A Study on the Evolution of Cuban Culinary Traditions during the Special Period

The basis of my research revolved around a beautiful art book that is a recent acquisition to the Cuban Heritage Collection, called “Cincuenta y Un Años, Cincuenta y Una Familias”. It was created by artist Steven Daiber, and includes an essay titled “La ración que nos toca” by Abel Sierra Madero. When I opened the cloth box that helped the art book I found a compilation of 51 of government ration booklets, rustically bound together. The ration booklets at one time belonged to 51 different families, until Steven Daiber became the “trustee of each family’s story”. He employed the help of his Havana friends to collect these booklets that are a part of everyday life in Cuba. The ration books are small enough to fit in a pocket, and the covers are made of thick brown paper and stamped with a sign that reads “Control de Ventas para Productos Alimenticios”. However, of the 51 booklets collected, many of them are personalized by the previous owner; the decorations are extracted from different sources: floral wrapping paper, comic books, fashion magazines, or a greeting card that says “te amo Madre”. Whether they were decorated to protect the flimsy covers from damage or merely to enhance the drab official appearance, the effect is quite beautiful.

I sought to discover the stories behind these ration books, and how a rationing system in Cuba’s unique political and economic situation affects the continuation of culinary traditions in Cuban households. Steven Daiber collected used ration books from 2004, which guided my project to focus on the last two decades since the fall of the Soviet Union and a period of extreme economic hardship. The initial years of this era were given the title “Special Period”, which
derives from a speech made by Fidel Castro in February of 1990, as he designated it a “special period in the time of peace”.

My first area of investigation lay within the pages of cookbooks in order to obtain the knowledge of what ingredients are combined to create traditional Cuban dishes. There are many cookbooks from different time periods, such as the Nuevo Manual del Cocinero Cubano y Español, published in 1857. This very old cookbook demonstrates an early existence of a Cuban culinary style as many plates are given a suffix of “a la cubana” and “a la criolla”. Another cookbook shows that food is an aspect of culture that is constantly evolving, as a 1956 cookbook titled ¿Gusta Usted? often calls for specific American products such as canned vegetables, processed cheese, or pasta, which are typically not Cuban ingredients. A cookbook published in 1992 recalls this same time period from a childhood before the Revolution and life in exile. The author, Mary Urrutia Randelman, rejects those American ingredients in an effort to assert pride in long lasting Cuban culinary traditions that have made their way to American shores.

Despite the few differences in the cookbooks, there are many consistencies that make up the dishes that constitute traditional Cuban cooking. The main ingredients are rice; various types of beans, put particularly black beans; root vegetables such as boniato, yucca and malanga; tropical fruits and vegetables such as pineapple, plantains, citrus fruits, pumpkin, tomato and mangos; meats such as pork, beef, chicken and veal; many types of fish and shellfish. To add flavor, many recipes call for a base called sofrito, which is a sauté of garlic, onions, green peppers, bay leaves, oregano, and sometimes tomato. Many recipes call for butter, olive oil or lard, as most dishes require frying, sautéing or slow roasting.
On some of the pages of ¿Gusta Usted? are jolly quotes regarding time spent in the kitchen, such as “Fruit is condensed sunshine”. One quote seems almost prophetic to the national attitude towards cooking and politics 40 years later, as it says “One cannot make positive politics with a bad kitchen”. The Cuban Heritage Collection has many books on the politics, economy, foreign policy, tourism, urban development, and social relations during the time period following the fall of the Soviet Union. Because of negative U.S and Cuba political relations, it had previously been illegal to have American dollars in one’s possession. However, in 1993 the Cuban government had to compromise revolutionary ideals and open Cuba’s shores to the tourist industry. In an attempt to pay off international debts, Fidel Castro had to exploit his beautiful beaches and colonial architecture to wealthy tourists. Castro legalized the dollar and families were now able to accept money sent from families abroad as well as work for tips in the tourist industry, thus creating a dual economy of pesos and dollars. In order to control the circulation of dollars, the government opened dollar stores where one could find a greater variety in food items, cleaning supplies, clothing, or house decorations.

The items offered through the ration booklet are distributed at the beginning of the month one per family. In the libreta, or ration book, the following items are included as part of government subsidized prices: rice, beans, oil, lard, sugar, tomato paste, bath soap, dish soap, laundry soap, coffee, cigarettes, tobacco, matches, vegetables, eggs, meat, fish, and milk for children up to age 7. However, not all of these items are guaranteed each month, and often are only enough for about two weeks out of the month. Though many Cubans rely on these resources, they are a large source of frustration. Abel Sierra Madero in the essay “La ración que nos toca” says “This mechanism of ‘subsidized’ distribution tells us how much and what we should eat”. Too add to this frustration with governmental control, families have to wait in
extremely long lines to purchase their rationed food for the month, and the result is often disappointing. For example, lack of oil to run delivery trucks as well as tardiness in technological renovations causes the items to arrive to the city in poor condition, or not arrive at all. Meat might be provided one month but run out in the next; dry rice or beans might have particles such as pebbles or wood bits to be picked out before boiling; eggs might be rotten because of lack of refrigeration; fruit and vegetables are seasonal, thus not always available.

Madero says “To cope with this crisis, the popular sectors have had to put into practice other survival strategies, that many times brush against the delicate border of illegality”. The unpredictability and scarcity of delivery of items such as milk, meat, butter or cheese creates a sense of urgency as well as an opportunity for personal profits to those who are able to provide these goods for their neighbors. A black market has arisen for food items, as one person may buy all the meat in the dollar store and then resell it to neighbors at an increased price. Though technically illegal, the bartering of food for dollars has become an important source of income for many families. To join in this clandestine, private market, many might steal rum or sugar from government factory jobs in order to trade for dollars or other food items. Private enterprise is illegal in Cuba’s economic system, and these private exchanges are a “tightrope walk between punishable illegalities and everyday infringements” (Chavez, 20) that are necessary for survival.

In a 1993 play by Alberto Pedro Torriente, titled Manteca, a family of three siblings raises a pig secretly in their apartment. Though they plan on roasting the pig in honor of the New Year, they also plan to sell the manteca, or lard, on the black market. To avoid getting caught, they close the doors to their small apartment and raise the pig in the bathroom. Throughout the play they confront their frustrations with the unsanitary conditions of cohabiting with a pig, as
well as their fears of slaughtering the pig and getting caught. One of the siblings, Pucho yells out:

So that the building, all the neighbors, and the foreign press hears. We are raising a pork in secret, a pork! And we can’t do it any longer, because we are three and the apartment is tiny and we live shut in so that the odor doesn’t get out. We are raising a pork that doesn’t let us live, or breathe, or have guests over. A pork, a pork, a pork! We are raising a pork on the threshold of the year two thousand, secretly, in an apartment building, challenging the sanitary laws that have made the flowering of the cities of the planet possible, because we need protein, protein and lard, especially lard, tons of lard, infinite lard. Because, what other thing could be happiness, but the eternal, struggling extension of lard? And with this pig we will be able to live tranquilly for the rest of our days, eating chicharrones and without having to worry about the lard. To satisfy the ever increasing necessities of man. To eat chicharrones, chicharrones, chicharrones in the paradise of lard. Because we will have tons of lard and will be able to eternally fry plantains, eggs, potatoes, and continue frying however much we like, without any fear, for centuries of centuries, everything that is humanely possible to fry…

Therefore, despite the ability to get ingredients such as plantains, eggs and potatoes that are able to satisfy hunger, Pucho longs for the extra bit of flavor if lard and the dollars earned from the selling of the lard that would provide opportunity for slight improvement in quality of life.

This involuntary subtraction of key ingredients in traditional dishes is one of the most common factors in the evolution of recipes since the beginning of the Special Period. To make a Cuban sandwich, one must put together bread, ham, roast pork, cheese, mustard, butter and dill pickles. To start, one may not have access to the pickles or mustard, as they are not something manufactured in Cuba and would thus be very expensive or non-existent in the dollar stores. To make flan, one must have sugar, 6 egg yolks, milk, vanilla, lemon peel, salt, cinnamon and water. Since 6 eggs are almost half a month’s ration, a person might raise a chicken in their home, or turn to a neighbor who sells watered down powdered milk stolen from a factory. Breaded chicken might be dipped in water instead of eggs to hold the breadcrumbs, a sandwich might
have only a few slices of meat without cheese or condiments, or beans might be made without ham bits that add that little extra bit of flavor. Therefore what has occurred is an extreme simplification of recipes, as Cubans make do with what they can, since it is often so complicated, expensive, or illegal to obtain necessary ingredients. What is most important is feeding one’s family, and the best cook is the one who can make things last and satisfy hunger. In this instance, one may quote Don Quixote when he says “hunger is the best sauce in the world”.

In a way, food acts as a cultural link between families of the diaspora and those remaining in Cuba; a person in Miami may take joy in the fact that he or she is able to provide a bit of culinary comfort for family remaining in Cuba. As travel policies between the United States and Cuba become easier, the visit of a loved one is made that much more pleasurable with the opportunity to purchase extra ingredients to make a delicious, traditional meal. However, to those without access to the dollar through the tourist industry, black market or family members in Miami, they must rely on the peso to provide scarce food through the ration booklet and subsidized fresh produce markets as Cuba continues to face economic hardship.


