

Tastes of Cuba

Would it be way too cruel to talk about south Florida in the middle of an Ohio winter? I've had this really intense craving for Cuban food lately and with that comes flashbacks to some great years spent in Miami during the 80's and early 90's. Here in Cincy a typical lunch experience might be a 5 way at Skyline but in Miami most often we would brave the crowds at a Pollo Loco outlet or one of the Latin American Sandwich Shops for Cuban sandwiches, Moros y Christianos (black beans and rice), fried platinos (deep fried plantain chips) and café con leche.

Well most of us don't have the luxury of being able to jet off to Calle Ocho or Miami's South Beach for a weekend but great Cuban food can be had by all if you're willing to be a tad adventurous in the kitchen. Two of my favorite menu choices in Miami were "arroz con pollo" which is a fairly simple chicken and rice dish followed by Cuban flan (caramel egg custard) made from scratch.

One of the neatest experiences I ever had in the years I lived in Florida was a evening with Cuban friends who introduced me to an assortment of these wonderful Caribbean dishes followed by an amazing Flaminco performance. If you've never really understood a lot of what goes on during a Flaminco experience once you've had your first cup of traditional Cuban coffee you'll understand.

Here's a couple of favorite recipes and I might add that any of the seasonings and specialty items mentioned are pretty easy to find at larger supermarkets. Also if you have an opportunity to visit the Caribbean section at Jungle Jim's you'll be blown away by all of the choices they offer. I make a trip there every few months and stock up on all types of things especially my favorite Cuban marinade, Mojo Criollo.

Arroz Con Pollo (Cuban Chicken & Rice)

(Serves 6 to 8)



1 large chicken, about 4 pounds, cut into 8 pieces
2 cups Mojo Criollo

For sofrito & broth:

2 Tablespoons olive oil
1 small onion, finely chopped
1 small red bell pepper, cored, seeded and finely chopped
3 Tablespoons minced garlic
1 small tomato, seeded and diced
3 cups water
1 cup dry white wine
1 ½ cups beer
¼ teaspoon saffron threads
1 Tablespoon tomato paste
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

1 pound Valencia or Arborio rice
Sliced red pimientos for garnish
1 small can baby green peas for garnish

Wash chicken thoroughly and blot dry. Place chicken and two cups of Mojo Criollo marinade in a large freezer zip lock and allow to marinate at least one hour to over night in the refrigerator.

Heat olive oil in a large Dutch oven on your stove to medium high. Drain chicken pieces and add them to Dutch oven to brown, about 2 minutes per side. Transfer the chicken to a platter and pour off all but 2 tablespoons of the fat. Reduce heat to medium, add onion, bell pepper and garlic to oil and cook until soft but not brown, about 1 or 2 minutes. Add the tomato and cook for one more minute. Return the chicken to the Dutch oven and cook for about 1 or 2 more minutes.

Add the water, wine, beer, saffron, tomato paste, sea salt and pepper. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, cover and simmer for about 30 minutes. Thoroughly wash rice swishing with your hands, and drain off the water. Continue doing this until water runs clear.

Bring chicken mixture back to boil, stir in washed rice, reduce heat, cover and simmer until rice is tender, about 20 to 25 minutes. If it starts to dry out and rice is still al dente, add more liquid. If it gets too soupy, uncover during the last 10 or 15 minutes of cooking. Just before all is done stir in half of the peas and pimientos. Garnish with the rest before serving.

The perfect finish on any Cuban feast is a rich, silky homemade caramel egg custard flan. There are plenty of boxed flan mixes on the market but they really don't give you the same results as scratch preparation. Here's a great recipe and it's truly worth the little bit of extra cooking time.

Cuban Flan

(Serves 6 or more)



1 ½ cups sugar
6 egg yolks
2 cups whole milk
3 egg whites
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 lemon peel
¼ teaspoon salt
1 cinnamon stick
¼ cup water

Prepare your caramel by adding ¼ cup water to ¾ cup sugar in a heavy bottomed saucepan over medium to low heat. Stir while cooking until the sugar starts to melt. Let it simmer. Use a pastry brush dipped in water to wash the sides of the pan free of granular sugar. When sugar starts to thicken and turn brown remove from the heat and add 1 ice cube to stop it from cooking further. (Be very careful not to get burned by any splattering.) Coat a 9-inch baking dish or round mold by pouring in the caramel and swirling it around the sides and bottom until it is fairly evenly coated. Put the coated mold or dish aside.

In a heavy bottomed saucepan bring to a boil the milk with the lemon peel, cinnamon stick and salt added. When the mixture starts to boil remove it from the heat and allow it to cool a bit.

In a medium bowl beat lightly the egg yolks, egg whites, vanilla and remaining sugar until mixed. Add in the slightly cooled milk mixture then strain the milk and egg combo through a strainer directly into your caramel coated mold. Your last step is to place your filled mold into a sided baking pan and add water to the pan until it is halfway up the side of the mold. Bake this in a preheated 350°F oven for about an hour. A knife or toothpick inserted into the middle will come out dry when it is done. It is best served just warm.

To remove your flan from the mold after it is allowed to cool place a serving dish flat against the top of the mold and turn it upside down in a fast motion.

My wine choice this week for our Cuban feast is a 2001 Rioja Sierra Cantabria Cuvee Especial made from 100% Tempranillo grapes. This magnificent ruby red offering from Spain has gobs of blackberry, cocoa, and vanilla bean laced together in a rich, powerful combination.

Let me know if you have any questions at 888-288-0668 or visit us on the web at www.winedog.com. Adios!