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Our search for a good Cuban sandwich takes a surprising turn

By ENRIQUE FERNANDEZ

Sometimes what you need is a hot Cuban.

Un sandwich cubano.

A Miami staple.

Or is it?

The Cuban sandwich is not, in fact, a Cuban Miami invention. It hails from Tampa -- specifically Ybor City, the old cigar-factory town within Tampa.

Andy Huse, a University of South Florida librarian who is the sandwich's major historian, had his first Ybor City cubano in 1992. It was love at first bite.



"Miamians think they invented everything Cuban," Huse told the St. Petersburg Times with all the pride of a transplanted Tampan. (He is from Chicago.) "When Miami was hardly a gleam in an alligator's eye, we had a thriving community in Ybor."

I concur. Having lived in Tampa from 1957 to 1964, Ybor City's last years as an authentic Latin town-within-a-town, I can attest that the Cuban sandwiches rocked.

The Tampa cubano was made on shortening-free Cuban bread, filled with hand-cut ham, roast pork, Swiss cheese, thinly sliced pickle and a slather of yellow mustard. Plus either mortadella or salami, which was dropped in the Miami version. It was usually, as now, heated in a sandwich press.

Even in their birthplace, Huse says, "Cuban sandwiches seem to be getting worse."

Miami, too, once prided itself on its cubanos, with the original Latin American Cafeteria setting the standard, but Huse's dictum applies here as well.

Not just Miami but all of South Florida is awash in variations of the Coral Way cafeteria -- now gone -- but their cubanos don't measure up.

The original, Huse says, was called a *mixto* -- "mixed" meats as opposed to just ham and cheese or just roast pork (pan con lechón, a topic for another time) -- and it was a classic in Havana sandwich shops that in Tampa became known as a cubano.

In both cities, they were first made by Spanish immigrants, mostly *gallegos*, who hand-sliced home-roasted pork leg (i.e., fresh ham), home-glazed ham, also on the bone, and big rounds of Swiss cheese.

At tony Havana sandwich shops like OK, Siglo XX and El Carmelo, they also added mortadella,

according to Mary Gladys Peón, a self-declared Cuban-sandwich nut whose husband, Ramón, owns La Taberna de San Román in Doral.

Searching the food websites, I find lamentations: "Where can I get a good Cuban sandwich?" Sometimes there are tips, but the cubanos to which they lead are, indeed, lamentable.

I follow leads from friends, colleagues, foodies. Close, but no cubano.

After sampling countless examples (they're served at every Cuban coffee-shop in town), I am forced to conclude that, like other popular Cuban specialties, the *sandwich cubano* had descended to fast-food quality in South Florida, made by -- and often for -- folk who no longer know the right stuff.

But there is hope, albeit unconventional.

At L & L Market Bistro in Miramar, the owners are Cuban, but theirs is not an ethnic deli. There is jazz on the sound system, a variety of sandwiches and salads on the menu and a good selection of wines on the shelves.

Their Cuban sandwich is made with thin-sliced ham, the pork is house-roasted, and the bread -- a sandwich-sized French loaf -- is toasted with grill marks -- an unconventional but nice touch.

On Thursdays, Norman Brothers Produce in Kendall makes a "Cubano panini" with pork that is braised rather than roasted and then shredded -- atypical but very, very tasty. There's only one thin slice of ham -- a welcome relief from overstuffed cubanos at more "ethnic" eateries -- and the bread is a small, crusty, French loaf, nice but not Cuban.

We live in a curious gastronomic era. Good-quality, traditional food is almost impossible to find commercially, and at the higher end, the buzzword is deconstruction.

That is precisely what accounts for the best cubano in town. Or best non-cubano cubano.

At the trendy Bin No. 18 on Biscayne Boulevard, chef-owner Alfredo Patiño marinates pork loin in sour orange and onion, then braises it for six hours and tucks the shredded meat, along with Swiss cheese, inside a ciabatta loaf that's been slathered with Patiño's own mix of Dijon mustard, horseradish and mayo. No ham, but traditional dill pickles (he uses kosher) sliced lengthwise.

The result is something that is not a Cuban sandwich but hits all the right Cuban sandwich notes. Alas, Patiño only serves it as an occasional special.

Perhaps we have entered the era of *nuevo cubano sandwich*. Or perhaps we just have to wait for one of our Cuban-culture obsessives -- and the diaspora is full of them -- to decide it's time to bring it all back home.

At the eating end, this obsessive is waiting.