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Key West Eats

On the path to fun and flavor in the Conch Republic.

By Margit Bisztray

THE OTHER DAY I PASSED ONE OF the seafood joints, radiant with beer signs, where I never eat. But when the barker in front offered me a take-out menu, I accepted. Her lace dress, high heels, and gloves were irresistible – and then there was the parrot pacing back and forth on her shoulders.

The personalities are half the fun on Key West, and that goes for its eateries, too; my favorite places are full of local characters.

Jr., son of the middle brother, and his job is making Cuban coffees, known as *con leches*. He works from 6 A.M. to 6 P.M., preparing 12 at a time during peak hours and going through 24 pounds of coffee a day.

"The coffee's strong and sweet – that's what they tell me," says Paez.

Judging from the breakfast crowd – employees from the aqueduct authority, the firehouse, the electric works, the police force, the courthouse, and

meaning a single tablespoon, still raises Paez's eyebrows; behind me, people in uniforms call out for larges with three sugars, and for several pork sandwiches to go with them. I feel like such a wimp.

I like to linger once I've paid (small coffee: 60 cents) and roam the aisles stocked with dried shrimp, chorizo, anise, and guava paste. I'm tempted by sets of dominoes, bottles of violet cologne, and Virgin Mary statues posed above the cigarettes. The votive candles inscribed with prayers appeal to me, too; I like their offers of "courage to accept life's adversities" and "strength to ward off wickedness," and also the fact that they burn for days on end and cost about a buck.

After the first sip of my *con leche*, I start to crave some chewy Cuban toast topped with margarine or melted yellow cheese. But typically I go somewhere else for my morning bread.

Cole's Peace bakery sits at the intersection of Grinnell and Eaton streets. It's not unusual to see a car idling in traffic while someone dashes in for onion-dill bread, but I enjoy getting there on foot or by bicycle. I like the scent of toast as I approach, and seeing how the loaves in the window look like faces. I like the sound of the screen door slamming behind me, the sight of rustic walls streaked with old paint (when was the mint-green era, anyway?), and the shelves of sourdough and honey-wheat bread. If not for the cooler of green tea and fresh-squeezed orange juice, I could be back in a time when jolly men in white hats baked bread and popped up in nursery rhymes.

The bakers at Cole's Peace wear combat boots and body piercings, but they still bake the old-fashioned way. My favorite is their mango *boule* studded with chewy amber fruit, which I take home to eat with brie or Camembert.

Although a short journey away, lower Petronia is culturally as far from whole grain bread as it's possible to get. There in the heart of Bahama Village, porch sitting is a pastime, and people always stop to say hello. If someone leans into a friend's car window to chat, other cars wait without a toot – or they take the



Their daily bread: Key West locals buy it fresh and flavorful at Cole's Peace bakery.

Just a short walk from the cemetery is 5 Brothers Groceries & Sandwich Shop. While the eponymous siblings have all retired, they maintain a strong presence: A cartoon drawing of their faces is the grocery store's logo, and the guy who works there could be any one of them – 30-some years ago.

As it turns out, he is Heriberto Paez

construction sites – if 5 Brothers ever closed, Key West would, too.

A *con leche* is one part intensely strong coffee to roughly six parts hot milk, a rich, husky mix without any bitterness. *Con leches* come in four sizes, and while some people drink several a day, I'm high for hours after a small one. My usual request for just one "sugar,"

THE GUIDE

sidewalk. And then there are the nine-year-olds who zoom by on bicycles too big for them, carrying a friend on the handlebars and yelling "Look out!" as chickens run for their lives.

This area could be the Bahamas (if not for Petronia's, with its incredible Polish food), and at Blue Heaven an eclectic crowd waits to dine on Red Stripe-glazed shrimp while catching the evening's live folk music.

The Conch Shop, a nondescript shack, feeds the neighborhood locals. At lunchtime there, greetings ring out over the sizzle of food.

"Hey girl, what's shaking?" and "How's things with you?"

The menu includes savory conch fritters, collard greens, crab rice, and *souse* – tripe, chitlings, and pig's feet stewed in key-lime juice – but most people go there for Nasty Burgers – a handmade hamburger, but a very good one. I order one, grab a handful of napkins, and try to keep my chin clean.

On United Street, the Dennis Pharmacy is home to a diner that used to be a soda fountain. Three generations of "conchs," as locals call themselves, have dined there. Owner David Alea attributes that fact to the "decent food and good prices."

To reach a seat at the laminated double-horseshoe counter, I have to cut through a passionate debate on local politics. A security officer shouts out his opinion; a dental hygienist refutes it. The waitress adds her two cents while taking my order.

"THAT'S CRAP, HARRY!" she says. "Small or large root beer, hon?"

Breakfasts of eggs, meat, and potatoes cost less than \$5, including coffee and a refill. Lunch features Onelia's chicken soup, Inez's conch chowder, and Cuban dishes whose names trill off the tongue – *picadillo* and *palomilla*. Lunches arrive with yellow rice, stewed black beans, and fried plantains. For dessert, there's incredible flan and

homemade guava bread pudding.

Sometimes in this climate, the only thing that sounds good is ice cream. Late in the afternoon, I like to stop by the Cuban restaurant El Meson de Pepe's, near Mallory Square, which serves ice cream made just as it was for years at El Anon.


Grandchildren of the founders folded El Anon into El Meson de Pepe's up the street, but they still use the original recipes for custardy vanilla, rich fudgelike chocolate, and tamarind sorbet. The creamy soursop ice cream tastes like the world's best peach.

As sunset nears, I watch as the tightrope walker, the popcorn vendor, the buskers, the jugglers, and the human statues head to work at the pier. I watch while I eat my ice cream and think about the characters – and the characteristic food – of Key West. ♦

Freelance writer Margit Bisztray lives in Key West.

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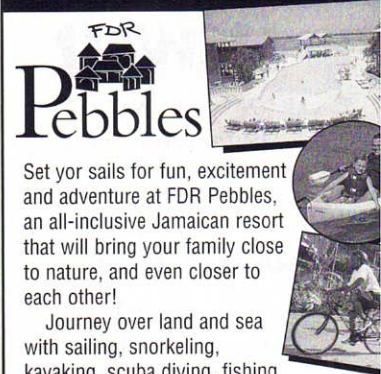


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