

THE PROMISCUOUS PALATE

Miami gives rice and beans royal treatment

My 65-year-old Jamaican mother says Cuban-style black beans and rice has no taste. My Haitian-American friend says Jamaican rice and peas is too dry. Miami's longest-standing culinary battle is which culture has better rice and beans.

But beyond this friendly feud lies the impact this dish has had on the gastronomical experience of Miami. In almost every neighborhood, there's a rice-and-beans refuge, its powerful aromas softening the hardness of a

long day's work. Let's call it culinary therapy for under 10 bucks.

Affordable and accessible, rice and beans is a

humble food staple for countries as close as Jamaica and as far as Peru. The dish acts as a storyteller, narrating the lives of immigrants, who, in many instances, risked their lives to arrive on Miami's shores. This week The Palate gives you a little taste of Havana and Port-au-Prince right in your backyard.

Morro Castle is a warm, diner-style venue with grandmotherly waitresses, a wall image of *Castillo del Morro* (a fortress guarding Havana Bay), and a *guarapo*, a small mill used to squeeze juice from sugar cane.

The menu boasts everyday specials for \$5.79, among them a generous size of skirt steak sprinkled with Italian parsley and served with white

THIS WEEK'S ESTABLISHMENTS

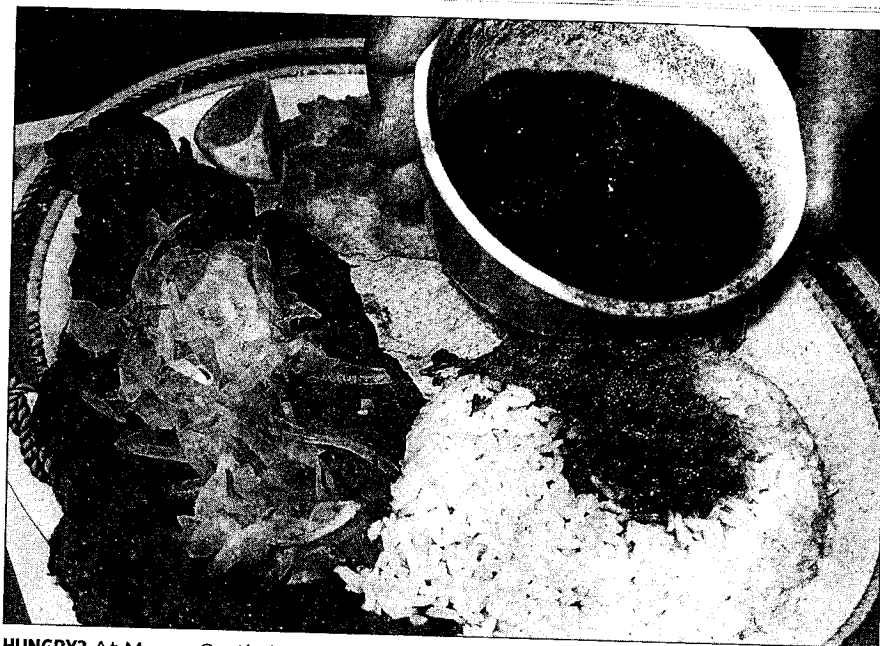
Here are the establishments noted in this week's column:

- Pachamamma: 17040 Collins Ave., Sunny Isles Beach, 305-957-1970.
- Morro Castle: 1201 W. 44th Pl., Hialeah, 305-556-4252
- Randy's International Restaurant & Lounge: 13420 NW Seventh Ave., Miami, 305-687-9630
- Jamaica International Café: 119 SE First Ave., downtown Miami, 305-400-6694, Ext. 1

rice and black beans. The beans flourish with chunky pieces of green peppers and onion, garlic, salt and pepper and taste so homemade that one gets the sense they're tasting the very territory of Jaruco, the Cuban city from which owner Leonard Villalobos hails.

Meals are also served with slices of toasted and buttered Cuban bread; fried, sticky, sweet plantains; *tostones* (fried green plantains) or salad. There's a rice and bean special every day for \$5.79, so use leftover change for an icy glass of sugar cane juice (\$1.85). The venue is open from 8 a.m. to 1 a.m. Mondays through Thursdays and 8 a.m. to 2 a.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

In most local Haitian restaurants, the most popular styles of rice and beans are *diri kole ak pwa wouj* (red beans and rice), *diri ak*



HUNGRY? At Mosso Castle in Hialeah, patrons can get a generous skirt steak, sprinkled with Italian parsley and served with white rice and black beans.

djondjon (black rice), and *diri blan sos pwa noir* (white rice with pureed red bean sauce). Most local Haitian restaurants have all three versions, but at many venues like **Randy's International Restaurant & Lounge**, black rice is a specialty dish available only on Sundays.

The blackness and earthy flavor of Haitian black rice is attributed to a variety of mushroom found in Haiti. At Randy's the rice is then sautéed with shrimp, lobster and/or green peas, lima beans or other vegetables.

On weekdays, order white rice with a creamy side of pureed red beans reminiscent of Mexican *mole* sauce or the red beans and rice, which are seasoned with cured pork, ground black pepper onions and shallots; both rice options are perfect with the sautéed spinach with beef chunks for \$7. (For my starving artists, one plate feeds all). Randy's looks like an old lodge from the outside, but inside the windowless venue is lit up with Christmas lights and earth-toned walls and furniture. It's open from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. Mondays

through Saturdays, and 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sundays.

Even though **Pachamamma** is stuck in a Sunny Isles Beach plaza, one is transported to Lima with the beautiful, folklore music and dark wood-and-leather furniture accents.

The standout dishes include the fried snapper served with fried green plantains and salad (\$15.99), but add white rice with sweet, porridge-y white beans (\$2) and you've got a decadent fish dip. For \$9.99, the sautéed chicken dish is blended with fries and red peppers and served with white rice and white beans upon request.

For a truly romantically budgeted feast, go for the *bistec a lo pobre* (\$13.99), skirt steak served with rice and white beans, fried eggs and sweet plantains. The dish loosely translates to "steak of the poor," but when sharing with your significant other, ah, the experience captures the richness of putting a spoonful of Lima in your lover's mouth. Pachamamma has a second location in North Miami Beach.

Jamaica International

Café is the type of venue one finds in New Kingston, Jamaica. Its menu offerings boasts traditional ingredients in a touristy two-floor, setting of ripe banana-colored walls, Bob Marley images and plastic tropical plants. It's all here — carried goat (\$8 or \$9), brown stewed chicken (\$5.50 or \$6.50), oxtail stew (\$8.00 or \$9.00) and jerk chicken (\$5.50 or \$6.50).

All entrees are served with a rice and red peas side that is prepared with packaged coconut cream and seasoned with thyme and black pepper. Though not exemplary of authentic Jamaican rice and peas, their recipe absorbs the spicy, sweet juices in a way that makes you linger with the rice grains as you would a juicy chicken bone.

Add spicy ginger beer (\$1.50) to the experience, and you're in New Kingston. Rice and beans have made Miami one of the most intriguing culinary destinations in the world.

Think you know the best place to get rice and beans, please send your responses to promiscuouspalate@yahoo.com.



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