

# Tales from the White Dog Cafe

A Quarterly Newsletter 3420 Sansom St. Philadelphia Spring, 1998

## White Dog Cafe Cookbook is Here!

"Soon, soon," we'd been saying for the last two years when customers had asked about the arrival of our cookbook. After squeezing out time to test recipes and write stories while running a restaurant, Kevin and I are excited to finally answer, "It's here!" We hope you'll enjoy reviving fond memories by recreating our most popular dishes while reading tales of adventures to sister restaurants around the world. You're bound to discover things you never knew about our unconventional early years when our kitchen was a charcoal grill in the backyard or Kevin's introduction to cooking while growing up in a small Texas town. This newsletter includes two excerpts from our book, a portion of Kevin's story in his column and the following tale, about our trip to Cuba.

### Tortilla Floridita

It was pitch black in the walk-in refrigerator at Restaurante Floridita, once a favorite haunt of Hemingway's in Havana, Cuba, and now a sister restaurant to the White Dog Cafe. The power was off during one of the frequent blackouts engineered to save energy on an island further crippled by the tightened U.S. embargo. Along with eighteen of our customers, Kevin and I had come on a week-long trip sponsored by the Cafe and led by Medea Benjamin of Global Exchange (a non-profit organization based in San Francisco) to find out how our government's policy was affecting the lives of Cubans, as well as to enjoy the cultural delights of the island.

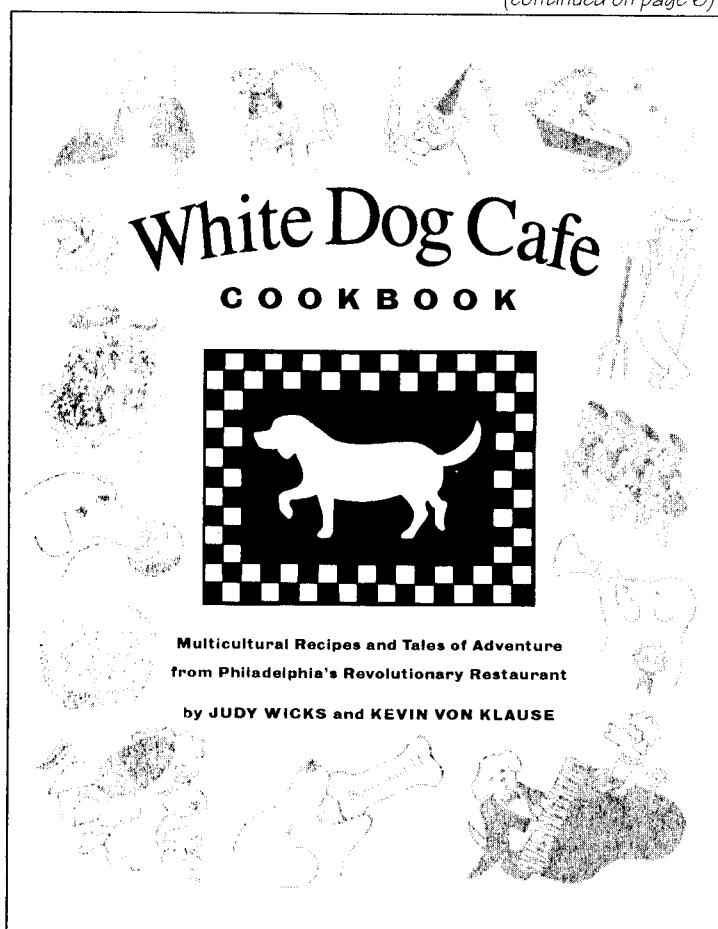
A free enterprise enthusiast, I'd sworn never to have a state-owned sister restaurant, but curiosity got the better of me. It was 1993, just after the fall of the Soviet Union, and this might be our last chance to experience a system where every tomato, fork, and toilet plunger was purchased through central planning. Even in Cuba, things were changing as the government, though determined to prevent rampant consumerism and preserve the victories of the revolution, cautiously began opening the economy.

Tonight was the grand finale dinner. La Floridita's Chef Clemente Harewood was preparing his famous stuffed lobster dish and Kevin was creating a first course from what could be found in the walk-in. Our anxiety was rising as our hope for fresh ingredients diminished. On the trip we had learned of the food shortage in Cuba, precipitated originally by a dependency on U.S. imports while all tillable soil was used for exported crops like sugar and tobacco. After the revolution, the U.S. imposed an economic embargo to punish Castro who then made the mistake of transferring Cuba's dependency from the United States to the Soviet Union rather than developing self-sufficiency. Now Cuba had again lost its

major trading partner and was desperately trying to diversify its economy to become self-sufficient. It was a race against time to increase food production fast enough to feed the population before supplies ran out. Everyone in Cuba, including the employees of La Floridita, takes his or her turn in the fields. While at home we see only those fleeing in search of opportunity, here I found an indomitable spirit of dignity and hope and a willingness to tolerate authoritarianism and economic hardship rather than surrender to external domination and a return to a dependent economic system that had once enslaved the Cuban people.

While the rest of our group enjoyed the unspoiled beach at nearby Valedero, Kevin and I groped through the dark walk-in with dimming flashlights, searching for food. We stumbled over a cardboard box which looked promising until we found it contained only a couple of rotten potatoes. Finally, we emerged clutching a

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few precious tomatoes, peppers, and onions and a large tubular vegetable called boniato. The kitchen was spacious and immaculate with white tile walls rising up to a high ceiling with a beautiful big skylight that bathed the kitchen with a precious commodity – light. The staff was dressed in whites and the chefs wore traditional tall chef hats or toques. Clemente's was bright red with matching kerchief, the same color as Kevin's baseball cap. They were ready to be of assistance, but spoke no English – and we spoke little Spanish. We said "Hola!" and everyone smiled and shook hands.

Kevin approached the boniato with curiosity. It's similar to a sweet potato, but much larger. In his usual manner of cooking, he wanted to do something that was familiar to the guests, but with a new twist. Boniato dumplings perhaps! He set to work cooking the vegetable, then mashing it by hand – the electric mixer sat useless without power. Next he added free-range eggs with the most beautiful bright yellow yolks, a result of never ingesting chemical feed. Green philosophy had developed out of scarcity but had taken hold as a national mission. You will never see garbage dumps as clean and efficient as those in Cuba. Crops are grown organically, bicycles fill the streets and herbal medicine is taught in every high school. Even a paper substitute, *Kenaf*, is grown in order to save trees.

Kevin added flour and more eggs to the mashed boniato to form the dumplings. Mashing and kneading, adding more flour, then more eggs – nothing seemed to achieve the right consistency. Instead, the gummy mixture stuck persistently to his hands, refusing the shape of a dumpling.

The dinner hour was all too rapidly nearing. We were expecting about forty guests, including some local opera stars and officials whose permission I had sought to hold the event in this state-run enterprise. The La Floridita sous chef watched with puzzlement. Under his cap, Kevin's face lit with a new idea. He grabbed a rolling pin and flattened the mixture. The kitchen staff looked on with great interest as he broke off pieces and formed them into pancakes.

"Tortilla," he explained. They smiled and nodded, understanding nothing. This wasn't Mexico. Spotting a nice big griddle, Kevin put on the tortilla. After it had browned, he broke off a piece and we apprehensively tasted a bite. Delicious! With the flavor of roasted chestnuts. Success at last! Now Kevin put the staff to work, "Mas, Mas," he said as they eagerly patted out the tortillas and put them on the griddle.

Clemente presented Kevin with some lovely shrimp, and things were really looking up. Kevin chopped the tomatoes, onions, and peppers, and added black beans, capers and olives from the pantry. As the staff lined up to watch, he placed the tortilla on a dinner plate, spooned out the tomato mixture, which formed a bed for the shrimp, and topped it with a dollop of herbed mayonnaise made from those beautiful eggs.

"Tortilla Floridita," he announced.

Everyone smiled with great satisfaction. "Vive la Tortilla Floridita! Vive la Revolucion!"

Judy Wicks

## Happy Hour for Social Activists

Third Thursdays, 5:30-7:30pm

April 16, May 21, June 18

Co-Hosted with Philadelphia Cares

Phila Cares matches citizens with opportunities for community service throughout the region. Network with others who share your values while enjoying the piano bar and happy hour prices.

As part of the White Dog Cafe  
Philadelphia Sister Restaurant Project

we invite you to join us for

## An Evening in El Barrio

on Thursday, April 30

6pm "Guatemala: Faith, Art, and Survival"  
at Taller Puertorriqueno

the Puerto Rican cultural center at 2724 N. 5th St. 426-3311  
featuring a selection of original hand woven textiles and  
costumes from private collectors and photographs  
by Ila Abernathy. Guided tour by Doris Noguera, Visual Arts  
Director. \$3 contribution to Taller suggested.

7pm Dinner at El Tropical,

the White Dog's Puerto Rican "sister" restaurant  
at 4058 N. 5th St. 229-0550

Enjoy a traditional Puerto Rican dinner of roast pork or  
chicken, rice & beans or rice & chickpeas, salad, fried plantains  
and flan or coconut custard, with a complimentary Cocoquito,  
a special coconut & rum drink, soda, and coffee.  
\$16, including tax & tip (BYO wine)

9pm Dancing at Raymond's Night Club

5th & Somerset (across the street & up the block from Taller)  
Dance to a popular Latino band playing Salsa and Merengue in  
this warm and friendly club, which welcomes newcomers.

The purpose of the White Dog Philadelphia Sister Restaurant  
project is to promote minority owned businesses and cultural  
organizations and encourage city-wide community.

For reservation, call the White Dog at 386-9224.

## White Dog Community Service Days

Saturday, April 16, 8:30am - 1pm

Sierra Club Earth Day Event

We will offer adult supervision to high school students who are  
participating in earth stewardship service, for which they earn  
high school credit, at Blue Bell Meadow in Fairmount Park.  
Service activities will include water testing, trash cleanup, and  
tree planting. Lunch will be provided by the Sierra Club.

Saturday, May 16, 9:00am-1pm

Phila. Cares About Fairmount Park Day

Joining hundreds of Phila. area residents dedicated to  
contributing to the betterment of the Park, we will work as a  
small group at Belmont Mansion to undertake a general spring  
cleanup of the area and prepare the grounds for garden  
plantings. Lunch will be provided by the Fairmount Park  
Commission. Bring your own gloves and wear appropriate  
cleanup clothing. Youth 16 and over are welcome.

Registration required.

Call 386-9224 for either of these days.