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The Blossoming of El Floridita

By ROSE DOSTI, *Times Staff Writer*

There are several good things you can count on at El Floridita in Hollywood: On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being tops, warmth and hospitality rate a 10; neatness and cleanliness, a 10-plus; free mall parking, 10; a menu you'll probably like, nine plus; food you will probably enjoy (although you might have had better Cuban cuisine elsewhere), an eight; and, not least, prices that will almost make you jump with joy, considering the high cost of low-cost dining out these days.

Not bad for a street-corner mall cafe.

What you should not count on is spit-and-polish service (two-plus rating), and not because the people are not nice. They are very nice, indeed, bending over backward to please. It's just that knowledge and experience have made a clean getaway, never to return. Waiters misunderstand or misinterpret orders, bring things not ordered, careless customers muss up the nice, neat tables, in ways they would never dream of doing if they were dining at Trumps or Spago. Messy, messy, messy. And don't ask me why.

Too-Kind Proprietors

I've noticed the phenomenon particularly in ethnic restaurants, where too-kind proprietors tend to be intimidated by bad manners of customers rather than attempt to control them with a meaningful eyeball to eyeball glare or an immediate remedial response. Like 10 raps on the wrist with an asparagus.

The last to pay attention to the nuances, however, is the management, whose perceptions have been dulled by the sheer thrill of having anyone occupy their humble tables or the imminent reality of revenue, or both. Who knows?

El Floridita is relatively new in town—about 7 months old—a labor of love and the hard work of its owner, Armando Castro, a former banker, who decided to change career at midlife. Tina Porros is the co-host who has helped Castro with the long hours and hard work. You'll probably enjoy the experience because of the nice people, good food and prices to match.

We had several things I would order again and again. The wonderful Cuban *puerco asada* (roast pork marinated in garlic and served with rice and beans and yucca) is a must. You get soup or salad with the dinner. At lunch it comes as an entree without trimmings, but the dish at lunch is only \$6.25; dinner \$8.75.

You want to try the authentic Cuban steak, *bistec de palomilla*, garnished with sauteed onions and French fries or the *bistec empanizado*, which is breaded and fried. At lunch there is a terrific steak sandwich served on Cuban bread, called *pan con bistec*.

The *arroz con pollo* is succulently moist, with meat fairly falling from the bone. If you have the time to wait, try the *zarzuelas de mariscos*, a sort of seafood stew or bouillabaisse equivalent (\$19). Both the *paella* made with pork and chicken or

paella marina made with seafood only, are bargains, at \$17 and \$19, respectively. The lobster with creole sauce is another excellent dish that's worth the price (\$15.95). The fried foods, although high in fat, may be worth a try for people who can afford the extra calories. Scrumptious *pollo frito con mojo* and the *serrucho* (fish floured and fried) are worth trying. *Boliche*, another Cuban favorite, meat stuffed with sausage, is also worth a try.

Those who know *mojo*—the snappy garlic sauce eaten as a dip with everything—will find the El Floridita version milder than most. But it's good.

Much of the Cuban fare on the lunch menu is great Havana vendor food: *tamal*, the Cuban version of tamale made by layering cornmeal mush with ham, pork and Swiss cheese; the pressed Cuban sandwiches, which are made with the rather flat, crusty bread filled with ham, pork, Swiss cheese and pickles and press-fried. The bread itself, made for the restaurant, is served at the table and it is good.

The entrees are served with a crisp lettuce-tomato salad on the plate, as well as *Moros y Cristianos* (Moors and Christians, the flamboyant name for black beans and rice). We suggest you go for the soup choice, which is usually excellent. If you prefer, you can order one of the several other salads offered, which, frankly, all look and taste alike to me. Avocado salad looks and tastes no different than the vegetable or mixed salads, but maybe the chef knows something I don't.

Many Choices

The desserts are especially fine. Try the flan; it's a good one. I also like the spongy, cake-like pudding, *tres leches*, made with condensed, evaporated and regular milks. One reviewing food critic suggested topping the fabulous-tasting, but otherwise plain-looking dessert with whipped cream. The owner did and it's the crowning jewel among desserts. The diplomat pudding (custard flecked with fruit), which made the rounds throughout the colonized world and stuck, also is quite nice.

There is more for the price of the food: harp music by Luis F. Gonzalez is played weekdays at lunch (from noon to 3 p.m.) and piano with electronics by Leo Torres can be heard Thursdays through Sundays. Torres does some good piano, especially pop jazz, which would be perfect without the brain-wave denting bop, bop, bop of the electronic equipment. That's my humble opinion. Others may enjoy it. No dancing yet, just as there is as yet no Cuban beer, but the owner is working on both. Meanwhile, you can use your fork and knife to keep rhythm and drink Amstel.

El Floridita, 1253 N. Vine St., (213) 871-0936, (213) 871-0936 or 8612. Open from noon to 10 p.m. daily. Reservations preferred on weekends. Free parking in mall. Visa and MasterCard accepted. Beer and wine available. Price range for lunch \$4 to \$7; dinner \$7 to \$19.