

# Cuba Sabe, without Bread or Casabe

written by Ernesto Pérez Chang | viernes, 13 de enero, 2023 9:10 am



HAVANA, Cuba. - There is no bread, not even the patrimonial cassava flatbread, the casabe, but still the Cuban regime dares us with a new edition of the controversial culinary festival, Cuba Sabe, an event that is coordinated from the Paradiso Cultural Tourism Agency by Lis Cuesta Peraza, the wife of our present ruler, Miguel Díaz-Canel.

Sponsored primarily by the ministries of Tourism and Culture, together with the Chinese Embassy in Havana (the present edition is dedicated to China) and the hotel chain Iberostar, this new episode once again will be held at the Hotel Grand Packard, and will feature activities, workshops, conferences and banquets between January 12 and 14.

The event has been widely promoted in some regime-friendly Cuban news media and in the main official printed dailies; however, it's been talked about minimally on national radio or television, perhaps to add less fuel to the fire in an environment where discontent due to food shortages is strong, as well as popular rejection of an economic management that for decades has only generated hunger, general shortages and, as a result, the extinction of practically all culinary traditions in the island.

On the streets, and because there is little information out there, there isn't much talk about this paradox -the financing of an event to discuss flavors, food and culinary traditions in a country where there practically aren't any- but people engaged in, or informed about, this celebration, like workers in tourist facilities that are involved in the festival, describe it as a mockery, which indeed it is, especially when one of the weakest links of the Cuban tourism sector is precisely the poor level of quality in the gastronomy department or the scant variety of traditional Cuban or international dishes available even in "luxury" hotels like the Grand Packard itself. And the list of "weak links" gets larger every day.

For people who know nothing about Cuban reality, enough proof is provided by the numerous negative comments left by guests and tourists, both domestic and foreign, in sites like TripAdvisor. Those who want to skip the research and who have experienced that "bad taste in the mouth", only need to check their own taste buds' memory of any restaurant, cafeteria or bar in Cuba, especially state-owned ones to reach the conclusion that Cuba Sabe 2023 is not just a pretentious event, but a mockery staged by a government whose only recourse is to draw a smokescreen to camouflage all things that aren't going well.

Cuba Sabe is all about simulation and marketing masquerades, in an economic and political context where unpleasant consequences rule in perpetuity, the more so in a country where people are forced to fight in hellish food lines for scant and rationed food, while an elite linked to Power is privileged, thus using the mere access to food as an obvious method of socio-political control. And there is no better evidence about this statement than the marked difference between bony Cubans and fat-belly Cubans, between regular folk who are starving and overly nourished rulers.



(Foto del autor)

Cuba Sabe could be the luxury dishware in a store window of a poor individual who is ashamed and presumptuous, an empty and dusty window that's only good for photographs. It looks more like tricks in a fair, farcical illusionism for tourists who ignore what has truly happened to Cuban gastronomy in almost seven decades of absurd prohibition and shortages. The dinner table of Cubans have been cleared, actually sacked, by that barrage of policies where communists defined pleasure and abundance as "vices of capitalism" and, thus, punished as synonyms of "middle-class-ness".

In truth, the history of our national cuisine has been a veritable succession of ill-intentioned, demented, failed, anti-cultural policies, and, in that sense, a history of perpetual tragedies, among them -and maybe the saddest- the disappearance of Chinese-Cuban culinary traditions, mainly because of the expropriation of these private businesses that made this such a peculiar and picturesque community.

There stands the ghost of what was, before 1959, the Chinese Quarter today, to remind us about the magnitude of the disaster, and as proof of how much hypocrisy and perversity there is in dedicating Cuba Sabe to a cuisine that was condemned to extinction.

At the fork on Zanja Street -where Havana's Chinese quarter begins- it is very difficult to savor a spring roll, or any fritters, greens, fish, shellfish or ice cream that more than half a century ago marked the tastiness of Chinese food stands and restaurants in every Cuban city.

Same has happened with every distinct area of our gastronomy - whether indigenous, Spanish or African- that has disappeared in today's miserable reality where not only are you sold "chicken for fish", but also made to drink toasted chickpea powder passing as coffee, and eat strange concoctions that only out of habit we continue to call "ground beef", "croquettes", or "mortadella" when, in reality, they look like anything but food for human beings.

In the last 60 years, forced to fill our stomachs with anything without regard to taste or personal preferences, traditions or roots, we Cubans have lost every notion of what it means to eat out of real pleasure, or even feeding ourselves with nourishing food, or making choices when it's time to eat.

To eat in Cuba is a veritable ordeal. The entire island tastes and smells like pure acts of survival. From prices that even at the humblest cafeteria are beyond the

purchasing power of the highest state salary, to the discriminatory policy that some establishments have furtively adopted once again in order to sell to foreign tourists where Cuban clients are rejected because, apparently, those Cuban clients and their pockets full of Cuban pesos tarnish the environment of those establishments.

Beyond the luxury hotel where the smell of bad food can be concealed by strong doses of air freshener, rancid smell envelops us in the best dining places in Havana, just like spoiled beef never goes to the garbage but in the croquette sandwich or the yellow rice that a neighbor kindly offers us, or a chef suggests we eat, while the waiter whispers awful things, like people eating cat and vulture meat, both knowingly or through deceit.

If Cuba, in the realm of gastronomy alone, tastes and smells like something special, that “something special” is nothing more than the abuse that, besides “tourism apartheid”, Cubans and foreigners alike experience on a daily basis, like dismal service, poor culinary practice and unstable choices even where local news tells the public that “things” are going fine.

Forced to eat poorly, with hunger almost becoming a genetic trademark, Cubans, contrary to what some people say, are not obsessed about food, only desperate from hunger, and, at best, anguished about not having been able to choose freely for days, months or even years, what they will eat. This means that the island tastes bad to us, that is, it tastes very differently from what Cuba tastes like in Lis Cuesta Peraza’s mouth at the ballrooms in the Packard Hotel.

Today, Cuba has no bread, no cassava flatbread. Without pork roast on our tables, without yucca or corn, without fish or shellfish, without the promised glass of milk and with no coffee in the morning, without the memory and legacy of what once was our cuisine, Cuba tastes like dearth.

#### ARTÍCULO DE OPINIÓN

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