

Restaurant Reviews

Celebrating Life at Havana

by Lisa Louise Santonato

Wake up early one Saturday morning, and have your breakfast down the Drive at Havana, located at 1212 Commercial. In Havana, they say, it is good to have “a little something” before breakfast. Maybe 2, usually 3, “Boochitos” are short, dark and sweet shots of espresso with the cream and sugar already added in. Something like a hot kiss, these shots are soft and smooth. Perhaps it is only my association with “bouche” (French for mouth) that makes me think it has anything to do with a kiss at all, but they are still just as good.

Talking to Corinne Lea and Simon Juan Sobolewski on the evening of the opening night of ‘Fierce’, I started my meal off with one of those, a sweet and dark boochie. Couldn’t stop reading the wall, though the conversation was enthralling enough. Dinner at Havana means sitting in a booth, or by the window and people watching or wall reading while watching Simon kiss the hands of the women who enter at the door. There is something distinctly different about this place, and I don’t know whether it has to do with the simple fact that there is no other Cuban restaurant in Vancouver, or that the warmly lit atmosphere and rich Cuban cooking mixes so well with martinis. If you’re lucky enough, Simon will offer you a corkscrew, to scrawl your name into the wall amongst the others.

The place is fused with the energy of Commercial Drive. You see it in the faces of those who walk by: everyone looks in to see who’s in Havana today, and everyone inside watches for their friends who will, inevitably, pass by for a drink. Conversation on the Drive is at street-level, and in Havana, the talk is of street-culture. The only place of it’s kind on the Drive (or in Vancouver, for that matter), Havana brings artistic communities together in a sophisticated, and suitably pretentious environment that offers a restaurant, gallery, theatre and café all in one, and the food is incredible. There is no place else like Havana, where art and culture mix without the taste of politics.

With my *Mojito* (Cuban for cocktail) and a delicious dinner conversation with Simon, I learned more about the year-old establishment and its proprietors. Havana first opened its doors on the 5th of September, just over one year ago. It was the beginning of the fringe festival, and Simon’s birthday. Of Cuban and Polish descent, Simon moved to Vancouver four years ago from Montreal, where he grew up. When I asked him what he was doing before, he responded somewhat wistfully, “...*Making films... and that’s what I’ll do when I’m done here, too.*”

“*Havana is what I am...*” And then he showed me the autographed photo of Dezi Arnaz on the wall. “*Ricky was the first Cuban I ever knew.*” Amongst the other photos of film stars and Cuban leaders you will find photos of Simon’s mother and father; and their placement opposite the dead cigars on the wall offer glimpses into the feeling of old Havana, in all its “faded glory”.

Corinne Lea, on the other hand, is of Swedish descent. A painter and an Emily Carr graduate of '94, she spent two years curating multimedia exhibitions at Flux Studios before opening Havana together with Simon. As curator of Havana’s Gallery she expresses her dedication to the arts. “*We’re the square peg that doesn’t fit into the round hole. We try to enhance and support the cultural aspects of East Vancouver.*”

With every intention being to create a unique experience on the Drive, Havana has presented everything from Yiddish swing bands from Toronto, to Sufi poetry and Brazilian dance, and a retrospective on Canadian poet Early Birney. In addition to 16 mm short films that are screened regularly, *Idera* presents third world films every Sunday for \$3 a piece, and once a year Havana hosts an independent film festival.

Fierce. A series of photographs by Jamie Griffiths, exhibited at the Havana Gallery from November 19 to December 17. An exploration of the life of Mikèla J. Mikael, and her transformation from intrasexual to female. An incredible multimedia exploration, Griffiths’ work reveals a beautifully rendered and honest representation of Mikèla’s life. Like walking a mile in her shoes, we are led, from the first photos of an old grade-school portrait through a photographic journey that leads to physical transformation, and the actualization of self. While almost candidly capturing the most personal moments in her life, Jamie Griffiths uses the eye of her camera in a non-judgmental and unassuming way, allowing us to enter into Mikèla’s world.

When I spoke with Jamie about her work, she spoke highly of the Gallery, saying “*Havana is so helpful and generous to their artists. They take a fair commission, everything I asked for they agreed to without hesitation. They really took care of me as an artist, and took care of me through the whole process. I really find that makes a huge difference in putting a show together.*” And of her work, she tells me: “*It’s a celebration of life.*”

Havana Restaurant and Gallery
1212 Commercial Drive
Gallery: 253-9181
Restaurant: 253-9119

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