

Eatery offers a taste of home and needed support

A Hialeah restaurant serves more than food. To many newly arrived Cubans, Tropical is a place that reminds them of home.

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TIM CHAPMAN/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

MAKING A LIVING: Rocio De La Torre, 21, an employee at the Tropical Restaurant in Hialeah, is part of the wave of young Cubans, who have recently arrived in Miami.

Tropical Restaurant in Hialeah serves up a daily mix *a la libra*, by the pound: the feel of home in a new country; the first sliver of opportunity for many Cubans who've recently made the exile leap, and of course, *congrí* and *ropa vieja* at a budget price.

Take Rocio De La Torre, waitress, Miami Dade College student, and recent survivor of a dangerous smuggling operation that brought her across the Florida Straits. She now works at Tropical with her mom, Barbarita Herrera.

Tropical, 652 E. Ninth St., is the Versailles restaurant of the new arrivals, a U.S.-flag draped place where there's always a buzz around the *timbiriche* window, with plenty of seating and kitschy decor, and where language is not an issue, as long as you speak Spanish.

"I went looking for work when I got here and found a job here immediately," said Yudenia Cruz, 26, who arrived two months ago after getting a visa. "I just want a normal life, a family, a house, the things necessary to live. This restaurant is the first step."

Indeed. Tropical owner Regino Rodríguez prides himself not only on the savory *churrascos* he serves by the hundreds every day, but by the support network he has created for new arrivals.

OPEN DOORS

"I feel like it's an obligation I have to help people reach the American dream," Rodríguez said of his open-door policy. "Sometimes one will come in and ask for work and even if there are no positions available and no money, I don't turn people down."

Rodríguez, like other business owners in the area, has a close-up view of the new arrivals' work-ethic and struggles.

He said many are distrustful and fearful because of the oppressive communist system they were raised in, and it takes some of them years to appreciate their new-found freedoms.

"They come with a mentality that you can get anything you want here, do what you want, but what they don't always understand is that here you have to work very hard for what you have," he said.

Most of the new arrivals who work there are young, in their 20s and 30s. Many of them are taking English-language courses and have plans to better themselves.

Julio Acosta, 21, took a boat from Cuba to Mexico in the spring of 2005, then crossed the Mexican border on his way to Miami. He came to Tropical looking for a job, and got one. Now studying massage therapy, he wants to be a doctor. "This is so different because it's capitalism, it's a free country," he said. "What a person does is entirely up to them."

Many of Tropical's customers are also new arrivals. Marlene Acosta, 36, recently stopped in with her son, Gilberto Curbelo, 14, for some food. Both of them arrived in March. An accountant by trade, she just finished her first accounting course at Miami Dade College and hopes to practice her profession.

As a single mother, Acosta struggles to make ends meet. She said she appreciates her new freedoms but is still leery of her surroundings.

"For us Cubans, mostly the ones who were professionals, we had to keep appearances to keep our jobs in Cuba," she said. "All Cubans steal from the state to survive. It's the only way."

Herrera knows that well. As a restaurant worker in Cuba, Herrera had access to all kinds of food, which she said she would steal and trade for U.S. dollars. Her salary of about 160 Cuban pesos, or \$6 a month, plus the monthly rations of six eggs, some rice and bread, were not enough. A bottle of oil fetched her \$2; 30 eggs, \$3. She had to pay the guard at the door to keep quiet, too.

NO NEED FOR STEALING

Herrera's job at Tropical pays her enough to live and send money home. In Miami, she said, she doesn't have to steal to get by.

She said Tropical is the only place that really reminds her of Cuba, where neighbors see each other on the street every day, and there's a greater sense of community. In Hialeah, no one walks anywhere, and few people know their neighbors, she said.

"When we started working here the owner's daughter gave us a bag full of great clothes," said Herrera, a self-proclaimed *santero* who practices the Afro-Cuban religion. "Everything we had here was given to us, the clothes, the job. But it's never easy to leave your country behind."