

Mambo Kings

There isn't a supper club in L.A. with more old-world style than El Floradita

By Nancy Rommelmann

As far as I'm concerned there's only one substitute for sex, and that's dancing. And let's just say I've had plenty of time lately to test this theory. Anyway, last Monday night I put on my slinkiest dress and cruised over to El Floradita, a Little Havana cantina in a Hollywood strip mall. There may be many hot spots for dancing in our urban sprawl, but there's no place with more old-world style than El Floradita. Think tropical supper club, and you're almost there.

The first thing you see when you walk in the door is a stage bathed in mango-colored light. Around it are tables filled with people engaging in mass oral hysteria: eating and laughing and talking and kissing. Being alone, my options are limited; I use my solitary mouth to order a *mojito*, Cuba's version of a julep—mint leaves crushed with sugar, a healthy shot of rum, and soda. Then I perch on a strategically located bar stool and take in the well-dressed, grown-up crowd.

Have you ever noticed that when ants pass one another, they always touch noses? (That I notice such things may tell you a little about where my life is at.) Anyway, that's what people do at El Floradita: they greet and engage and nuzzle. The patrons have an intensity that most Angelenos reserve for their day jobs. But then, we are not in Los Angeles now; we've gone international. Languages overlap, and a table of six flaunts five skin colors. We're all on equal footing, the great yardstick being our dancing shoes.

At ten, Johnny Polanco y Su Orquesta begin blowing New York salsa. (There's live mambo, merengue, and cha-cha on other nights.) The music immediately slips under the skin. Plates of garlicky *chicharritas* and *camarones con salsa verde* are forgotten as the crowd begins an orchestrated, R-rated passion play on the dance floor. Everyone looks like they know what they're doing. Perhaps they've been taking advantage of the dance lessons, available free with dinner on Thursdays at eight. I watch a spectacularly handsome Aztec man lean


into his beautiful wife, and I think for the umpteenth time that a guy who can dance is very, very sexy.

I'm breathing through my mouth when a dapper gentleman named R. Gabriel asks for my hand. The floor is just crowded enough—skin brushing skin as couples samba. I smile my sexiest smile, lift my skirt just a little, and let R lead. I figure I'll pick up the steps, but I soon realize that I'm staring at our feet; whereas R is doing this *da-da-da* step, I can only *da-da*. The cruel truth is that Cuban dancing is precise and I'm all over the

place, a spastic Lucy to his syn-copated Ricky. R compliments me on my "free expression" as he leads me back to the bar, where I content myself with being the voyeur...for about seven seconds.

"C'mon, I'm gonna teach you," a 60-plus man wearing a gold chain says as he spins me onto the floor. All of a sudden, I'm back in seventh grade and the dance teacher's lips are moving, but all I hear is an enormous white noise. I feel a sense of doom, until I look to my left and there's Robert Duvall (who's known to bring his own tango-floor on location) dipping a raven-haired girl with legs up to there. They look so strong, so unified,

that I let my partner's hand sink into the small of my back, and...it's like riding a bike. Our hips move in unison, our feet flutter an inch above the floor, and we're off.

I'm lying. I wasn't very good at all. No one asked me to dance twice, and I wound up freestyling with a girl in Doc Martens most of the night. Still, nobody seemed to mind, and when I left, many (OK, two) men kissed me and made me promise to come back. Makes a girl feel her expiration date's not quite up. 

El Floradita is located at 1253 N. Vine St. (at Fountain), Hollywood; (213) 871-8612. You can send e-mail to Nancy Rommelmann at 102506.1115@compuserve.com.



Dancing at El Floradita