

Los Angeles Times

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THE REVIEW

Cuban sequel debuts in Hollywood

Xiomara has arrived on Melrose, pairing authentic flavors with modern flare. And then there are the mojitos ...

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January 21 2004

At Porto's Bakery in Glendale, people wait patiently in line to take home fresh-baked Cuban-style bread or a warm medianoche sandwich. Versailles on Venice Boulevard is always jammed with a combination of hipsters eating on the cheap and Cuban expatriates looking for the taste of home. Most of the Cuban food in Los Angeles is to be found in simple mom-and-pop cafes and bakeries, although Paladar Cuban Bistro came along a couple of years ago with terrific lightened-up Cuban fare in a hip modernist setting.

But until Xiomara Ardolina decided to take her French bistro, Xiomara, in a Cuban direction several years ago, nobody in Los Angeles had tried a serious Cuban restaurant. If Versailles is Cuban 101, then Xiomara in Pasadena, and now the new Xiomara on Melrose in Hollywood, is the graduate course.

Starting with the home cooking she grew up on in Cuba, Miami and New York, Xiomara gives it her own idiosyncratic spin. The menu at the new place is not all that different from her original Pasadena restaurant - a little bit of haute with a little bit of Nuevo Latino influence and a pinch of the Chinese-Cuban cooking everybody in Cuba is crazy about. She buys good ingredients, prepares everything from scratch and puts some effort into the presentation. But she's smart enough not to go too far with it. For the most part, her Cuban food keeps its homey character.

A couple of blocks west of the old Patina, Xiomara on Melrose occupies a prime corner spot, with a wide, arched window overlooking Melrose punched into the double-storied space. At the back is a broad mezzanine dining room fenced off with a wrought iron railing copied from one on a crumbling old Havana mansion. Votive candles flicker on the brick walls; above the staircase, an ornate Moroccan lantern casts lacy shadows. The bulky, rather ugly upholstered chairs are the only incongruous note. They look as if they've been borrowed from a funeral parlor.

At the massive dark wood bar, styled like those in Havana, a bartender makes mojitos to Xiomara's recipe. The secret is freshly squeezed sugar cane juice, which adds its special lilt to the classic Cuban cocktail. She uses plenty of mint and gets the balance of lime to sweet just right. Her mojitos have a cult following: I know people who used to drive to Pasadena just to have one. Sometimes, though, if Ardolina isn't personally making them, the ones at the Melrose Avenue spot aren't quite up to speed. I think it's that sometimes the mint isn't muddled enough. Even so, they still trump every other mojito in town.

While you're reading through the menu, someone will bring a basket of Porto's bread to the table. One bite and you're hooked. It's crisp and warm, two pieces pressed together

with melted butter. This is white bread, and it's heaven. You might want to order another mojito now, because the bar can get furiously busy.

Island mainstays

For a first visit, I'd suggest trying some of the classics. I'm fascinated by the very Cuban black bean soup, an inky blue-black slightly thickened purée, inset with perfectly cooked whole beans. It doesn't scream garlic or cumin; everything is subtle, yet you're absolutely convinced these are the best black beans you've ever tasted. And that's enough. Ardolina knows enough to let the beans stand on their own.

Bacalaito, golf ball-sized codfish fritters that show off the distinct salt-sea taste of salt cod, are terrific against a cool, sugary mojito. I like them plain, but they come with a mango and sweet-pepper dipping sauce. And I haven't met anybody yet who isn't a fan of the Chino-Cubano arroz frito, fried rice studded with pork, ham and pretty little rock shrimp and garnished with an avocado salad and fried ripe plantain.

If you have a hankering for charcuterie, Ardolina has put together a selection of Spanish-style cured sausages and meats that includes a couple of different hams as well as sausages from Pamplona and the town of Vic near Barcelona, along with a hunk of Manchego cheese and a little membrillo, or quince paste.

The primeros include some 20 entries, and I'd be happy to order from just this side of the menu. My favorite salad is the nuevo Cubano, a juicy mix of avocado, tomato and watercress with fresh hearts of palm in a dressing lit up with fresh lime and oregano. Though I'm not crazy about those huge green-lipped mussels from New Zealand, here the addition of bitter Seville orange juice to the juices makes them sing.

The French-bistro influence shows up in a couple of dishes. Ardolina's Cuban tamale, for example, sits in a puddle of silky lobster bisque, and the masa dough is mixed with fresh corn to brighten the flavor. Ropa vieja, which is traditionally beef braised for so long it resembles rags, is made with duck and it's kind of great, the spicy shredded duck sitting atop a thick Colombian corn cake. Won ton pork taquitos and egg rolls are both a miss, though, mostly because they come out a little wan and greasy.

Of pork and plantains

I have a much spottier experience with main courses. What's nice, though, is that most of them are available as either half or full courses so everybody can try more dishes. The standout is the seared pork hash, made from slow-roasted leg of pork and presented as a tall cake in a moat of black bean jus. The garlic-scented pork is moist; the fried ripe plantains are rich and fruity. Here is where you begin to see the same ingredients - black beans, plantain, citrus, ham, yuca, avocado, rice - appear again and again. The vocabulary is small.

Ardolina does a couple of different seafood soups, usually a chupe with clams, mussels, scallops, shrimp and calamari dosed with a Peruvian chile sauce. Sometimes, too, the special might be Spain's zarzuela with a similar mix of seafood. I also liked the giant prawns, served whole and split in a mango-rum glaze and a Chinese soybean sauce.

But Cubans are big on meat. And here Ardolina has given the French lamb shank she

used to serve a Cuban accent by presenting it with puréed malanga (taro root) instead of potatoes. If you're going to go for steak, the calle ocho is the best because the marinade gives the beef more flavor. The other two steaks won't knock anybody's socks off.

Given the number of moderately priced terrific wines from both Spain and Argentina, Ardolina seems to be missing the boat with the wine list. She's got the right idea but seems clueless about the specific choices of wines and producers. She could do much better.

We didn't have much luck with the desserts either. One night the pudín de pan, a chocolate bread pudding that has to be ordered 45 minutes in advance, arrives burnt and charred on top. Isla flotante, the famous floating island, is stiff as Styrofoam. Tres flancitos, though, are three doll-size flans, each subtly suffused with the taste of a different tropical fruit.

In a Hollywood neighborhood not exactly saturated with restaurants, Xiomara starts serving at 11:30 a.m. and, instead of closing at 2 or 3 p.m., stays open all through the afternoon for a quick bite or a Cuban sandwich. Dinner is served until 11 p.m. The restaurant has weekend brunch too. So pretty much anytime that craving for Cuban food comes on, Xiomara is waiting.

Xiomara on Melrose

Rating:

Location: 6101 Melrose Ave., Hollywood; (323) 461-0601

Ambience: Old Havana, with wrought iron balcony and staircase, potted palms and atmospheric lighting. The dark wood bar gets all the mojito action.

Service: Inexperienced and sometimes slow.

Price: Dinner appetizers, \$6 to \$12; sandwiches, \$9 to \$12; main courses, \$16.50 to \$32; desserts, \$7 and \$8; three-course business lunch, \$14.

Best dishes: Black bean soup, codfish fritters, corn tamale, duck ropa vieja, arroz frito, pork hash, nuevo Cubano chicken, tres flancitos.

Wine list: Features wines from Spain and other Latin countries, but the selections could be better. Corkage, \$15.

Best table: Upstairs on the balcony overlooking the bar and main dining room.

Special features: Open all afternoon for a quick bite.

Details: Monday through Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m.; weekend brunch, 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., and open for the regular menu until 11 p.m. Saturday and 10 p.m. Sunday. Full bar. Valet parking, \$4.50.

Rating is based on food, service and ambience, with price taken into account in relation to

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quality. **: Outstanding on every level. ***: Excellent. **: Very good. *: Good. No star: Poor to satisfactory.**