

A Flavor of the Past

All that's left is water. Water, the element that once made Miami a desirable destination, is the same element that has turned it into nothing more than an aquatic wasteland. Miami Beach was completely demolished by higher category level hurricanes, the only structures left standing are barren concrete buildings that no longer house human life but instead marine life and what today are called the mangrove shelters. The "flood-proof" roads have become the ocean, the neon hotel signs have forever lost their light and vacancy is eternal, traffic is frozen in time as the cars are still there but they never advance.

In the year 2019, my grandmother's high school and many other public places participated in an initiative to plant mangroves around the community. Her generation had an idea of what was going to occur but they never had anticipated this much damage. These mangroves saved the population, I was born and raised in the high school mangrove shelter. As said before, cars became useless and kayaks became the main mode of transportation. As a child, my grandmother would take me in her kayak and show me the buildings of her youth and on those trips, she'd tell stories of the past.

My grandmother would talk about the melting pot that Miami was as if culture and tradition no longer existed in her eyes. She'd remind herself of how she took her heritage for granted in her adolescence. What I found most fascinating was her memories of the restaurant, Versailles. Versailles, she'd tell me was located in the heart of Cuban Miami, la Calle Ocho, or also known as 8th Street. There would usually be a wait to be seated and in the meantime, she'd say you could hear the viejitos (elderly men) arguing about Cuban politics while drinking Coladas at the stand outside the bakery located a few feet away from the restaurant's entrance. If she were still here today, I think she'd smile at the fact that viejitos are now arguing pointlessly on kayaks to keep the tradition alive. She'd talk about the raucous voices filling up the salons from floor to ceiling, incessant chatter about chisme (gossip) or the celebration of birthdays, anniversaries, etc. "Smell would be the second sense hit" she'd exclaim, "smells similar to Abuela's kitchen". The sweet aroma of plantains and the hearty smell of oxtail or pulled pork coming from every which way, her mouth would water at that description. In the years after the catastrophes, flavor wasn't a necessity, survival was. It has taken us a long time to adapt but we are finally in a stable place. Grandma would continue to describe Versailles, a color palette of emerald and silver with golden-toned lighting, every salon marvelously mirrored. She could recall the feeling of the white table cloths and the laminated menus and would shed a tear at the memory of every meal she had had there.

I recently visited where the restaurant once stood but now there is no chatter, the smells have long floated away, and the mirrors are shattered yet the culture has not gone away. We are rebuilding the life there was before. Institutions have been preserved thanks to the help of our relatives. If my grandma could see us today, she'd be amazed at the progress made but I know in her heart she'd still long for a taste of fried plantains.