace fibre, 89 mg chol, 151 mg sodium. % RDI: 4% calcium, 13% iron, 12% vit C, 4% folate.

Rice and Black Beans

One pillar of Cuban cuisine is sofrito – onion, green pepper and garlic sautéed in olive oil. Here it lays the flavour base for a dish appreciated everywhere in Cuba.

1½ cups	dried black beans (12 oz/375 g)	375 mL
2	bay leaves	2
2 tbsp	extra-virgin olive oil	25 mL
1	onion, chopped	1
½ cup	diced Cubanelle or sweet green pepper	125 mL
2	cloves garlic, minced	2
½ tsp	dried oregano	2 mL
2 cups	long-grain white rice	500 mL
1 tsp	salt	5 mL
White vinegar (optional)		

☞ In large saucepan, cover beans with 6 cups (1.5 L) water; soak for 12 hours in refrigerator. (Or cover with water and bring to boil; boil for 2 minutes. Remove from heat; cover and let stand for 1 hour.)

☞ Drain beans; cover with 6 cups (1.5 L) cold water. Add 1 of the bay leaves and bring to boil; reduce heat, cover and simmer until tender, about 45 minutes. Reserving cooking liquid, drain beans.

☞ In large saucepan, heat oil over medium-low heat; fry onion, pepper, garlic, oregano and remaining bay leaf, stirring often, until golden, about 10 minutes.

☞ Add rice, beans, 4 cups (1 L) of the reserved cooking liquid and salt; bring to boil. Reduce heat, cover and simmer until rice is tender, about 15 minutes. Discard

bay leaves. Season with vinegar (if using). **Makes 8 servings.** PER SERVING: about 333 cal, 12 g pro, 4 g total fat (1 g sat. fat), 61 g carb, 8 g fibre, 0 mg chol, 290 mg sodium. % RDI: 4% calcium, 17% iron, 9% vit A, 35% vit C, 68% folate.

Yuca with Red Onion

Yuca, also known as cassava, is starchy and sticky when cooked but has a sweetness that has made it a favourite of half the world, including Cuba. Look for heavy tubers that are completely bark covered. Scrub well and, because yuca is hard, cut crosswise into 3-inch (8 cm) rounds. Then set cut side down and slice downward with a chef's knife to cut off the bark, turning the round after each cut.

2 lb	fresh yuca or potatoes, peeled and cut into 1-inch (2.5 cm) cubes	1 kg
¾ tsp	salt	4 mL
¼ cup	extra-virgin olive oil	50 mL
1	small red onion, thinly sliced	1
4	cloves garlic, minced	4
2 tbsp	lime juice	25 mL

☞ In saucepan, cover yuca with cold water; add ½ tsp (2 mL) of the salt. Cover and bring to boil over medium-high heat; reduce heat and boil until tender but not mushy, about 20 minutes.

☞ Drain yuca and peel away any ▶

Rum Notes

➤ Cuba produces some of the best rum in the world, so it's the perfect accompaniment to this dinner party. Made from the purest sugarcane molasses, this rum ages in white oak barrels then is blended with sugarcane alcohol to create *ron fresco* (fresh rum). To get the party started, **Havana Club Añejo Blanco** (\$23.10, 750 mL) goes into the Mojito (recipe, page 174). This briefly aged (añejo) white rum makes an ideal cocktail mixer because its clarity won't discolour the drink. Its delicate, sweet flavour with vanilla and caramel nuances adds complexity without overpowering the mint. With dessert, enjoy **Havana Club Añejo**

Reserva (\$24.60, 750 mL) like a liqueur. This amber rum blends young with aged rums to create complex aromas of caramel, coffee and fruitcake with smooth, round flavours of alcohol, vanilla and spice. Or for true rum enthusiasts, after dessert, pour a snifter of **Havana Club 7 Year Old** (\$29.10, 750 mL) to slowly sip and contemplate like fine cognac. Composed of rums aged for a minimum of 7 years (many much older), this mahogany-colour rum has complex aromas of molasses, spice and wood, with the smooth, soft taste of vanilla and spice. Considered one of the best rums in the world, it is a perfect complement to a Havana cigar.



remaining pink fibrous layers. Arrange in serving dish.

☞ Meanwhile, in small skillet, heat oil over medium heat; fry onion for 3 minutes. Remove from heat. Stir in garlic and lime juice; pour over yuca. Sprinkle with remaining salt; toss. **Makes 8 servings.** **PER SERVING:** about 170 cal, 3 g pro, 7 g total fat (1 g sat. fat), 25 g carb, trace fibre, 0 mg chol, 223 mg sodium. % RDI: 8% calcium, 3% iron, 50% vit C, 7% folate.

Tostones

Like French fries, chunky crispy tostones are irresistible. Tostones are made with green plantains (cooking bananas), but ripe brown plantains, called maduros when fried, make a sweeter version. Try either, or fry a plate of both.

2	large green plantains	2
2	large ripe plantains	2
Vegetable oil for frying		
¼ tsp	salt	1 mL

☞ Peel green and ripe plantains; cut into 1-inch (2.5 cm) slices. Set plantains aside separately.

☞ Pour about 1 inch (2.5 cm) oil into large deep skillet or wide saucepan. Heat over medium-high heat until deep-frying thermometer registers 375°F (190°C) or 1-inch (2.5 cm) cube of white bread turns golden in about 40 seconds.

☞ In batches, fry green plantains, turning often, until softened, 8 to 10 minutes. Transfer to paper towel-lined baking sheet and cover with paper towel.

☞ With hands or bottom of glass, flatten fried plantains to half slice's thickness. Repeat with ripe plantains, frying for 2 to 3 minutes.

☞ Return slices to same hot oil; fry, turning once, for 1 minute. Remove to paper towels. Sprinkle with salt. Serve warm. **Makes 8 servings.** **PER SERVING:** about 229 cal, 1 g pro, 14 g total fat (1 g sat. fat), 30 g carb, 2 g fibre, 0 mg chol, 76 mg sodium. % RDI: 4% iron, 9% vit A, 17% vit C, 11% folate.

Tropical Fruit Pudding

This dessert is a tribute to the many desserts created by Cuban chefs. Serve with whipped cream spiked with rum.



Tropical Fruit Pudding

2	mangoes	2
1	golden pineapple	1
2 tbsp	granulated sugar	25 mL
2 tbsp	dark rum	25 mL
2 tbsp	lime juice	25 mL
1 cup	pineapple juice	250 mL

CAKE TOPPING:

4	eggs, separated	4
1 cup	granulated sugar	250 mL
¾ cup	all-purpose flour	175 mL
2 tbsp	dark rum	25 mL
1 tbsp	grated lime rind	15 mL
¼ tsp	salt	1 mL
1 tbsp	icing sugar	15 mL

☞ Grease 13- x 9-inch (3 L) glass baking dish; set aside.

☞ Cut off mango flesh from each side of pit. Cut grid pattern of ¾-inch (2 cm) squares in flesh down to but not through skin. Gently push skin to turn inside out; cut off flesh and place in prepared baking dish. Cut off rind of pineapple; trim, quar-

ter, core and cut pineapple into bite-size cubes. Add to mangoes. Add sugar, rum and lime juice; toss and set aside.

☞ **CAKE TOPPING:** In large bowl, beat egg whites until soft peaks form. Beat in ⅓ cup (75 mL) of the sugar, 1 tbsp (15 mL) at a time, until stiff glossy peaks form.

☞ In separate large bowl, beat egg yolks with remaining sugar until pale. Add flour, rum, lime rind and salt; stir until combined. Whisk in one-quarter of the egg whites; fold in remaining whites. Scrape over fruit; spread evenly. Pour pineapple juice over top.

☞ Bake in centre of 350°F (180°C) oven until tester inserted in centre comes out clean, about 50 minutes. Let cool on rack for 1 hour. Dust with icing sugar. Serve warm. **Makes 8 servings.** **PER SERVING:** about 279 cal, 5 g pro, 3 g total fat (1 g sat. fat), 60 g carb, 2 g fibre, 93 mg chol, 105 mg sodium. % RDI: 3% calcium, 9% iron, 20% vit A, 68% vit C, 18% folate.

ON THE NET

For a Moroccan feast for friends, visit www.canadianliving.com.