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David Guas's guava-and-cream-cheese *pastelito* (stuffed pastry) is flaky, sweet and creamy in the center (recipe, p. 190).

# HAVANA

*homecoming*



CHEF DAVID GUAS GETS A LESSON IN CUBAN COOKING ON A RICE-AND-BEANS-FUELED TRIP AROUND HAVANA WITH HIS ÉMIGRÉ FATHER, BACK FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MORE THAN 50 YEARS.

BY MARK KURLANSKY PHOTOGRAPHS BY BOBBY FISHER FOOD PHOTOGRAPHS BY CON POULOS

# On January 1, 1959,

Mariano Guas, 13 years old, was at home in Havana when he learned that Cuba's dictator, Fulgencio Batista, had fled the country. "It was a gloomy scene. I was scared," he recalls. "I didn't know what to expect or what it meant. But it didn't take long to realize my life was about to change." Young Mari started boarding school in Mississippi a few months later, and he never lived in Havana again.

Mariano is now 65 years old, and after years of talking about it, he and his son David have returned to Cuba. David grew up in New Orleans and is an expert on the sweets and savory dishes of his hometown, which he re-creates at Bayou Bakery in Arlington, Virginia. Though he made his reputation cooking Creole and Cajun dishes, David's childhood was filled with traditional Cuban food. "Instead of eating red beans and rice, like everyone else in Louisiana, we had black beans," he says. "It was important for my father to represent Cuba to us." Now the father and son have come to Cuba to reconnect with the country through the dishes of their memories.

Just a few years ago, visiting Cuba to eat would have been unthinkable. After Fidel Castro's revolution in 1959 and the ensuing US embargo, the country's tourism industry collapsed. But over the past 10 years, the government has revived tourism, finding inventive ways to maintain state control but also attract foreign investments and promote local entrepreneurs. The Havana of today draws crowds of Canadian and European tourists, but few Americans; only those on educational trips, conducting research, working as journalists or visiting family are granted special visas.

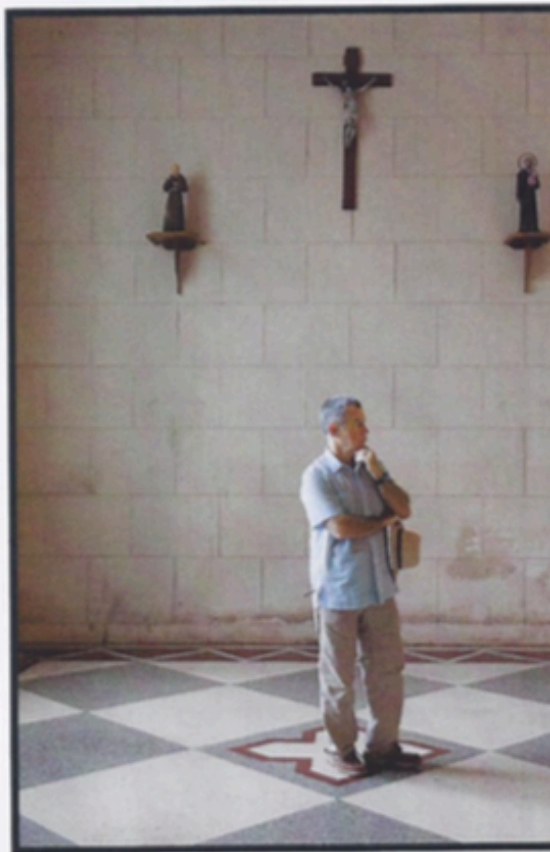
Eating your way around Cuba, however, isn't like eating your way around France or Italy. As Mariano and David quickly discovered, Havana restaurants are wildly different from those in other cities. The larger ones are usually state-owned establishments that cater only to tourists and the upper-upper class. The other types of restaurants are small, family-run spots called *paladares*, which are usually inside someone's home. (*Paladar* is Spanish for palate, though the name was inspired, oddly, by a Brazilian soap opera.) This type of family restaurant has existed for a long time in Cuba; it was legalized in the '90s, but the number of seats, non-family employees and types of food are still regulated by the government.

Mariano started the trip with a checklist of dishes he wanted to find again, as if to reboot his childhood memories: Guava paste and butter sandwiches, served after school by the family's maid; the gooey guava-filled pastries called *pastelitos*; roast chicken with sour orange and garlic from a thatched-roof restaurant on the outskirts of the city; the fresh pineapple slices he used to dip in the ocean before eating.

The first stop on this food-nostalgia tour was a small home *paladar* in the central Vedado area called Los Amigos. Cubans stood in line waiting to get into a small space with a dozen tables. The food was classic: roast chicken, rice and beans, fried yucca root and *tostones*, starchy plantains double-fried into crisp, round disks (recipe, p. 189). David looked at the menu and said, "Ah, this is what I've been waiting for."

These were the dishes of his childhood, "peasant food, comfort food, what I want to eat at the end of the day," he said. He was excited about *picadillo*: ground beef cooked with onions, olives and raisins, served over rice (recipe, p. 189). "Chefs always think about mixing savory and sweet, and this has that balance down," David says. "I think it's a perfect dish." There was a moment of triumph when he found tomatoes in it. For years, he'd been arguing with his mother: She said *picadillo* should not have tomatoes; David always made it with. He photographed it to show her. "The sweetness comes from the tomatoes and raisins cooking down for a long time," he said.

Mark Kurlansky's latest book is *Birdseye: The Adventures of a Curious Man*.



## Cuban Food LEXICON

### EMPAÑADAS

These hand pies have their root in the region of Galicia, Spain, where they are typically baked as large savory pies and then cut into smaller portions. They're common in Latin America, where they are made to be portable. In Cuba, empanadas are traditionally deep-fried and filled with beef or chicken.

### ESCABÉCHE

A method of preserving fish by first cooking it, then pickling it in a vinegar marinade. The preparation can be traced back to an ancient Middle Eastern dish of meat in a sweet-sour sauce called sikboj.

### FUFU

A staple of Western Africa, this starchy side is usually made from cassava or yams. In Cuba, the dish is made with mashed green plantains and bits of pork.

### MEDIANOCHE

A warm pressed sandwich that uses the same fillings as its more famous cousin, the Cuban, but featuring a softer, challah-like egg bread instead of a crusty loaf.

### ROPA VIEJA

A beef-tomato stew cooked until the beef resembles rag-like shreds of cloth, which inspired the dish's name of "old clothes." It is said to have come from the Canary Islands and spread on Spanish Colonial ships throughout the Caribbean.



Mariano and David Guas (RIGHT) found a city fairly unchanged by time, from the vintage 1950s cars to colonial churches and incredible renditions of classic dishes like *tostones*, double-fried plantains (recipe, p. 189).



But what impressed David most was the *tostones*. "These are something Cubans always do right. Never undercooked or overcooked," he said. "And always perfectly salted." At Los Amigos, there were side dishes of *moros and cristianos* ("Moors and Christians")—black beans and rice, another dish of his childhood. "Every time I eat this," David said, "I start humming to myself." The dish represents the mingling of Muslims (black beans) and Christians (rice) in Medieval Spain; they are cooked together, so the rice takes on an inky, purplish color and the earthy flavor of the beans.

## Cubans often joke

that returning exiles expect to find Havana frozen in time, with men in white

linen suits singing "Guantanamera." On their first night, Mariano and David went to a bar in the historic old section—and the band played "Guantanamera." They drank daiquiris, but not the blended kind. These were strong, tart drinks with just three ingredients: lime, sugar and rum (recipe, p. 190). Later that night, they stopped in at La Bodeguita del Medio, a 70-year-old bar and restaurant that is, as Hemingway once pointed out, one of the best places in Havana for a mojito. Playing a handmade Cuban guitar called a *tres*, a singer played Mariano's favorite song, a Eusebio Delfin bolero from the '20s, "¿Y Tú Qué Has Hecho?" ("And you, what have you done?").

Havana's frozen-in-time feeling was everywhere. Visiting his former neighborhood, Miramar, Mariano found his family's house still standing, his old neighbor living in the same apartment upstairs. He traveled around the city in the cars of his childhood: two-tone 1950s Buicks, Chevys and Oldsmobiles, which never broke down, though the suspension sagged and the gurgle of the ancient engines earned them the nickname *cafeteras*, "coffeemakers."

At a state-owned restaurant called El Aljibe, Mariano had the gustatory version of a time warp when he saw the house specialty—roast chicken with garlic-and-sour-orange sauce. As a child, his family used to drive outside the city just to visit Rancho Luna restaurant, famous for its crisp-skinned birds. (The chicken was so memorable that Mariano's mother continued to make it after the family moved to New Orleans.) The García family that owned Rancho Luna, which closed in 1961, opened El Aljibe in the well-off Miramar neighborhood, bringing the same thatched roof, leather chairs and chicken recipe into an urban environment. Mariano asked when the new restaurant had opened, and the waitress said August 13, 1993. She then pointed toward the heavens reverentially and, in a hushed voice, added, "the birthday of Fidel."

When the chicken arrived, Mariano bit into it and said, "This is it." David nodded in agreement, saying that the tangy sauce would be tough to re-create at home without sour oranges, which are hard to find in the US. However, basting the chicken with a mix of its own juices, pineapple and lime juice would approximate the flavors of the original (see recipe at right). Mariano tried to order the dessert his parents always got him and his younger brother, the *doncellita*—chocolate syrup and evaporated milk with a cherry on top—but the waitress said they didn't make it anymore.

Mariano ordered a round of other desserts. David recognized the French toast-like *torrejas*, similar to the New Orleans dessert *pain perdu*. The *natillas*, a simple cream-colored custard sprinkled with cinnamon, was a perfect delivery system for eggs, milk and vanilla (recipe, p. 188). David noticed that the custard was overcooked and pitted with bubbles. All his Cuban relatives in the US overcooked their flans. "I used to say to my grandmother, 'Why do you overcook the flan?'" David recalled. "She would say that it was supposed to be like that."

There are more ambitious restaurants in Cuba now, though some of them try too hard. One Miramar *paladar*, La Cocina de Lilliam, garnishes a fish dish with a water glass that has a live goldfish swimming in it, leaving the diner with both a moral and gastronomic conundrum.

## Chicken in Pineapple Sauce

ACTIVE: 25 MIN; TOTAL: 1 HR

4 SERVINGS

One of Mariano Guas's favorite Cuban food memories is enjoying a platter of chicken in a sweet, tangy glaze with his family. After tasting the dish on their visit, his son David worked to re-create the flavors in this recipe.

½ cup all-purpose flour

One 3-pound chicken, cut into eight pieces

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 teaspoon sweet paprika

¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil

1 sweet onion, finely chopped

1 green bell pepper, finely chopped

4 garlic cloves, minced

1 cup dry white wine

1 cup chicken stock

½ cup pineapple juice

¼ cup fresh lime juice

1 bay leaf

Steamed white rice, for serving

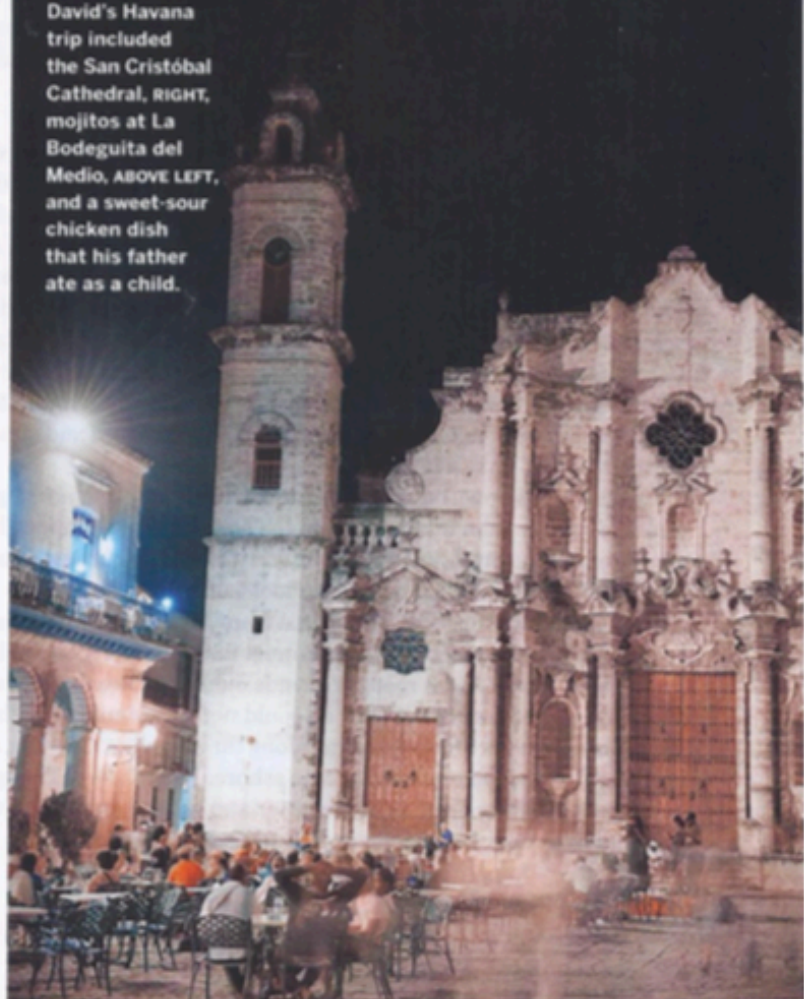
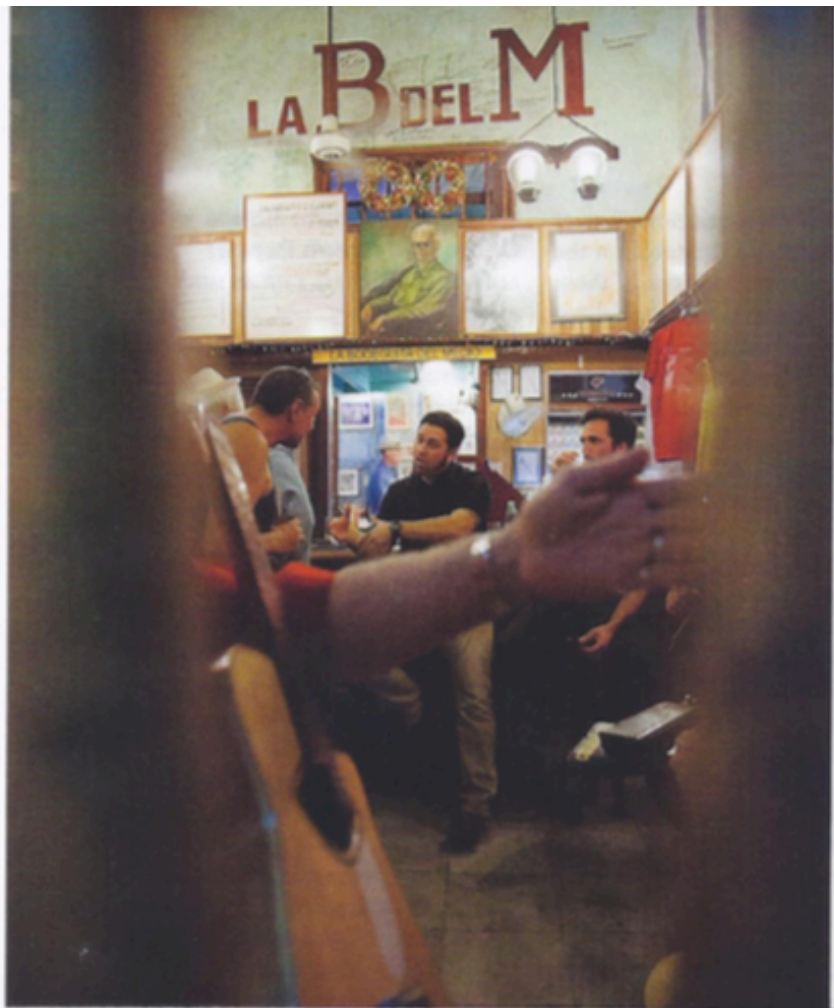
1. Put the flour in a shallow bowl. Season the chicken with salt and black pepper and sprinkle with the paprika. Dredge the chicken in the flour, tapping off the excess.

2. In a large, deep skillet, heat the olive oil until shimmering. Add the chicken and cook over moderately high heat, turning once or twice, until golden brown, about 6 minutes. Transfer the chicken to a plate. Pour off all but 1 tablespoon of the fat in the skillet.

3. Add the onion, green pepper and garlic to the skillet and cook over moderate heat, stirring, until softened, 5 minutes. Add the wine and boil until reduced by half, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom of the skillet, 5 minutes. Add the stock, pineapple juice, lime juice and bay leaf and bring to a boil.

4. Nestle the chicken in the skillet and add any accumulated juices. Cover and cook over very low heat, turning the chicken once, until cooked through, about 25 minutes. Uncover and cook over high heat until the sauce is thickened and glossy, about 5 minutes. Discard the bay leaf and serve the chicken with rice, spooning the sauce on top.

**WINE** Sweet, tangy pineapple can be difficult to pair with wine. Try a substantial white with good acidity, like Chardonnay. Pour the 2010 Charles Smith Eve or the 2010 Clos Julien.



David's Havana trip included the San Cristóbal Cathedral, RIGHT, mojitos at La Bodeguita del Medio, ABOVE LEFT, and a sweet-sour chicken dish that his father ate as a child.

Cooking with chef Carlos Cristóbal Márquez, David marveled over the similarities between Cuban and Louisiana cuisine: Both use onions, celery and green pepper as the base of nearly every dish.





But some of these spots are wonderful. Carlos Cristóbal Márquez, 50, a former personal chef to a Spanish businessman, opened Paladar San Cristóbal on the ground floor of his family home in downtown Havana. The house is one of those grand, crumbling buildings with ornate tile floors, potted palms, crystal chandeliers, high ceilings and tangled makeshift wiring slung over ornate rococo masonry. The rooms have slid from elegant to kitschy, with old photos of everyone from Carmen Miranda to Fidel playing baseball. Carlos cooks traditional Cuban dishes like *congrí*, pork in garlic and onions, and fried malanga root. David was most impressed with a dish called *langosta enchilada*, spiny lobster cooked with soft sautéed onions, peppers and celery. Because of the name, David thought the dish would be spicy, but it was a stew-like sauté served over long-grain rice, incredibly similar to the shrimp Creole David cooks at his restaurant. "The parallels to New Orleans were crazy," David said. "In Louisiana, we talk about the 'holy trinity'—onion, celery and pepper. If you have that in your refrigerator, you can make anything. This starts the same way, and it's just like the shrimp Creole I make at home, but not spicy."

"Cuban food is mild," Carlos said. "It is based on onions and garlic."

David went into the kitchen to see how Carlos made the dish. "It was not a state-of-the-art kitchen," he recalled. "It was just a home kitchen, with cheaply made products, a bunch of crock pots and a steamer. There wasn't even a commercial range. It was incredible that he could even run a restaurant."

David chopped the holy trinity for the lobster enchilada while Carlos talked about Cuban food and demonstrated his recipes. He added some white wine to the lobster. "Chardonnay?" David asked.

Carlos shrugged. "Dry."

David showed Carlos how he makes his shrimp Creole, essentially the same dish, but with a strong hit of cayenne pepper. Later, David marveled at the way the Spanish and African influences crossed the Atlantic and then both took root in these two cities, which are separated by the Gulf of Mexico. "Even his restaurant, with stucco walls and a big open courtyard, reminded me of New Orleans," David said. "I felt immediately comfortable."

## The next day,

Mariano and David hired a driver and packed into his 1955 Oldsmobile convertible, the same car Mariano's father once owned. They were in search of the Guas's country place, a modest, tile-roofed wooden house about an hour outside the city. Mariano knocked on the door of a house and found the granddaughter of a man who used to cook for his family. She let him onto the property. It was a hot day, and Mariano, a small, fit man, took off his shirt and leapt along a muddy, thorny, narrow trail as though following a call. David followed, shouting out to him, and found Mariano standing in the tall weeds of a steep slope. He looked 13 again and stricken by a spell. He whispered, "This is it."

The house was gone, but he looked down the slope, remembering how they used to slide down on palm fronds to the beach below, where he dipped his pineapple in the water. A security guard from a military officers' club next door told him that down by the water, there is a plaque. Fidel had been there in 1960.

Mariano knew that. When he visited from Mississippi in the summer of 1960, he didn't know it would be his last summer in Cuba. The mood in Havana was too tense, so his family spent most weekends out by the beach. Mariano had broken his arm, and because of the cast, he could not go swimming with the rest of the family. He spent his time wandering along the shoreline. One day, a launch pulled up and a bearded giant of a man came ashore: Fidel Castro. Though there was no one else there, he walked right past Mariano without saying anything. That fall Mariano went back to school, never to return—until now.

## Shrimp in Tomato Sauce with Onion and Green Pepper

ACTIVE: 1 HR; TOTAL: 1 HR 45 MIN

8 SERVINGS

David Guas, who grew up in New Orleans, was amazed by the similarities between Creole and Cuban cooking, which were both heavily influenced by African and Spanish cuisines. In Cuba, he encountered a preparation of spiny lobster in a tomatoey sauce. "It was almost exactly the same dish as the shrimp Creole I cook at my restaurant," he says.

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 3 pounds large shrimp—shelled and deveined, shells reserved
- 1 chopped sweet onion, plus 2 cups finely diced sweet onion

Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper

- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 green bell pepper, finely diced
- 3 tablespoons minced garlic
- ½ cup dry white wine

Two 15-ounce cans tomato sauce

- 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper

Steamed white rice, for serving

1. In a saucepan, melt the butter. Add the shrimp shells and cook over moderate heat, stirring, until pink, 3 minutes. Add the 1 chopped onion and cook until softened, 3 minutes. Add 5 cups of water and bring to a boil. Simmer over moderately low heat until the stock is reduced to 2 cups, 40 minutes. Strain the shrimp stock through a fine sieve.
2. Season the shrimp lightly with salt and pepper. In a very large, deep skillet, heat 2 tablespoons of the olive oil until shimmering. Add half of the shrimp and cook over moderately high heat, turning once, until lightly browned, about 2 minutes. Transfer to a plate and repeat with the remaining shrimp.
3. In the same skillet, heat the remaining 1 tablespoon of oil. Add the green pepper, garlic and the 2 cups of diced onion and cook over moderately low heat, stirring, until softened, 8 minutes. Add the wine and simmer for 2 minutes. Stir in the shrimp stock, tomato sauce, Worcestershire and cayenne and bring to a boil. Simmer over moderate heat, stirring often, until the sauce has reduced by half, 15 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.

*continued on p. 188*