

Miami Vices: A culinary tour

by John Blanchette

The day I flew into Miami, Fidel Castro had ceded power to his brother and all of Little Havana was dancing in the streets, celebrating news they had waited to hear for 47 years. Since Castro took control in 1959, nearly a million Cubans have left their native land, most settling in Miami, where they wait for the Old Country to welcome them home.

But the younger generations raised in Florida have no memory of Cuba; they are enjoying the prosperity, tropical bounty and multicultural landscape that have made Miami an international destination for many from the Caribbean and Central and South America.

A walk on South Beach may open your eyes to the vast number of Europeans who have also discovered the warm sun, white sands and aquamarine waters of Miami. Be ready for the clothing-optional lifestyle preferred by the Mediterranean libertines. **BREEZIN ON THE BEACH** - Warm aquamarine waters, white sand and tropical breezes draw visitors from around the world to Miami's South Beach. CNS Photo by John Blanchette. In the 1920s, South Beach was devastated by a series of tropical storms that leveled most of the colonial architecture. Over the next 20 years, the town rebuilt, adopting the popular art deco style of the day.

But South Beach fell into disrepair in the '50s and '60s, becoming a geriatric slum of nursing homes, low-rent condominiums for retirees and snowbirds escaping the winter chill, and flophouse hotels for students celebrating spring break.

Finally, in the early 1980s after Gianni Versace razed the lovely art deco Revere Hotel to build an addition to his Casa Casuarina estate (where he was later gunned down by a spree killer on the front steps), a huge protest by preservationists led to a landmark decision.

South Beach was the first 20th century district added to the National Register of Historic Places, saving more than 800 structures from destruction. Most of South Beach's unparalleled art deco hotels and buildings have been restored to their former glory, creating the elegant ambience of a bygone era.

Today South Beach throbs with music, dancing and revelry into the deep hours of the evening, where clubs generally reach a crescendo around 4 a.m. Take the self-guided Art Deco Walking Tour that begins at 10th and Ocean Drive (\$15) and see the mile-square Historic District at your leisure.

For a pleasant diversion from Ocean Drive, walk nearby Lincoln Road Mall, with its wide variety of restaurants and shops. There are great expanses of chairs and tables for open-air dining and people-watching, somewhat reminiscent of St.-Tropez.

When you are in Miami, you must take advantage of the wonderfully creative and diverse food options available. Little Havana is a must, and Versailles Cuban restaurant is ground zero for the community. It is where more than 20 news crews had set up their operations during the Castro deathwatch and where some of the best and most authentic Cuban food and coffee is dispensed. Be sure and try the meat pastries.

Down the block you can get fresh tropical fruit drinks pressed as you wait at El Palacio de Los Jugos, hand-rolled cigars at Cuban Tobacco Trading, handmade Cuban linen clothing at Casa de las Guayaberas, and even pick up a game of bones at the famous Domino Park. Dragonfly Expeditions offers informative tours of the area.

A fun way to dine and see a bunch of different restaurants is to do a cafe crawl. Order drinks at one place, appetizers at another, entrees, desserts and then after-dinner drinks at various establishments. This way you can go to five restaurants a night and start making a dent into this culinary paradise.

We did it on Lincoln Road Mall one night with cocktails and appetizers at Chef Jose Mendin's Sushisamba, a Japanese-Brazilian restaurant - Brazil's second-largest ethnic group is Japanese - followed by an exceptional dinner at Pacific Time, voted by Zagat as the best restaurant in Miami, desserts across the street at Touch and drinks at The Fifth nightclub, where Paris Hilton and Mickey Rourke were spotted.

Some recommended restaurants include my favorite, Restaurant Brana. Chef Jeffrey Brana was Norman Van Aken's sous chef at Norman's. When the restaurant moved to Key West, Brana and the staff opened his Coral Gables jewel, where they are creating culinary history every day.

Also in Coral Gables is Belkis Lopez Gables Juice Bar, 230 Almeria Ave., for refreshing tropical fruit drinks, and Ola Steak & Tapas, which features Nuevo Latino cuisine. At La Cuisine Gourmet culinary store, we tasted Florida fruit wines (lychee and passion fruit) from Schnebly Redland's winery near Miami, demonstrating that wine can be produced nearly everywhere.

Novecento in downtown Miami features tropical cocktails and upscale Latin fusion cuisine. Across the street at the top of the Conrad Hotel is English chef Michael Gilligan's beautiful Atrio restaurant, offering a panoramic view of Miami.

Trendy restaurants Afterglo and Tantra are run by Food TV Network veteran Sandee Birdsong, who guided us through a tour of Culinaire, a specialty foods supplier that brings in products from around the world for Miami's chefs.

Many European restaurateurs have also discovered the plenty of southern Florida. Three of France's greatest chefs, Joel Robuchon, Paul Bocuse and Alain Ducasse, will be opening restaurants in South Beach over the next year.

Tamara Restaurant in South Beach is run by young French chef Frederic Delaire. It is located in the beautiful art deco National Hotel, which boasts a 205-foot infinity pool - the longest in Florida.

Next door is the Delano, which has the area's most impressive lobby and also makes the best mojitos in town. The restaurant is operated by French chef Stephane Becht, a veteran of several three-star Michelin restaurants in Paris, New York and Los Angeles and a real rising star. He also prepared a special dinner I attended at the Biltmore in Coral Gables, the grand lady of Miami's hotels. Opened in the 1920s, its enormous pool was made famous by Esther Williams and Johnny Weissmuller's water shows.

Noted American chef Emeril Lagasse recently opened his restaurant at the Loews Miami Beach Hotel, and another 10,000 eateries dot the city, serving every cuisine imaginable. Food is a continual topic of conversation and many believe that Miami is now the third-greatest culinary city in the world, next to Paris and New York.

Johnson & Wales University has opened a campus in Miami that streams newly educated chefs into the growing restaurant population that is creating this culinary revolution. Called New World Cuisine by chef Norman Van Aken and Floribbean by others, it is a cuisine that brings a full range of tropical products and international cooking styles to the creative mix.

IF YOU GO While in Miami, a must-see is the Seaquarium, where you can make reservations to swim with the dolphins and feed Lolita, the largest killer whale in captivity. She's a finicky eater, however, probably influenced by all the fine dining available in town, and only sushi-grade fish will do.

New Times and Miami Today weeklies offer the best guides to what's happening in town. For lists of housing options, restaurants, special events, guidebooks and brochures, contact the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau, 800-955-3646, www.miamiandbeaches.com.

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