

GOING CUBAN IN LOGAN SQUARE



The Dictator Has No Clothes

NOT SINCE MONTECRISTO CIGARS AND CHE GUEVARA HAS A CUBAN FLAVORED EXPORT BEEN MORE HYPED (AT LEAST LOCALLY) THAN THE CUBANO SANDWICH AT WEST LOGAN SQUARE'S EL CUBANITO (2555 NORTH PULASKI).

Foodies on lthforum.com have racked up three pages of mostly adoring love letters to the sandwich, and The Reader, Chicagoist.com and a handful of others have also chimed in with confirming odes.

For me at least, the dictator has no clothes. (I apologize if you just thought of Fidel Castro naked.) The roast pork, which on the best Cuban sandwiches has a garlicky citrus kick from mojo marinade, was so dry and tasteless, it channeled a Butterball turkey blasted in the flaming tombs of the sixth circle of hell in Dante's Inferno. The shiny tasteless ham slices above the pork were a cut above supermarket cold cuts, and Cubanito's parsimony with the mustard and pickles meant there was no balancing tang to cut the sweet swiss cheese and salty savory meat. What was undeniable is that the sandwich casing, a crispy "water bread," featuring a handful of smoky grill press marks, baked to specification for the restaurant by Gonnella, is excellent. For the bread alone, I'd make the trip.

After trying their steak sandwich, I figured that's just what I'd have to do. I watched in horror as the cook mounded too much beef on the grill, so it steamed in its own juices, leaving a lifeless grayish mass with no caramelized crust.

I was starting to wonder if folks had been captured by the lore of the place, rather than the quality of the food. Cubanito has all the hallmarks of a hipster food discovery, the kind of "secret" spot an overzealous foodie would be proud to claim. The restaurant is a grungy, non-descript, white-painted cinder-block shack in the middle of a commercial strip on Pulaski. The lobby is so small that on a busy afternoon, it looks like one of those vintage photos of college coeds trying to break a record for stuffing people into phone booths or the backseat of cars. There's a smattering of kitschy décor, including a clock above the door on "Cuban Time" and a pair of Cuban flag-covered oven mitts that look like worn boxing gloves hanging over the grease trap. It's run by an immigrant couple, the Ramoses: Alberto, a barrel-chested gracious teddy bear of a man who works the grill, and Laritza, an affable order-taking, cash-register-operating dynamo.

It turns out that Laritza is also the hand behind the house ropa vieja (a traditional braised beef which translates literally as "old clothes"), which is the saving grace and the real reason to make the trip to Cubanito. Stewed for hours to a juicy tenderness, studded with salty olives and piled high on the excellent bread, it's kind of like a Latino Italian beef, though with a shredded consistency, rather than the shaved roast beef slices you identify with Scala's or Vienna. In fact I'd probably choose the ropa vieja at Cubanito over my favorite beefs from Chickies (2839 South Pulaski) or at the original Al's on Taylor, most definitely if I could top it with Al's giardinara.

If you want to try the ropa vieja, it's not available on Sundays. As Laritza says, "I need to rest at least one day." Though, if you find the ropa is not available, the pan con timba, which features oozy swiss cheese and sweet guava spread, also pressed between the delectable grilled Gonella bread, is a worthy alternative.

Based on the quality of those two sandwiches, it's possible the Cuban and the steak I had were off, so I look forward to trying them again. Since nothing on the menu is over \$4, it won't be too tough to do, and at those prices, there's no sweat for you to try the Cuban yourself. If you do, just make sure you order extra pickles and a healthy slather of mustard to start things off, as even those who have loved the sandwich seem to agree about the restaurant's stinginess with those components.

El Cubanito, 2555 North Pulaski, (773)235-2555.

READINGS

THU/15

Jeffrey Wasserstrom

The author discusses "China's Brave New World." *International House, 1414 E. 59th, (773)753-2270. 6pm. Free.*

Joanne Jacobson

The author discusses "The Hunger Artist: A Suburban Childhood." *Women and Children First Bookstore, 5233 N. Clark, (773)769-9299. 7:30pm. Free.*

Stephen Kinzer

The New York Times correspondent discusses his work. *International House, 1414 E. 59th, (773)753-2270. 7pm. Free.*

FRI/16

LeAnne Howe

The author discusses "Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story." *Women and Children First Bookstore, 5233 N. Clark, (773)769-9299. 7:30pm. Free.*

Nathan McCall

The author discusses "Them." *57th Street Books, 1301 E. 57th, (773)684-1300. 7pm. Free.*

SAT/17

Alix Olson

The author discusses "Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution." *Women and Children First Bookstore, 5233 N. Clark, (773)769-9299. 7:30pm. Free.*

Bookamania

Chicago Public Library's annual celebration is an all-day literary event for families, featuring multiple presentations and readings of children's books. *Harold Washington Library Center, 400 S. State, (312)747-4300. 11am-3pm. Free.*

→ Sam Prekop

The photographer signs copies of his new book, "Photographs." *Quimby's, 1854 W. North, (773)342-0910. 7pm. Free.*

SUN/18

Jerry Crimmins

The author discusses "Fort Dearborn: A Novel." *Mitchell Museum of the American Indian, Kendall College, 2600 Central Park, Evanston, (847)475-1030. 1pm. Free.*

Richard Fox

The poet celebrates the release of "Swagger & Remorse." *Uptown Writer's Space, 4802 N. Broadway, Suite 200. 6pm.*

MON/19

Peter Gomes

The author discusses "The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What's So Good About the Good News?" *International House, 1414 E. 59th, (773)753-2270. 6pm. Free.*

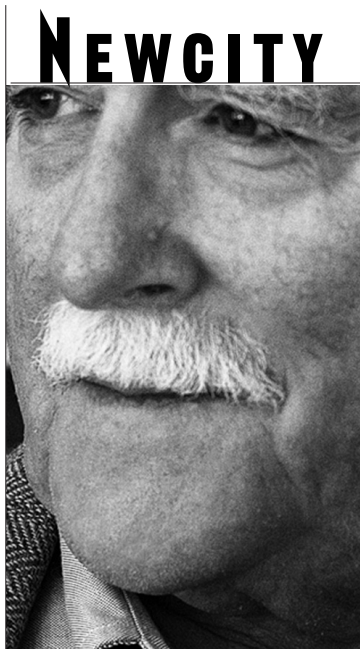
Stephen W. Berry II

The author reads from "House of Abraham: Lincoln and the Todds, A Family Divided by War." *Harold Washington Library Center, 400 S. State, (312)747-4300. 6pm. Free.*

TUE/20

→ Cris Mazza, Ray Hsu

The authors each read from their work. *Hyde Park Art Center, 5020 S. Cornell, (773)324-5520. 7pm. Free.*



On the cover

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