

D R I F T



Volume 3: Havana



ORO NEGRO

*Writing by Claire Boobhyer
Photography by Adam Goldberg*



Greeting visitors at the no-frills cafe in the National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana is *La Cafedral*, a two meter-tall, tarnished silver cathedral fashioned from stacked Moka pots. The work of one of Cuba's most revered artists, Roberto Fabelo, it is an ode to the machine that brews coffee on the stove of every kitchen in Cuba, one that elevates the drink to a spiritual elixir.

And that's what coffee is in Cuba: the national drink; a conversation-starter; sweetener and succor for a storied Caribbean nation. Coffee, consumed morning through night in homes and on the street, fuels conversation where garrulous locals delight in out-talking each other and emphatically proving a point, where verbal dexterity in the *choteo*—the art of ribbing and an irreverent attitude—is a national skill indulged, practiced, and perfected by all Cubans.

If the modern-day visitor to Havana thinks that caffeinated Cuban linguistic marathons are a recent development, suggest the words of American explorer Alpheus Hyatt Verrill who penned a guidebook, the *Cuba of Today* in 1931, "The Cubans are great patronisers of the open-fronted cafes...talking and arguing as if they were responsible for the welfare of the world."

It wasn't always aromatic coffee, though, that perfumed each tropical dawn in this island nation. In early 18th-century Havana, chocolate was the breakfast beverage of choice. But the turmoil ravaging a neighboring island in the latter half of the 18th-century transformed the history, fortunes, and the drinking culture of Cuba.

When the French colonized the western part of the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti) in 1659, French planters cultivated coffee using West African slaves. But in the 1790s, thousands of slaves revolted, forcing French planters to flee to Cuba, many accompanied by their slaves.

In Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo in Cuba's Oriente (the East)—the closest *terra firma* to western Hispaniola—officials granted thousands of settlers land concessions. It is thought that between 15,000 and 30,000 fled to Cuba. The planters farmed the land of the Oriente's Sierra Maestra mountains—in particular, establishing high altitude *cafetales*, or coffee plantations, of Arabica coffee.

Rewind a little further, and you'll see that the coffee bean's relationship with Cuba began earlier than the Hispaniola uprising, when a Don José Gelabert brought the bean to his estate in Wajay, outside Havana, in 1748. The idea of planting the bean spread and coffee was slowly scattered across the mountains of western and central Cuba, along with parts of the east. But it wasn't until the rapid proliferation of French plantations in El Oriente that coffee drinking began to filter through the salons of Tivoli, the French quarter of Spanish colonial Santiago de Cuba, and became embedded in the daily ritual in Cuba's second city.

It was fitting, then, that a Frenchman, Juan Bautista Tavern, founded the first coffee shop in Havana on the corner of Calles Mercaderes and Teniente Rey on Plaza Nueva (now elegant Plaza Vieja) in the early 1770s, according to Cuban journalist Rolando Aniceto. (Today, Tavern's coffeehouse is La Taberna, where expensive nightly live music shows entertain packs of tourists.)

At the time, Tavern sold young Cubans, curious for their first taste of the drink, 2.5 oz (71 g) of ground coffee diluted in a liter of boiling water—not too far off the modern day barista's ideal ratio of ground coffee to water, although far in excess of *un cafecito*, or Cuban-style espresso.

Home brewing appeared slow to catch on, for it wasn't until 1790, writes Ned Sublette in *Cuba and Its Music*, that Havana's first newspaper, *Papel Periódico de La Habana*, printed a recipe for brewing coffee in its first edition.

By the 1830s, Cuba's black gold output was at its peak. But the nascent coffee industry suffered a seismic shock as sugar, Cuba's white gold, was seen to be far more profitable than the aromatic bean. Across the island, *cafetales* were destroyed to make way for sugar plantations.

To note, coffee drinking—*con leche or solo*—by now, had become an indelible part of Cuban culture. In 1859, some 65 cafes served Havana including the Café de Copas, Café de los Franceses, La Dominicana, Marte y Belona, and Escauriza; by 1890, Havana boasted 156 coffee shops. Havana's golden age had come. Sugar was king and trading in white gold built up the magnificent and eclectic architectural landscape of the capital city.

As Havana grew fat and wealthy on sugar harvested by West African slaves, coffee culture downsized, with production ebbing and flowing through the first half of the 20th century.

Coffee production, nationalized after Fidel Castro's 1959 Cuban Revolution, has taken a hit in recent years. In the early 1990s, just before the Soviet Union's annual subsidies to Cuba (\$3 billion annually) were amputated by the fall of communism in the USSR, Cuba produced almost 25 million kilograms of coffee, according to the International Coffee Organization. That number had sunk to just five and a half million kilos in 2009 to 2010 and has risen only slightly again over the last several years. This drastic plunge led the government to resort to unconventional measures.

The year 2011 became known as the *Año del café mezclado* as one joke went. A riff on the *Año 52 de La Revolución*, a date printed on all official material, 2011 marked the year the Cuban government resorted again to adding chickpeas into ground coffee (*café con chícharo*) to sell to Cubans in the bodegas, their neighborhood ration stores. Cubans buy 4 oz. of *café con chícharo* for 0.75 CUP (US\$0.03) via their monthly rations, or resort to the black market and pay 15 CUP (US\$0.6) for the same packet. Determined coffee drinkers buy black market coffee beans that have been smuggled from the eastern provinces. Beans that survive the risky journey, having escaped the noses of policemen at roadside stops, must then be roasted and ground at home—pure dedication for pure *café*.

Yet Raúl Castro's late 2010 economic reforms, introduced to inject life into Cuba's moribund economy, have helped the Havana café scene flourish. Previously, with few exceptions, travelers had to rely on an espresso from state-run venues stripped of ambience and any semblance of service. But now, the busy streets are full of kiosks selling *buchitos* (*cafecitos*) to locals in pesos for 1 CUP, and privately owned (and stylish) coffee haunts for those with hard currency (CUCs) to spend. Café Mamainé, whose name embodies the spirit of one of Cuba's most famous personalities, is one of these new retreats. Every Cuban can sing the words of Eliseo Grenet's 1927 *Mama Inés* song, popularised by Cuban singing great Rita Montaner, with the catchy, immortal lines: "*Ay Mamá Inés, Ay Mamá Inés, todos los negros tomamos café.*"

But it's probably *trova* singer Carlos Puebla, best known as the Singer of the Revolution, who synthesised best the meaning of a morning *demitasse* of coffee for *los Cubanos* in his song *Si No Fuera por Emiliana*. Paying homage to the sustenance of brewed Cuban coffee, its humble roots in the farmsteads of Cuba's *el campo*, or countryside, he sings of the necessity of having a *compañera* to offer you a *buchito* when the going gets tough.

*Emiliana es una cubana que en el albergue es fundamental.
Emiliana es muy cumplidora, es halagadora, alegre y cordial.
Emiliana no se demora y en la colada siempre es puntal
Si no fuera por Emiliana nos quedaríamos con las ganas,
de tomar café, de tomar café, de tomar café, de tomar café.*

Emiliana is a Cuban who is fundamental to the home.
Emiliana is very dutiful, is a flatterer, cheerful and friendly.
Emiliana does not delay, always filtering the coffee on time.
If it were not for Emiliana, we would be without the desire,
to drink coffee, to drink coffee, to drink coffee, to drink coffee. ■