



rowing up, I was being educated in the Jewish cuisines of East and

West, of Islamic Europe and Christian Europe, and in their gradual fusion as our family moved from Cuba to America.

Of course as a young girl I didn't know that. What I knew was that my two grandmothers—Abuela, my father's mother, born in Turkey, and Baba, my mother's mother, born in Poland—had very distinct approaches to food and eating. And poor Mami, born in Cuba, ever anxious to please, was trying to be loyal to the cuisines of her mother and her mother-in-law while expressing her nostalgia for our abandoned island by adding tropical flavors to our diet.

Abuela was fat, never left the house (Abuelo did all the grocery shopping), kept songbirds, loved to cook, and served food at room temperature, neither hot nor cold, gentle on the tongue. She sat waiting in the kitchen of her one-bedroom apartment in Canarsie. As soon as we arrived, she prepared plates for us; you never served yourself. For lunch there'd be thick doughy *borekas*, filled with potato and cheese, and *bulemas* of thin *fila* knotted around leafy spinach that tasted delicious even to us children. For dinner there'd be *tomaticos rellenos* (crimson tomatoes filled with rice, ground meat, and pine nuts), fish in egg lemon sauce accompanied by string beans and tomato cooked in chicken broth, and thin slices of eggplant, dipped in beaten eggs and sautéed to perfection in olive oil. For dessert, there was *tishipishí*, an almond cake cut into diamonds and swimming in honey, and also baklava, made with layers of walnuts and swimming in more honey, and sometimes rose jam with bread too. Oh, and her *haroset*, made out of dates, raisins, and dried apricots and drenched in wine, was a delight. You left her house feeling intoxicated, like you'd fallen into a Turkish bath.

Baba was lean, a working lady who sold fabric by day under the Number 7 train and took English classes at night, hated to cook, and her food had to be piping hot and her soup boiling, pure fire in the mouth. She cooked out of obligation for the holidays, preparing the classic Yiddish dishes: gefilte fish, matzo ball soup, roasted chicken, tzimmes, latkes, and, because Zayde was Russian and liked

East, West, and Cuban: The Foods of Home

By Ruth Behar

PHOTOGRAPH BY BEN BENHART

it so much, she'd make borsht for him. Her kreplach and blintzes, rare delicacies, were divine. She and Zayde adored apples, the fruit of northern climes, and Baba made baked apples that none of us children would touch, though I did develop a taste for a sliced fresh apple with dollops of sour cream, which was Zayde's favorite midnight snack. Baba had a bad stomach and always ate only half of what was on her plate, but she kept the cookie jar filled with teeth-cracking cookies that she'd roll out herself, shape into stars, serpents, and dots with her fingerprint in the center, sprinkle with cinnamon and a bit of sugar, and save exclusively for dipping into tongue-scorching glasses of Lipton's tea.

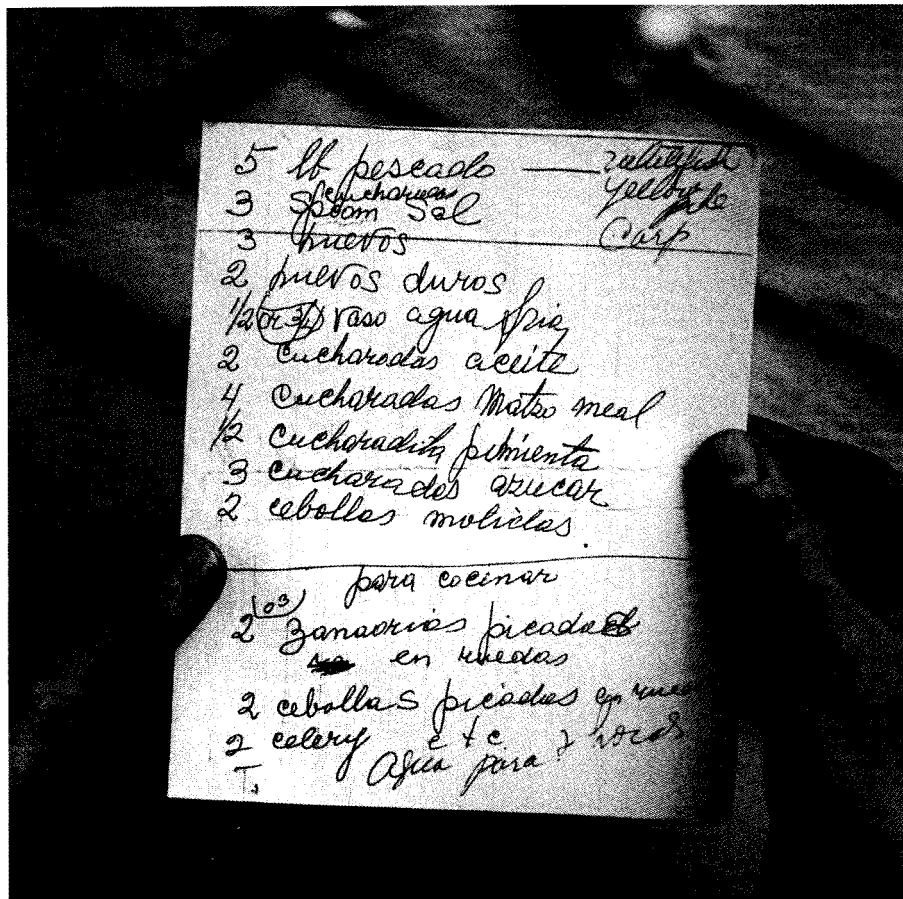
Mami, who was a housewife at first and finally stood up to Papi and got a job in the diploma office at NYU, learned to prepare these Sephardic and Ashkenazic dishes expertly. But it fell upon her to innovate, to Cubanize Jewish food. Her *hamentashen* were

filled with the Goya guava paste that came in long gooey bars. She also kosherized Cuban food. Her tamales were stuffed with shredded chicken rather than pork. She served *picadillo* made from kosher beef with a fried egg over a mound of white rice and black beans on the side. Mami was careful to offer coconut flan for dessert, which (miraculously) didn't require milk, just lots more eggs, a

Goya can of coconut in heavy syrup, and a cup of sugar for the flamed caramel on top.

I was fortunate to eat only Mami's home-cooked food until I went off to college, but Mori, my brother, three years younger, was not so lucky. Mami would come back to Queens, tired from the long subway ride from the Village, and serve him a bowl of burned SpaghettiOs.

Now Mori, a jazz musician who subsisted on bologna and white bread for years, is a strict vegan.



This last Passover, thanks to the recent rabbinical dispensation, Mami was able to make quinoa for him. But not even Mori could resist Mami's coconut flan—the taste of Cuba, the sweet taste of loss.

RUTH BEHAR is the author of essays, poetry, and prose. Her most recent book is *Traveling Heavy: A Memoir in between Journeys*.