Miami Book Fair authors explore Miami’s evolution as a foodie town

HIGHLIGHTS

The annual Miami Book Fair International runs Nov. 15-22

Food writers are among dozens of presenting authors

BY LINDA CICERO

Special to the Miami Herald

Those of us who have discovered South Florida’s magic often forget that this is a place with roots and history.
We forget that, before it was known for its architecture, Latin beat and edgy melting-pot cuisine, this was a place where pioneers struggled, fortunes were made and immigrants dreamed.

Three new books that will be spotlighted Nov. 15-22 at the Miami Book Fair International take a look back, so I read them looking for perspective on how we evolved to be such a foodie town.

When I came to Miami in the 1970s, there literally was no restaurant on South Beach with the noted exception of Joe’s Stone Crab. Art Deco hotels were crumbling, and the only food was prepared on hot plates in the rooms.

Midtown didn’t exist and there were few places to eat downtown — Tobacco Road, The 1800 Club, S&S Cafeteria. The Design District was mostly shuttered. All the Latin food was traditional Cuban, and you had to get in the car and drive to find anything out of the ordinary or spicy.

**Magic City history**

* In *It Happened in Miami, the Magic City* by Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer (Taylor Trade, $29.95), a wide range of voices reminisce, and the result is captivating. You’ll find great tidbits that will make you want to learn more.

Did you know that Joe’s is so far south on Miami Beach because there was once an ordinance that allowed no Jewish ownership north of Fifth Street? That hotels and restaurants before World War II had signs advising “No Negroes, No Jews, No dogs”?

There are mentions of the grand Jewish delis on the beach: Wolfie’s, Rascal House and other gone-but-not-forgotten spots like The Famous, Embers, Ollie’s, The Roney Pub.

But the consensus is that the Mango Gang put greater Miami on the food map. These were chefs like Norman Van Aken and Douglas Rodriguez, who started using local ingredients and tropical fruits in the late 1980s and literally transformed our food consciousness and created Latin fusion cuisine.

Restaurants that pioneered the art of bringing people back to the beach and worked in symbiosis with the Art Deco movement are given their due: The Strand, Wet Paint Café and News Café.
Because this is an oral history, the stream-of-consciousness at times edges toward rambling and often leaves you frustrated, wanting more. It also means the history is limited to the memories of the living and so does not touch on much before World War II. You also don’t get a lot about the Cocaine Cowboy/Miami Vice Days, the horrors of the Liberty City riots, or the impoverished displaced by architectural renaissance.

The book also is very much focused on Miami Beach, despite the title; there’s not much about Miami, Coconut Grove, Little Havana or the suburbs. But I learned so much and the reading was easy, so consider this a perfect starting point for more education.

**Homestead landmark**

- It was 1959, and a 6-year-old boy trying to sell his father’s surplus cucumbers on a street corner in the Redland had a discouraging day when no one stopped. The next day his dad scrawled on an old storm shutter “Robert is Here,” and the iconic fruit stand was born.

Thousands visit the sprawling market at 19200 SW 344th St. in Homestead every day, looking for perfect mangos and mameys and other fruits and vegetables, or stand in long lines for milkshakes made with Key limes and exotic tropical fruits.

*Robert is Here*, written by Cesar A. Becerra (Free Range Publishing, $19.95), glimpses into the life of farmers in South Florida, touches on the devastation by hurricanes and depressed markets, and celebrates the ambition of that 6-year-old, Robert Moehling. By age 9 he had hired his first employee, and by age 14 had purchased 10 acres of land complete with a house, a car and a lawn mower.

You’ll learn some of the frustrations of competing with imports when you’re trying to support local farming, and of Moehling’s passion — getting customers to taste a tropical fruit they’ve never encountered before.

Frankly, the book could have used some editing as it rambles from topic to topic, and at 350 pages only a historian or Robert is Here aficionado will wade through. But the underlying story is fascinating and the glossary of tropical fruits is invaluable.

**Cuban cuisine**

- *Cortadito: My Wandering Through Cuba’s Mutilated Yet Resilient Cuisine* (Books and Books Press, $12) is a stream-of-consciousness essay by Miami Herald columnist Enrique Fernandez that offers a unique perspective on Cuban cuisine. It’s told through Fernandez’s
memories of growing up in pre-revolutionary Cuba and his life in America.

As he puts it, “in Cuban Miami, the menu is fixed more by time than by space: it’s what came over with the first wave of Cuban exiles in the early ’60s, the group that calls itself el exilio histórico” and does not reflect all the regional cooking that distinguished Cuban cooking before Castro.

You’ll learn that the cortadito we all love is “not Cuban at all” but something that evolved in Miami, and that “a snob and a curmudgeon, I only drink cortadito at the most important Cuban coffee stand in town, the window at the huge and famous Versailles coffee shop, where they make it properly, with foam. And I even love their wicked twist, making it with evaporated rather than fresh milk, a true oddity that is absolutely delicious.”

Fernandez goes on to expound on croquetas and arroz con pollo; why Cubans put rice in Spanish dishes that would be made with potatoes; why plantains, malanga, boniato and yuca are what distinguishes Cuban from Spanish cuisine.

There’s a fascinating dissertation on all things black bean — creole, colonial, wine or no wine — and mentions “la cuisine bourgeoisie,” black beans of “the prestigious Cuban Valdes-Fauli Family.”

Fernandez says, “This recipe calls for chopped pimientos, a very Spanish condiment popular in Cuban cooking, and one of the many ways in which Cuban kitchens bear strong Iberian influences. It is the recipe I’ve used for years.”

He writes about Nuevo Cubano cuisine and is frank and sometimes obscene and often cranky. It’s a fun ride, if sometimes dizzying, for the reader.

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IF YOU GO

What: The Kitchen, Miami Book Fair International’s culinary spotlight.

Where: Miami Dade College Culinary Institute, Building 6, 300 NE Second Ave., Miami
When: Events run from 10 a.m. Nov. 21-22. Miami Herald columnist Linda Gassenheimer hosts a cooking discussion from 3-4 p.m. Nov. 21 and a demonstration from 2-3 p.m. Nov. 22. Robert Moehling and Cesar A. Becerra talk about Robert is Here at 3:30 p.m. Nov. 22. Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer discuss their It Happened in Miami at 4 p.m. Nov. 22. Enrique Fernandez talks about Cuban cuisine at 4:30 p.m. Nov. 22. Complete schedule at miamibookfair.com.

Price: Author talks are free. Tickets for cooking demonstrations are $25; seating is limited. Tickets at miamibookfair.com/program/the-kitchen/

AUTHOR BREAKFAST


Where: Key Point Academy Brickell at First Presbyterian Church of Miami, 609 Brickell Ave.

When: 8:30-11 a.m. Nov. 21.


THE STRAND’S ROASTED GARLIC WITH TOAST POINTS

I got this appetizer recipe from The Strand 20-plus years ago. If you can, use elephant garlic (found in supermarkets and specialty markets), but standard garlic will do as long as it is fresh (you may want to increase to 4 or even 5 bulbs, depending on size). Roasted for a long time like this, the garlic is aromatic but not sharp — it’s almost sweet and mildly nutty.

3 colossal bulbs elephant garlic
1/4 cup olive oil
1 teaspoon each of fresh oregano, thyme and marjoram
Salt and pepper to taste
4 slices bread sliced into 16 toast points

Vinaigrette

Cut the top 1/3 off each garlic bulb and discard. Trim the root end of the garlic bulbs so they will sit flat. Place in a shallow baking dish or pie pan. Paint with olive oil, season with salt and pepper and sprinkle herbs on top of each bulb. Cover with aluminum foil and bake for about 11/4 hours at 350 degrees, or until the garlic is tender to the touch.
To serve: Remove the garlic from the skin by squeezing the roasted bulb gently. The pulp will ooze out like a paste. Spread the paste on the toast points. Serve, to be dipped in vinaigrette.

**Yield: 4 servings**

**ROBERT IS HERE BAKED LEMON-HERB CHICKEN**

*This recipe is from Robert’s daughter Savannah Moehling. She serves the chicken with some of her dad’s green beans and a jar of pineapple salsa, available in the market, with jasmine rice. Montreal Chicken Seasoning is a blend of garlic, rosemary, thyme, salt and pepper and is made by McCormick.*

- 5 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
- 4 fresh lemons
- 5 teaspoons Montreal Chicken Seasoning
- 5 teaspoons garlic powder
- 1/2 stick butter
- 2 garlic cloves, minced

Heat oven to 350 and line baking dish with foil. Start out by juicing two of the lemons on both sides of chicken. Combine the seasonings in a bowl and dust the chicken. Melt the half stick of butter in small saucepan and add the garlic and cook over medium heat until fragrant, then juice the other two lemons into the garlic butter. Brush the lemon garlic butter on chicken. Bake uncovered in oven for 30 minutes or until fully cooked.

**Yield: 5 servings**

**BLACK BEANS VALDES-FAULI STYLE**

*I got this recipe in 1986 from the Valdes-Fauli family, known in the Hispanic community for their culinary prowess.*

- 2 pounds dried black beans
- 1 1/2 pounds onions, peeled and chopped
- 1 medium green pepper, seeded and diced
- 1 (4 1/2-ounce) can sweet red peppers, minced, juices reserved
- 4 or 5 garlic cloves, peeled and minced
- 1 8-ounce can tomato sauce
Salt and black pepper to taste

2 teaspoons white vinegar

1 teaspoon sugar

1 to 1 1/2 cups olive oil

Sweet red peppers (sliced pimiento) for garnish

The night before you plan to make the dish, wash the beans in one or two changes of water, picking out broken beans. Place in a large, heavy pot and cover with cold water. Let beans soak overnight. Using the same water, start cooking beans over low heat for 2 to 3 hours, until they soften. Skim any foam that rises to the top. You may need to add hot water during this cooking period to prevent beans from sticking.

In a large skillet, sauté the garlic, onions and green pepper in 1 cup of the olive oil (almost enough to cover them) over low heat for about 15 minutes. Add the red peppers and cook an additional 5 minutes over low heat. Add half the can of tomato sauce and cook 10 more minutes.

When beans are soft, stir in the sofrito (the sauteed pepper mixture) and cook over very low heat 15 more minutes, until mixture thickens, stirring frequently. Add salt and pepper to taste and cook 30 more minutes. Stir in vinegar and sugar, and up to 1/2 cup more olive oil, to taste. Heat through and serve, garnished with red pepper strips.

**Yield: 12 servings**

**THE EMBERS HOUSE DRESSING**

2 cups mayonnaise

1/2 cup ketchup

1/2 cup sour cream

1/4 cup sweet pickle juice (from a jar of sweet pickles)

1/4 cup orange juice

2 garlic cloves, crushed

1 teaspoon yellow mustard

1/2 cup sugar

1 teaspoon paprika

Juice of 2 lemons
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
1 hard-cooked egg (optional)
A few black olives (optional)

In a blender, process the mayonnaise, ketchup, sour cream, pickle juice, orange juice, garlic, mustard, sugar, paprika, lemon juice and Worcestershire for just a second or two. Refrigerate 24 hours before serving. If you like, chop the egg fine and garnish salad plates with egg and olives.

Per tablespoon: 92 calories (81 percent from fat), 8.5 g fat (1.2 g saturated, 1.5 g monounsaturated), 7.1 mg cholesterol, 0.3 g protein, 4.1 g carbohydrates, 0.1 g fiber, 102.3 mg sodium

Yield: 2 3/4 cups

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