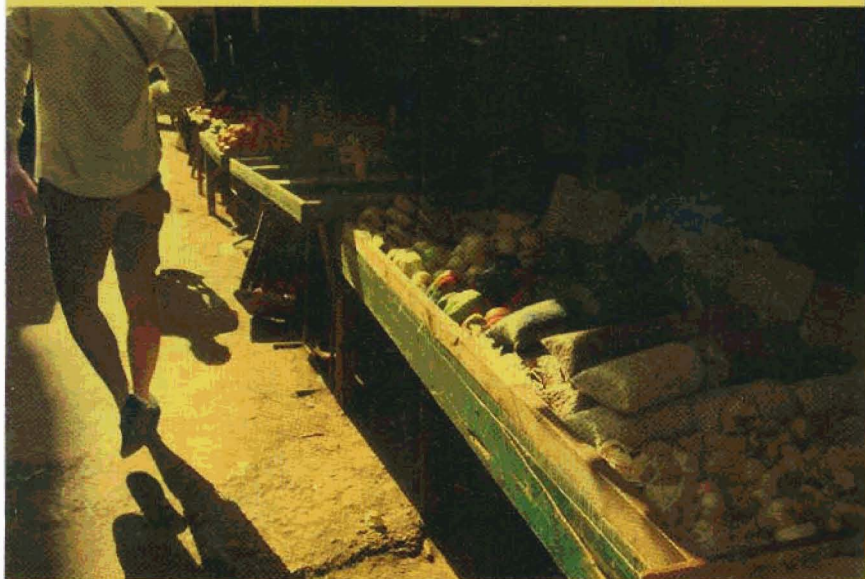
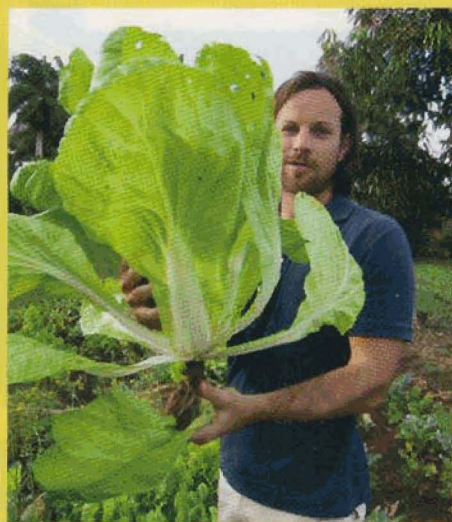


top to bottom, left to right: mustard greens from Miguel Cruz Bello's farm; a market in Havana Vieja; The Hotel Valencia Cafe; lettuce at Divino; a *cajita* at Santa Maria del Mar; chickens at Justo Torres' urban garden, the bar at Los Jardines de la Tropical.



# havana, CUBA

I was always looking for a way to get to Havana. Since I love Cuban music and film, I assumed that I'd end up there through some sort of arts-related route. Even though I work in the food world, I knew almost nothing about Cuban cuisine (beyond what I had noticed people eating in movies). But last year, I met avid travelers, Tom and Nhu Miller, who were arranging an exploration of Havana's rapidly changing food scene, and convinced them to take me along.

It's been the case in recent history that Cuban tourists would return home with less than glowing food reviews. But a transformation is underway in Havana, and throughout

the country. The Cuban government is phasing out its system of rations and cautiously allowing private restaurant ownership. As a result, the population is rediscovering its own pre-revolution culinary history—a delicious mix of Spanish, African, and Caribbean influences.

With help from two of Cuba's leading environmentalists, Yociel Marrero and Roberto Pérez Rivero of the Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation, we set an itinerary to visit with leaders in organic farming, seed saving and urban gardening in and around Havana. Each night we ate at restaurants that make an effort to support the local econ-

omy—mostly at *paladares* (privately owned restaurants that are often run by families directly from their home kitchens). Between mojitos, there was time to roam around town in a colorful array of classic cars (almost anyone will give you a ride for a small fee if they're going in the same direction) and absorb Havana's energy.

I was traveling with my friend, vintner Andrew Mariani of Scribe Winery (p. 70), and upon the Millers' recommendation, we booked a *casa particular*, a private homestay, in Vedado, a central neighborhood that features some of the best theaters, restaurants and strolls in Havana.

Naturally, we began our exploration at a farm, where we met two of Cuba's leading agricultural heroes. Justo Torres is





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Havana's Johnny Appleseed, saving and cultivating seeds in his backyard urban garden and distributing them to a wide array of school gardens and organic farms. After our visit, Torres sent us off with a tropical fig tree and several packets of seeds to deliver to **Miguel Cruz Bello**, a farmer-philosopher who singlehandedly manages several acres of land just outside of Havana. We arrived while Cruz Bello was raking over a heap of charcoal he was making from acacia wood. "When it sounds like glass, it's perfect," he said. Cruz Bello walked us around the grounds, past his collection of heritage-breed farm animals and wide variety of organically grown vegetables, fertilized with local bat guano.

A friend in San Francisco gave Mariani the task of hand-delivering a cookbook (*The*

*Modern Vegetarian Kitchén* by Peter Berley) to Héctor Higuera Martínez, the hospitable owner of **Le Chansonnier**. We stayed for dinner and of all the *paladares* in Havana, this one stood out for its attention to detail and excellent mood lighting. The small, hand-written menu is driven by what is available at the market with influences from North African and French cuisine—their Cuban take on baba ghanoush was strange and delicious.

Madelaine Vázquez, Slow Food Havana chapter leader and one of Cuba's best-known chef personalities, invited us to meet her at **Divino**, a new restaurant with extensive edible backyard gardens, a magical wine cellar and beautiful wood-fire ovens. Our dinner, one of the best meals we had in Havana, fused elements of Cuban cuisine—congru-

rice, ropa vieja, viandas—with local and sustainably produced ingredients. **La Finca Yoandra**, the adjacent two-acre farm named for owner Marco de Luca's wife, supplies the restaurant with the majority of its ingredients. Divino only serves lunch on weekends, when I would recommend you go and find their knowledgeable groundskeeper, Rufino Criso, for a garden tour.

We spent the last day of our trip at **Santa María del Mar**, a beach just a few kilometers from Havana's city center. For 25 Cuban pesos each (about \$1), you get *cajitas*, or box lunches, complete with a built-in pop-top spoon, crispy fried chicken, yellow rice, and a shave of cucumber. Cuba's culinary landscape will surely see many changes in the coming years, but the *cajitas* better not be one of them.

BY VARUN MEHRA

*Yoandra's 'Alice Waters' moment at Casa Pinassa in Berkeley*