

Yancel Valladares

Dr. Adomaitis

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International Palette: A Multi-Sensory Experience as a Food Critique

This food critique will be focused on Tina's Cuban cuisine located on 23 West 56th street in New York, New York. There are two other locations in New York City which are located at 940 3rd Avenue, and 179 Madison Avenue. Upon arriving at Tina's, one could see the glass windows fogged up from the inside the restaurant hinting at the hot food being served that is waiting for one's tastebuds to be put to the test. As one walks into Tina's at this particular location, one is immediately saluted with the warmth and smells of the food. The smoke that covered the trays of food left a trail coming from the kitchen across the room. People were desperately waiting for their food as it was around 1pm and they were ready to enjoy their lunch break. This location offered what was more leaning towards a cafe. One side of the restaurant offered foods such as meats, different types of rice, and other hot foods in a buffet option. On the other side, employees prepared sandwiches. People were seen making their orders and leaving with them, while others decided to use their seating area located in the back in order to sit and enjoy their food. Upon making an order where sandwiches were prepared, one is addressed well manner and asked "Hola! Qué te gustaría pedir?" which means "Hello! What would you like to order?" in Spanish. One was also greeted with "Que te gustaria pedir, mi niña?" which meant "What would you like to order, my girl" upon ordering from the buffet option. There was no need to make reservations or any type of wait before one could seated since the restaurant ran more as a buffet/ café. When customers ordered from the area where the sandwiches were being

made, there were two to three ladies working there at the same time in order to make sure the food preparations and orders were being fulfilled in timely and well-done manner. When one ordered from the buffet option, there was man and woman working at the area in order to accomplish the same as those working in the sandwich area. When one orders, one could decide what choices of foods to put on their plates and how much is desired.

A cultural difference one could notice at Tina's is the amount of seasonings put into the food for flavor. The seasonings could be smelled all throughout the restaurant even if one isn't close to the kitchen. They could even be smelled outside of the restaurant. One could also see parts of the Cuban culture surrounding the restaurant with musical instruments such as small congas and maracas being displayed as decorations. Another cultural difference that could be heard immediately is the language being spoken in the establishment. Although the employees spoke in English to customers, they also spoke in Spanish to others and amongst themselves. Another culture difference could be the music being played inside the restaurant while people are taking their orders and eating. Although it may not be the case in all American restaurants, some tend to choose music that is more quiet and relaxing so that others can enjoy their food. In Tina's, one could enjoy the music of Salsa playing in the background while enjoying their meals.

Tina's menu offers a beautiful representation of what Cuba is most commonly known for which is their use of classic cars to this day. It is printed on the front of the menu with two coconut palm trees behind it. Inside the menu, one could find daily entrees, weekly specials, sandwiches, appetizers, soups, desserts, sides and beverages. Each of the foods/drinks in each section is written in Spanish with the translation in English underneath it, with some ingredients described. The critique decided to order Cuba's famous dish known as "Ropa Vieja" accompanied with green and red bell peppers, sauce, and a side of white rice. Some of the daily

entrees are: pollo al horno (baked chicken), pollo picante (spicy grilled chicken), bistec encebollado (steak & onions), and ropa vieja (shredded beef stew). In the appetizers, one could find papa rellena (beef-stuffed potatoes), and empanadas (Cuban turnovers). Some of the weekly specials are picadillo (ground beef stew), and rabo encendido (ox tail stew). Sandwiches seen on the menu are Cubano (roasted pork, ham, swiss cheese, pickles, mayo & mustard), pernil (roast pork, mayo & onions), masitas de puerco (fried pork, sweet plantains, onions & mayo) and milanesa de pescado (breaded fish, tartar sauce & onions). Sides offered on the menu that are very popular among the Cuban culture even in the United States are yellow rice, arroz moro (mixed rice & beans), arroz y frijoles (rice & beans), yuca sancochada (boiled yuca with garlic and onions), tostones (fried green plantain), maduros (sweet plantain) and fried yuca. One could also choose to add sauces on their dishes such as salsa picante (hot sauce) and salsa de ajo (garlic sauce). If one has room left in their stomach after eating such delicious and spicy food, one could sweeten the pallet by delighting themselves in a dessert known as “flan” which is a caramel custard. Customers also have a variety of different choices of beverages. American drinks offered are sodas, Snapple, and ice tea. Cuban batidos (shakes), offer natural flavors such as passion fruit, blackberry, soursop, mamey, tamarindo, mango, and papaya. Another drink seen on the menu is “Malta”, a product from Goya that is popular among many Latin countries. Unfortunately for those who enjoy drinking alcoholic beverages, any type of alcohol was not included in the menu. There were also no traditional salads or breads offered.

Cuba is an island located in the Caribbean where the northern Caribbean Sea, Gulf of Mexico, and Atlantic Ocean meet. The best known dish from Cuba, “Ropa Vieja”, has a story behind it that might be reflective of the cultural and economic geographies. The word ropa vieja translates to ‘old clothes’ in English. The story of this unique and mouthwatering dish is that a

man decided to shred and cook his own clothes because him and his family were poor and they could not afford food to eat. While he was making this, he prayed for a miracle to happen and so it did. The miracle was that his clothes suddenly turned into a delectable meat stew. Although this story has not been proven to be 100% true, one could look up the history of this dish and date is back for over 500 years as it originated with Sephardic Jews in the Iberian peninsula of Spain. Since there was no cooking allowed on Sabbath days, the Sephardi would slow-cook stew the night before. Ropa vieja then made its way to the Americas with Spaniards where it became a famed dish across Cuba and the Caribbean (Revolución de Cuba, 2015).

The definition of dress of an individual is an assemblage of modifications of the body and supplements to the body (Eicher & Roach-Higgins, 1992). Such alterations to one's dress could be pierced ears, jewelry, and accessories. Some of these modifications to dress could be seen on the employees of the restaurant. At Tina's, employees were all seen wearing a black polo shirts with the restaurant's name embroidered on the shirt. They didn't seem to be wearing heavy makeup, but some eyeliner, mascara, and lipstick were seen. As for the jewelry being heard, employees kept the look simple by wearing stud earrings, simple necklaces and bracelets that wouldn't dangle therefore they couldn't be heard. One could assume that Tina's might have a policy on how much jewelry is allowed in order for the company's restaurants to have a look that flowed throughout the three locations, making them look put together and professional at the same time. This was Tina's own way having their own definition of dress according to their standards.

Tina's provides the citizens of new York with warm and comforting food that doesn't just occur while eating it, but it follows the customer throughout the whole day. The food brings happiness and coziness to one's most inner being and is like medicine for the soul, especially on

cold winter days. The taste of the food is eccentric and leaves one to wonder why they haven't found out about Tina's sooner. The service was very attentive, concentrated, caring, and organized. Although there was not much décor, the little provided such as the instruments gave a bold statement as if saying "we don't forget about our culture here". The restaurant was very well-kept and clean. There was sense of authenticity when the employees spoke Spanish, but Cuban accents were heard throughout the restaurant. The pricing was perfect as the quality of the food was beyond worth it to one's tastebuds.

Tina's Cuban Cuisine deserves the rating of an A. The way all of the employees were on such high alert of every order that was made, who was next in getting attended to, and how fast they deliver to you is the reason for such a high rating. According to their website, "Tina's Cuban believes that great cooking starts with a simple philosophy: slow cooking served fast and fresh". With direct quote from their website is exactly what the delivered to their most thankful customers. One could not see another customer unsatisfied with their food or service. Tina's Cuban Cuisine left one ravenous for more, and longing to devour their incredibility flavorsome food once more.

A lesson one could learn from this experience that one could contribute to a multi-cultural experience in a class discussion would be that food can truly educate people on one's culture. It is a special glimpse inside of a culture that only food can provide. It was also another way of wanting to open up into try many more other cultures that the world has to offer. One could also learn about a lot of the similarities in the way different cultures eat and what they enjoy eating. One could also learn about the history about the culture and how relevant it will always be even through food.



Figure 1

Note: By Y. Valladares, 2023, Ropa vieja with green and red peppers accompanied with white rice, Tina's Cuban Cuisine.

References

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