

Little Havana serves an authentic meal with a twist

by Linda Brockman

As a lifelong South Floridian who grew up in Miami, I find that often one Cuban restaurant's menu is pretty much the same as the next Cuban restaurant's menu. Mainstays at most include camarones al ajillo (shrimp in garlic sauce), ropa vieja (shredded beef), chicharrón de pollo (chicken chunks marinated in mojo and fried), churrasco (steak), lechón asadá (roast pork), and vaca frita (fried beef). All are delicious – that's why they are classics – but I must admit it is refreshing to find a new take on an old favorite.

At Little Havana Bar & Grill in Coral Springs, those dishes exist, but owner Jorge Alvarez also has more inventive dishes – often influenced by other Latin cultures. That is what my friends and I discovered while dining there on a recent Friday night.

Dinner / Cena

We started with drinks and piquillo, Spanish tapas that are not always on the menu. A tasty marriage of a roasted red pepper stuffed with bacalao (cod), the appetizer sat in a rich sauce that tasted like lobster bisque. We also had mariquitas, fried plantain chips that were perfectly tender in the center and crispy on the edges. It came with a mojo sauce, which we drizzled on top.



Mariquitas

"They are delish," declared Vida Handelsman of Coral Springs, who was also dining that night with her family. The mariquitas are her preferred way to start a meal at Little Havana. She said she prefers Alvarez's place to the other Latin restaurants in the neighborhood that serve Cuban

food. "They don't specialize in Cuban like they do here. The Latin flair here is so authentic, I feel like I'm on vacation." Her husband, Kenny, who works in Hialeah, said the food at Little Havana is as faithful to the original cuisine as any of his regular Cuban lunch spots.

Alvarez, a 14-year resident of Parkland, grew up in the restaurant business. Twenty-seven years ago, his parents opened Little Havana restaurant in North Miami, followed by another one in Deerfield Beach four years later. In May of this year, Alvarez and his wife, Michelle, opened the newest Little Havana on the corner of Coral Ridge Drive and Holmberg Road. Open seven days a week, from 11:30am to 10pm, the community welcomed it with open arms and the restaurant is packed daily.

One of the more unusual dishes is lechón tamarindo, pork topped with a sweet and slightly sour sauce made from sweet red peppers and tamarind fruit. On its own, the tropical tamarind can be so tart it is almost inedible unless cooked or rolled in sugar. At Little Havana, the popularity of this dish hatched pollo tamarindo, the chicken version that my dining companion, Rachel, described as "tender with a fantastic sauce."

For Rachel, the farther a culinary concoction strays from the beaten path, the bigger the smile on her face. She often finds chicken uninspiring, but not this time. "I love finding authentic cuisine cooked in a way I have never tried before," she said. "That was the dish on the menu that spoke to me."

Perhaps because they represent comfort food, I chose the hearty chicken soup and the tender Little Havana steak, pounded thin, then grilled and served with chimichurri sauce. My friend, Sara, chose the Relleno, a piece of haddock stuffed with tender bites of shrimp and mingled with a creamy seafood sauce. It didn't disappoint (her, or any of us.)

There are a couple of choices on Little Havana's parrillada (grilled) menu, both intended for two people – or in our case it was enough for three. The first one has chicken, beef, and pork smothered in onions and chorizo (Spanish sausage). The second option has roast pork, lamb shank, ropa vieja (which got its name because the shredded meat in this



5 Star combo

classic dish resembles "old rags"), grilled chicken steak, and Little Havana steak. Bring your appetite and invite your meat-loving friends if you plan to order this. All of the meats were perfectly grilled, moist, and hearty.



Lamb shank

For health-conscious diners, who think they need to limit Cuban food to an occasional calorie splurge, Little Havana's manager Jorge Fuentes has you covered. He suggests salmon (not on the menu but always available), grilled snapper filet, or Pescado Diana, haddock baked with tomato, onion, garlic, and capers, then toasted under a broiler. Vegetables and salads can be substituted as a side instead of the standard rice and beans.

Drinks / Bebidas

Little Havana serves wine and beer, but Alvarez says the most popular drink is the mojito (which also comes in pineapple, mango, and guava flavors). It is strong and refreshing, but my favorite was the robust sangria... flavorful and sweet. There is also a mojito martini.

Happy hour is from 4-7pm every day, which means you can celebrate the end of the day with \$6 mojitos and sangria, and \$4 beers. Furthermore, you don't have to sit at the bar to enjoy these specials – happy hour includes the whole restaurant. Monday's happy hour is actually a "happy day," when drink specials are available all day long. Two favorites come out twice a week: paella is served all day on Fridays and arroz con pollo is available all day on Tuesdays.



MOJITO



Tres leches cake, flan and crema catalana

There is some form of live music Thursday through Sunday from 6-10pm. A singer crooned Spanish language tunes to a packed house on the Friday night when we dined. Alvarez said this is a typical Friday night crowd including large parties, families, and couples.

Dessert / Postre

Save room for dessert... we tried three, proclaiming our favorites to be the creamy flan and crema catalana flambé, the Spanish version of crème brulee. Aside from the name, catalana flambé is very close in taste, texture, and appearance to its French cousin. Flame-kissed, the sugar fused on top and cracked under my fork. Once in my mouth, those crunchy bits wedged themselves in the crevices of my delighted molars. The tres leches cake was moist, dense, and very sweet. Of course, if you have a sweet tooth like me, I encourage you to be the judge. So take your pick, or better yet, try them all. 🍷

Little Havana
BAR AND GRILL

6240 Coral Ridge Drive • Coral Springs, FL 33067

954-510-1099

Littlehavanarestaurant.com