

## CUBAN CAFÉ

3350 N.W. Boca Raton Blvd., Boca Raton, 561/750-8860

**CUISINE:** Cuban

**CHARACTERISTICS:** A blend of Spanish, African and Caribbean influences, Cuban cuisine is essentially a “people’s cuisine,” making the most of a relatively limited pantry and basic culinary techniques.

**LOCAL CONNECTION:** When Anamaria Prada and husband Jorge Mejia emigrated from Bogota, Colombia to South Florida 11 years ago, the already seasoned restaurateurs thought it would be fairly easy to transfer their skill set from one country to the other.

It wasn’t.

“It was completely different,” Prada says. “There were a lot of regulations and laws we had to understand” before they could open Cuban Café, a charming and surprisingly stylish little restaurant in an obscure shopping center in East Boca.

And how is it that Colombian restaurateurs opened a Cuban place? Well, South Floridians, Cuban or not, were almost universally familiar with the island’s cuisine. And besides, she says, “We eat pretty much the same—the rice and beans, steak and seafood, the plantains.” They did, however, reduce the amount of salt and fat in dishes to suit the tastes of their health-oriented American customers.

The area’s Cuban diners didn’t have any complaints. In fact, they liked Prada and Mejia’s restaurant so much that several of them donated items to enhance the decor, from illustrations of important figures from Cuban history to a paddle actually used in one émigré’s sea-going escape from Cuba. Now, the café is a favored haunt not only of the local Cuban community but also of politicians, musicians, TV personalities and, of course, regular diners who enjoy tucking into big plates of slow-roasted pork, lusty ropa vieja or arroz con pollo. Good food, it seems, speaks across all borders.



Anamaria Prada, owner of Cuban Café (pictured below)



### CLASSIC CUBAN: ROPA VIEJO

“Ropa vieja” means “old clothes” in Spanish, a name probably derived from the resemblance of its main ingredient, long and slow-cooked shredded beef, to rags or old clothes. Most stories connect its origin to Canary Islands inhabitants, who apparently brought their version of the dish (which then contained potatoes and chickpeas) to the Caribbean and Latin America. In Cuban cuisine, the meat is typically flank steak cooked with sofrito, an all-purpose base for many Cuban dishes composed of garlic, onions, peppers, oregano and tomatoes.

