

California Chefs Encourage Fresh Dining In Cuba

PETER ORSI, Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — Rice, beans, pork — and lots of it. That's a typical restaurant meal in Cuba, widely regarded by travelers as a culinary wasteland where the variety and quality of raw ingredients leave much to be desired.

But a delegation of chefs from Alice Waters' celebrated Chez Panisse restaurant in Berkeley, California, is in Havana on a mission to encourage change in the Cuban diet by exposing islanders to healthier dishes with more fruits and vegetables, preferably grown organically and sustainably by local food cooperatives.

In the last week, members of the "Planting Seeds" delegation have held give-and-take seminars in Havana with chefs and culinary students about slow food. They also put on two massive dinners, including a five-course, five-star meal at the privately run Le Chansonnier, which drew culinary, artistic and influential leaders like President Raul Castro's daughter, Mariela. A 100-person bash was held at a state-run restaurant for luminaries such as Berkeley Mayor Tom Bates, California state Sen. Loni Hancock and senior Cuban officials who are in position to affect agricultural policy.

The California chefs toured nearby organic farms and marveled at the fresh, pesticide-free produce, which they stuffed into car trunks as the base foodstuffs for the dinners. And by dreaming up new uses for workaday ingredients, they gave their Cuban counterparts a lot to think about.

Luis Ramon Battle, for one, has seen plenty of guava during his long cooking career, but never thought to combine it with rabbit-liver pate atop a crispy wafer.

After tasting the savory-sweet appetizer at the Chansonnier dinner, he's considering adding it to the menu at his own privately run restaurant which opened last year in Havana.

"The cracker is practically neutral. The pate gives you all the classic flavor of liver, high in acid. But at the end you sense the guava as a very subtle, very delicate touch," said Battle, who is head chef at Divino in Havana. "I loved it."

At Chez Panisse, the chefs only decide at the last minute what to serve, based on what's available and fresh. Their advice to Cuban cooks who struggle with unreliable supply of even basics such as eggs and potatoes: Be flexible, and don't worry too much about maintaining a fixed menu.

"Walk around the farm. Get a feel for all the vegetables and start using your imagination about how you can make those vegetables taste like what they are," said Jerome Waag, head chef at Chez Panisse, crackling a chard-like leafy green with his fingers for emphasis. "That's what we do in California. That's the way we

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like to cook. We keep things really simple."

Cuba has a longstanding culture of organic farming by necessity. During the "Special Period" of the 1990s, many private urban plots popped up in Havana amid austerity that followed the collapse of Cuba's backer, the Soviet Union. Unlike in the United States, pesticide-free is largely the rule here rather than the exception, mostly due to a lack of supply.

And a new generation of privately run restaurants known as "paladars" has breathed life into Cuba's culinary scene.

But there are obstacles to the Chez Panisse ethos of fresh-is-best.

At the same farmers' market that enamored the chefs on the outskirts of Havana, locals said wages have not kept up with a 20 percent rise in food prices last year.

Two buyers said the quality was great but they can only afford to shop there once or twice a month. Prices that astonish an outsider — \$1 gets you a small bag of produce, enough for a couple of meals — are steep for Cubans who earn about \$20 a month on average.

Even getting to a produce market can be tough because most Cubans don't own a car and public transportation is spotty. Supply is heavily dependent on the season.

"The only option in the summer is to work with what little there is, like eggplant. There are no carrots," said Laura Fernandez Cordoba, a partner at Le Chansonnier. "The options are very limited."

Raul Castro has moved to expand private and cooperative agriculture, lease out fallow state land and facilitate direct sales to state- and private-run eateries. The government has also promoted "green belts" around major cities to help reduce the distance food must travel in a country where delays and inefficiency sometimes cause food to rot before it reaches consumers.

Even so, meat is often frozen, thawed and refrozen while still in the supply chain.

Other, cultural factors would seem to make the Chez Panisse model a tough sell.

Restaurants here typically overcook vegetables until they are mushy, even for salads. Many Cubans who are able to cobble together hard currency opt for processed foods in supermarkets like canned vegetables, dried mashed potatoes or jarred spaghetti sauce. And a common household cost-cutting practice is to reuse cooking grease again and again, until each meal is infused with the same underlying taste and odor.

It all adds up to cement Cuba's reputation as a gourmet's nightmare.

"A lot of the food that I've seen (here) seems like it's very cooked ... we lose sort of the freshness of it," Waag said. "We lose sort of all the energy."

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The Chez chefs threw a spontaneous end-of-trip party Monday and, in a departure from catering to Havana's elite, cooked for residents of a working-class block.

Working from a front-porch stand borrowed for the night, they handed out barbecued cumin-, turmeric- and lime-marinated chicken drumsticks and yogurt-batter onion rings for free to the neighbors.

It was a far cry from what's usually on offer at the stand: oil-soaked dough-fritter cholesterol bombs that can be snapped up for pennies apiece.

"We are trying to make the idea of nutrition a little more flexible," said Battle, the chef at Divino, "so people understand it a little more."

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