



CUBA'S OLD CLOTHES, MADE NEW

BY KATE THORMAN || PHOTOGRAPHS BY HOLLY WILMETH

AS I STARE DOWN AT THE PLATE of shredded meat in front of me, I am skeptical. After several days of eating canned green beans and overboiled yucca, I have surmised that 51 years of rationing has reduced much of Cuba's cuisine to a shadow of its former glory. What if *ropa vieja*, a vaunted and popular dish, has suffered the same fate? I am sitting in the cozy dining room at Doña Eutimia, one of Havana's original *paladares*, or privately owned eateries. The restaurant's inventive take on *ropa vieja* has been lauded as the best in the city, and I am afraid I will have to call out the emperor's nakedness.

Doña Eutimia was named for a local woman who for years cooked traditional dishes for the artists' workshop next door. The dining room, crammed with antique furnishings, resembles a home more than a restaurant. The proprietor, Leticia Abad, oversees the preparation of comfort food with grandmotherly warmth. If anything feels out of sync, it's the influx of foreigners triggered by a 2012 *Newsweek* listing as one of the World's 101 Best Places to Eat, with the *ropa vieja* singled out as a specialty.

Ropa vieja translates as "old clothes," a reference both to its stewy appearance and

to the folktale of its origin: Unable to feed his family, a poor father throws some worn-out garments into a pot and cooks them with such love that they transform into a delicious beef stew.

Abad's *ropa vieja* is the result of improvisation as well. Doña Eutimia opened for business in 1996, after the government loosened restrictions on independent enterprise. For the first time since the revolution, new dining spots served traditional cuisine, not the uninspired fare found in government restaurants. However, it remained illegal for nongovernment institutions to serve beef, the key ingredient of *ropa vieja*. So Abad got creative. She made the dish with lamb. This rich variation on an age-old recipe gained a following and kept the *paladar* going until 1998, when increased government constraints forced Abad to close.

In late 2010, as Raúl Castro attempted to stabilize Cuba's economy, *paladares* became legal again. This time, so did beef. But when Abad reopened the restaurant in 2011, she stuck to her adapted *ropa vieja*. "People loved the lamb," she told me as my dinner was delivered at Doña Eutimia, "and the old customers started coming back."

I plunge my fork into the meat and cautiously taste a few strands. The tender, juicy lamb falls apart in my mouth, its smokiness enhanced by perfect amounts of salt and garlic. I barely even touch the requisite rice and beans that accompany every Cuban meal, though a few bites tell me that Abad also does these better than most.

When I suggest that her *ropa vieja* must be complicated to make, Abad laughs. The recipe is straightforward, she says, and it can easily be adjusted to accommodate different tastes. "There are those who like it spicy, but I don't," she explains. "We're used to eating it with white rice, but you can eat it with anything. It's delicious when used to stuff other things, like red peppers."

After my revelatory experience at Doña Eutimia, I realize that by simply substituting lamb for beef, Abad has created a dish that should become the new tradition.



In a hotel courtyard in Old Havana, left, and on the city's streets, Cuba's cultural history manifests in colorful and traditional ways.



Ropa Vieja

(SERVES 4)

Adapted from a recipe by Leticia Abad of Doña Eutimia

INGREDIENTS

3 to 4 pounds lamb leg, bone in
3 to 4 bay leaves
Olive oil
Several cloves of garlic,
finely chopped
2 tablespoons tomato paste
1/4 to 1/2 cup white wine
Salt
Pepper
1 green bell pepper, sliced into
1/4-inch strips
1 red bell pepper, sliced into
1/4-inch strips
1 onion, thinly sliced

MAKE IT

1. Have your butcher cut the lamb into three or four pieces.
2. In a large, heavy pot or Dutch oven, add the lamb, bay leaves, and enough water to cover the meat by one inch.
3. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat to low, and simmer, covered, until the lamb can be pulled cleanly from the bone—at least two hours. Discard the bones.
4. Coat a large frying pan with olive oil, bring up the heat, and sauté the meat and garlic for four minutes.
5. Add the tomato paste gradually and stir slowly. The sauce should not turn entirely red or take on too much tomato flavor.
6. Add salt, pepper, and white wine to taste.
7. After allowing the other flavors to blend for a few minutes, stir in the peppers and onions and continue to cook until they are soft but not entirely limp.
8. Serve hot with white rice and black beans.

WHERE TO TRY ROPA VIEJA IN HAVANA

Doña Eutimia

Once you've found the restaurant, tucked away in an alley off the Plaza de la Catedral in Old Havana, you'll discover why Leticia Abad's *ropa vieja* is widely considered the best in the city. Tables are few and in high demand, so make a reservation for dinner. *Callejón del Chorro No. 60-c, Plaza de la Catedral, Habana Vieja, 53/(O) 7-861-1332*

Nao Bar Paladar

One of Havana's newer privately run eateries, Nao has a chic dining room with exposed beams and a large international wine collection. In addition to fritters, croquettes, lamb shoulder, pork loin, and a variety of seafood dishes, Nao serves a traditional *ropa vieja* that is quickly

becoming a local favorite. *Obispo No. 1-e, between Avenida del Puerto and Baratillo, Habana Vieja, 53/(O) 7-867-3463, naobarpaladar.com*

Gringo Viejo

This paladar mainstay in Havana's Vedado neighborhood attracts travelers and affluent Cubans by serving good-size portions of beef *ropa vieja* and other consistently tasty classic dishes, such as oxtail stew and roasted chicken with pineapple sauce. *Calle 21 No. 454, Vedado, 53/(O) 7-831-1946*

Plan Your Trip to Cuba

To book a tour of Cuba (and taste *ropa vieja* in Havana), contact AFAR Travel Advisory Council member Lauren Maggard at (312) 574-1186, lauren@jetsetworldtravel.com.

