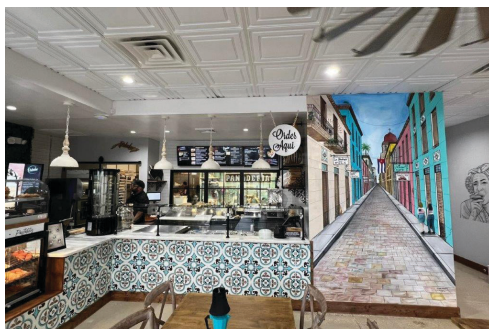




Isela Gonzalez and Nelly Santiago



Inside Paladar



Paladar's Cuban is a guarded tradition.

TABLE TALK

PALADAR CUBAN EATERY — WHERE 305 MEETS 904

story and photos by **LEIGH CORT**

When Isela Gonzalez and Nelly Santiago merged their talents, hospitality goals and business background, they created one of the most authentic Cuban restaurants in Northeast Florida: Paladar Cuban Eatery and Bakery in St. Augustine Beach.

The date was March 24, 2022, with patrons lining up at the door and searching for parking spots along A1A for early morning Cuban coffee (cafecito) and a heaven (cielo) of breakfast pastries. Nobody was more surprised than the two new business partners with their instant success!

Their family stories are touching and magical — both with Cuban heritage and individual journeys that brought them together. Destiny played a role as they chose a perfect name, Paladar, which refers to a small family-run restaurant that brings people together over good food and Cuban culture. Nelly and Isela couldn't be more perfectly suited as they both enjoy lavishing genuine love and hospitality on their guests and private party clients.

There is a comforting moment when you enter their 10-table restaurant, whether sitting on the outside patio or relaxing indoors within view of the colorful mouth-watering display of Pastes, Empanadas and Pastelitos! Here is where you'll experience the real meaning of Paladar — satisfying Cuban tastes and micro-scratch specialties; every dish will tempt your palate.

Imagine strolling a street in Havana in their hand-painted mural; spot Paladar's family photos and mementos. Don't come to eat and rush away. Take time. During colonial times when Cuba was an important port for trade, Isela's ances-

tors brought with them the traditions of its tropical climate. Greatly influenced by a culinary landscape of Spanish, African and Caribbean flavors, fruits and root vegetables are fundamental in Cuban cuisine. Now you're ready to treat yourself to Paladar's traditional menu. Of course, you might have heard about The Cubano, as famous as any one dish connected with its origin. It's a must-try! Paladar's Cuban is a guarded tradition, something that sparkles in the world of gastronomy. Sweet roasted ham, mojo-marinated pork, Swiss cheese, pickles and mustard in pressed Cuban bread.

One warning: If you keep reading, you will get hungry!

For obsessed nacho lovers, Paladar wins the award for Cuban nachos: Succulent shredded pork and ham, topped with queso blanco, olives, onions and cilantro aioli atop a bed of plantain chips! If you can't wait until lunch, it's perfectly okay to enjoy this and all of Paladar's food from early morning until late afternoon closing.

With Nelly's great passion for baking pastries, Paladar first opened to a crowd who are early risers at breakfast — guests who dreamed about starting the day with a "bite of Cuba" and coffee — choosing from her long menu of sweet and savory pastries filled with guava, cheese or meat. Traditional breakfast tostadas brightened beach strolls in the sunshine — then shortly they introduced their abuelas' recipes for beans and rice, maduros to die for and even mariquitas con mojo (crispy plantain chips with garlic mojo sauce). St. Augustine is a hungry-for-great-food tourist destination where the locals often live the same daily tempo as vacationers. Paladar couldn't resist opening for dinner on Friday and Saturday nights too!

From Picadillo (Cuban ground beef with spices) and Ropa Vieja (shredded flank steak) to Shrimp Creole (Camarones Enchilados) and Croqueta Preparada (sweet roasted ham croquette with Swiss cheese on pressed Cuban bread) — dining in or taking out works well with all of Paladar's chef-created dishes and pastry delicacies. A favorite of mine? Camarones al Ajillo (garlic shrimp)!

When Isela (area code 305) met Nelly (904), their plans included more than the popular Paladar. They excitedly merged event talents and created Nostalgia, a small, versatile private space meticulously designed for intimate gatherings for up to 50 guests. Nelly's career on the road planning events and appearances for famous singer "El Puma" Jose Luis Rodriguez, took her around the globe. Isela's Miami reputation for 30 years of high-profile grand affairs, delicious menus and stunning presentations left guests in awe throughout the United States and beyond.

Together, their beautiful Nostalgia is like a little chameleon; it can be transformed from a theme of white-hot Havana nights dance party to an elegantly gowned Bridgerton tea party. Birthdays, bridal parties or baby showers, the two partners are as versatile as their clients' requests. They have pride in perfection, attention to detail, commitment to quality and excitement while creating remarkable events.

"Ven a hacer nuevos amigos" — come make new friends — at Paladar. I'll be sitting at my corner table enjoying a scrumptious dessert to share with you. Would you like Flan de Queso (custard with caramel), Tres Leche cake or Basque Cheesecake? Let's sip a glass of sangria and practice our culinary Spanish!