

¡SABOR!

CUBAN CUISINE STAYS TRUE TO FORM STRAIGHT FROM MIAMI

by Bren Herrera

Café Bustelo is my addiction. It is vital to my gracious existence. Imagine having a cup of Folgers, super boosted and injected with eight times the potency and caffeine level. This is what I drink first thing in the morning, totaling about seven shots of this finely ground espresso, by the time I get to my third round. Of course, I add some steamed milk and one teaspoon of raw sugar.

If you are Cuban, have lived in Miami or know anything about Cuban culture, you know what Bustelo is, and you must indulge.

This morning, as I sip on my *cortadito* (one shot with equal parts evaporated milk and sugar), I remember my recent public announcement that I'm not a cookbook collector. Another nuance is not eating Cuban cuisine out in restaurants, no matter the number of popular accolades it bears. But, these minor things are rapidly changing, hence the last time I will mention it in print. However, I must share a gift that emoted what I never thought could occur. My latest cookbook addition—an unlikely one—is a Cuban cookbook. I'll have to admit for the first time I was intrigued, excited and drooling. A book that had all the foods I know and have eaten at some point or another, was in my hands.

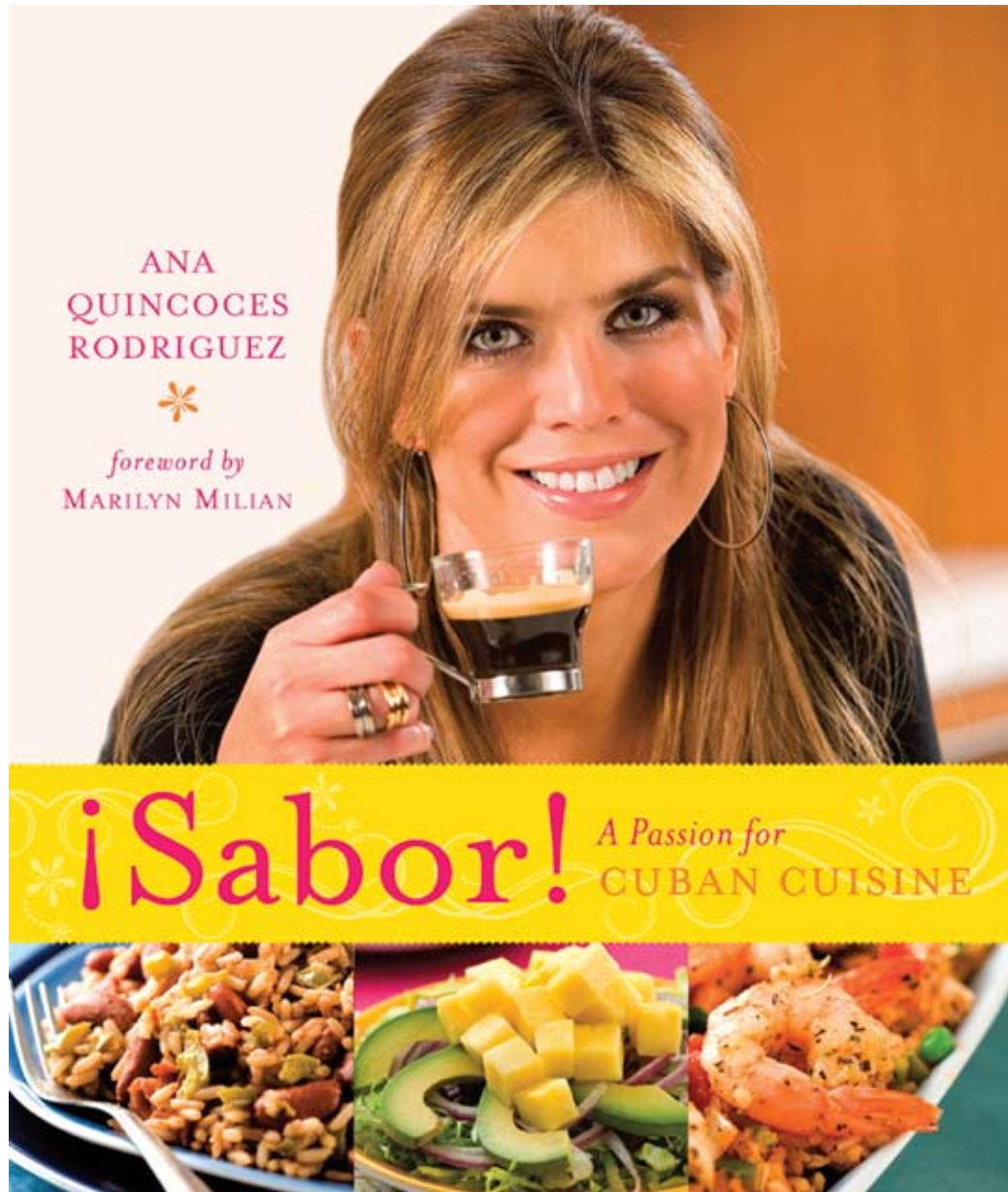
At first glance, ¡Sabor! (means *flavor*) was typical in title, but catchy with its vibrant colors and juicy dish titles. *Platanos Tentacion* (sweet plantain casserole) is a perfect example. Author and passionate about Cuban food, Ana Quincoces Rodriguez opens the culinary compilation with a statement of what makes her book different. I'm looking for an epiphanic suggestion on what really makes Cuban food one of the most desired around the world. Instead, she reiterates that Cuban food is diverse and that no *real* Cuban food ever calls for mango, a fruit

that Grows in abundance on the island. I remember my mother recounting her days climbing her neighbors' mango tree and "stealing" plenty of them for her enjoyment. So, I know first hand that mango is incorporated into Cuban food, on some level.

So I move on to the classic Cuban dishes we all love! Plantains—check. Her *Arroz con Pollo*, a classic dish even Bobby Flay has themed a "Throwdown" challenge after, looks great. The color and wetness (caused by a final

Cuban cookbook, I try to keep in mind that all Cubans are not created equal. I was born in Havana, but raised in Washington, DC. Rodriguez is 2nd generation, but immersed in the rich culture of Miami. Our passion for food is common, and at least we agree on how to make the best Cuban Sandwich!

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pouring of beer) was exactly what I am familiar with. My mother always taught me (and still likes to remind me she is the *Master Chef*) that Cuban food needs little to no altering or modification of authentic recipes. This critical note was consistently expressed throughout the book. Most recipes have a change margin of 2-3. I know for certain that *Moros y Cristianos* (literal translation meaning The Moors and The Christians, ergo black beans and white rice cooked together to make a dark colored, very savory rice) claim no worthy deviation. Rodriguez's recipe is pretty tried and true.

I cook Cuban food for private clients. Most of them American, and most of them not very familiar with my food but extremely eager to experience. For a starter, in-home cooking lesson, I always offer flan, an egg custard that's to die for. Every Cuban knows what flan is, and Rodriguez offers readers two really tempting ones. But aside from flan, which I could eat everyday, Rodriguez introduces me to something I'd never even thought of making: guava cheesecake! I didn't have to look at the recipe to know the taste of that thing was luscious and totally calorie-free! This is automatic entry into my dessert repertoire, and I would recommend it to any decadent dessert fiend.

As I work on my own