

Cubans go to street to augment rations

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HAVANA --

Cubans may not have McDonald's or Jack in the Box, but they do have pizza in a basket.

Customers shout orders to a terrace kitchen atop a 1930s-era two-story building and the pizza is lowered to the street in a rattan basket.

Pizza Celina is among the more inventive places that Cubans go for street food to augment government food rations. Elsewhere in Havana, self-employed street vendors hawk peanuts, popcorn and a snack known as "chicharrones de macarones" - macaroni pork rinds - made by boiling pasta, drying it the sun, then frying it.

Near the University of Havana, students line up at lunchtime outside a building with peeling pink paint to shout orders for pizza with tomato sauce and cheese for 8 pesos, which is about 38 cents. A little bit more buys a ham or sausage topping.

Minutes later, a basket on a rope drops for payment. Money collected, the basket comes down again, bearing hot pizzas, grease soaking through butcher paper wrapping. There is no soda, or napkins.

The basket-on-a-rope delivery method is popular among those who share and sell goods in apartment buildings without working elevators.

"We come here because it's good, it's fast and it's cheap," said Laura, a 20-year-old history student. Like many Cubans, she wouldn't give a last name, uncomfortable talking with a foreign reporter about an issue as political as food.

She said she often eats for less money at the university cafeteria, but the food there isn't as good as at the privately run Pizza Celina.

"This is a bit expensive for us but we come when we can," she said. A recent increase in the monthly government stipend for students, from 20 to 50 pesos (about \$1 to \$2.50), means she can now afford to visit the pizzeria once a month.

Laura lives on the other side of Havana, and it's impractical to go home to eat. There are few nearby places to buy cheap food, save for a nearly empty state-run vegetarian restaurant. "I've never gone in there," Laura says.

The only thing close to a fast-food chain in Cuba is the state-run Rapidito or the food counter at Cupet gas stations, which both sell hot dogs and fried chicken most Cubans cannot afford because they are priced in the "convertible pesos" used by foreigners.

Government workers are paid in regular pesos, which trade at about 24 to the convertible peso or 21 to the U.S. dollar. A Rapidito hot dog at 1 convertible peso costs more than a day's pay for a Cuban earning a typical monthly salary of 350 pesos (\$16.60).

Under the communist country's 45-year-old universal ration system, Cubans get a heavily subsidized monthly food basket of beans, rice, potatoes, eggs, a little meat and other goods. That, along with other subsidized meals such as workplace lunches, provides about two-thirds of the 3,300 calories the government estimates Cubans eat daily.

Cubans use their salaries and any other income to buy the rest of their food at farmers markets and overpriced supermarkets or through black market purchases and trades.

If they have enough money, or no way to get home for lunch, Havana residents go to the street for low-priced snacks. That often means bustling Obispo Street, the capital's largest concentration of stands and vendors selling food for pesos.

Elderly men walk down the cobblestone street hawking 1-peso (5-cent) paper cones of raw peanuts, clutched like floral bouquets.

A teenage boy at a weathered wooden cart asks 2 pesos for "granizados," small plastic cups of ice drizzled with strawberry-flavored syrup. Another vendor sells homemade popcorn in plastic bags for 3 pesos.

Many street vendors are licensed, and the government runs storefront stands selling pizzas, hot dogs and pork burgers for 10 pesos. And government stands offer a cold glass of "guarapo," or sugar cane juice, for 1 peso.

Similar foods are sold at Obispo's "tencen" - poorly stocked government shops that evolved from American-style five-and-ten stores of the 1950s and whose nickname is an adaptation of "10 cents."

The "tencen" are among the few places Cubans can buy food and other items in the national currency they earn. The shops also have lunch counters serving fried chicken or pork steak and a bakery offering sugary cookies.

Then there is the "frozen," a 1-peso cone filled with a smooth, cold vanilla mixture with a synthetic taste - a snack sold at the "tencen" and government storefront windows.

Just a block away, a convertible peso store sells imported frozen treats made from dairy products most Cubans cannot afford. There, the Nestle's Crunch chocolate ice cream bar is 1.10 convertible pesos - about 26 regular pesos, or \$1.20.