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Chef Talk: Jennifer Smith of LeLu Coffee Lounge

By Abby Weingarten, Herald-Tribune / Monday, January 25, 2016

Jennifer Smith, the owner of **LeLu Coffee Lounge** (5251 Ocean Blvd., Sarasota, 346-5358; lelucoffee.com) on Siesta Key, grew up cooking in the south alongside her mother and grandmother. Smith went on to study nutrition at the undergraduate and graduate level at Florida State University before becoming a restaurateur. She is known for her coffee brews and Cuban dishes, not to mention her specialty cocktails at the locale's full bar.



Jennifer Smith of LeLu Coffee Lounge.

Q: What about your upbringing led you to pursue a culinary career?

A: Growing up in the south, I learned to cook at an early age. My grandmother, Clara, and mother, Jeannie, wasted nothing. Mess-ups were roads to new recipes. I knew how to make things like homemade biscuits, gravy (a.k.a. roux), roast turkey, casseroles and soufflés by the time I was 12 and before it was cool. In college, I worked as a bartender at Fat Tuesday's, a barista at Aristotle's, a server at the Silver Slipper, and a bartender at Chez Pierre. Every free second, I was in the kitchen asking questions, helping on the line and observing every possible angle I could—from dishwashing to final plate prep.

Q: How did you cultivate your passion for food and drinks?

A: My passion for food came from watching my grandma make biscuits in her kitchen (which still brings a tear to my eye today) and from watching my mom bake and decorate cakes. My passion for drinks came from working as a barista and a bartender in college.

Q: What are three of your must-have items at LeLu?

A: The cafe con leche/Cortadito is one. The con leche is a blend of whole milk and sweetened, condensed milk. The Cortadito is espresso, with our local Dakin half-and-half blend of heavy cream and whole milk. Our Cuban black beans and rice comes from my love of the Caribbean and my Cuban friends. It is a vegan dish made with olive oil instead of pork fat (which goes against everything Cuban), brown rice, my house-made tomatillo salsa and house-made pico. My Manhattan cocktail comes from my love of all things whiskey and bourbon. I came up with one I like the best, which includes small-batch bourbon, vermouth, bitters and a brandy-soaked cherry.

Q: What was one of the most memorable compliments you received from a guest?

A: One is from a longtime customer and friend, Tony, who always tells me, “Jenn, you’ve created a lifestyle for people—a place where locals come and feel like they’re home.” That rocks me to the core because I do treat people like they are at my house, with respect and kindness (something the world has forgotten a little). Those acts are easy and do not cost a penny. I would rather have 10 customers who come in and are welcomed, spoiled and leave with fulfillment than have 100 who come and go with nothing but coffee.

Q: What makes you want to come into work every day?

A: My son, my family, my friends, the ocean, and the sense of community and family I have created at LeLu. I love my LeLu customers and friends, and I love hearing about their family and friends. I love Siesta Key. I love the challenges every day. I love the opportunity my husband created for me with opening LeLu, and I love being given another day to love all of that.

CUBAN BLACK BEANS AND RICE

Ingredients:

- 1 pound dry black beans, soaked
- 2 tablespoons unrefined olive oil (can substitute pork fat for an authentic dish)
- 1 small yellow onion, diced
- 1 small green pepper, diced
- 3 cloves garlic, smashed and minced
- 3 scallions, chopped
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 teaspoons cumin
- 2 teaspoons oregano
- 3 tablespoons red wine
- 1 tablespoon white vinegar
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Method:

Sauté the vegetables in olive oil until they are fragrant, add the spices and sauté for another minute. Add the soaked, drained beans along with the liquids and sugar, and cover with water. Bring the mixture to a boil and reduce it to a simmer until the beans are tender. Serve the beans over brown rice. Top with tomatillo salsa and pico de gallo.