

# Eating ■

Habana Vieja	111
Centro Habana	116
Vedado	118
Playa & Marianao	122
Eastern Habana	126
Outer Habana	127

Habana is not renowned for its cuisine and, although the food here isn't universally awful, don't bank on it being a highlight of your trip. Fifty years of austerity, rationing and on-off food shortages has left most of the city's state-controlled restaurants stumped for ingredients and starved of creativity. And, with a lack of any real incentive to perform, the service often isn't that much better.

There are, of course, some welcome exceptions to this rule. Habana Vieja has a growing clutch of attractive government-run restaurants set up by the City Historian's Office, Habaguanex, with the palates of foreign visitors in mind, while Playa and Vedado boast a plethora of inviting and gastronomically adventurous paladares (privately run restaurants; p124). If you want to excite your taste buds and try something a bit different, these are the places to head.

See p17 for information about food in Habana.

## Opening Hours

As a general rule, most restaurants are open 10:30am to 11pm daily. Paladares tend to open at noon and stay open a little later, often until midnight.

## How Much

In Cuba simple street food and light lunchtime snacks are normally relatively cheap, as long as you steer clear of the main tourist hubs (or any bar associated with the late, great Ernest Hemingway). Real aficionados can even swap

### PRICE GUIDE

The price symbols in this chapter indicate the price of a two-course meal for one person, excluding drinks.

\$\$\$	over CUC\$15
\$\$	CUC\$8-15
\$	under CUC\$8

## Booking Tables

Booking tables is only necessary in the evenings at the more popular paladares where space is limited. Reservations are recommended at Paladar La Guarida (p118) in Centro Habana, Paladar El Hurón Azul (p121) and Paladar Gringo Viejo (p121) in Vedado, and any of the half-dozen or so paladares in Playa and Miramar.

## Tipping

Remembering to tip is important in Cuba where leaving a couple of convertibles in the bread basket at the end of the meal can effectively make or break a person's week. As most Cubans earn their salaries (the equivalent of US\$10 to US\$25 a month) in Cuban pesos, access to hard currency is vital in order to make up the shortfall. However mediocre your food, a convertible or two isn't just a show of appreciation; it's a vital contribution to the local economy.

In Cuba, a 10% tip is usually sufficient, with CUC\$1 being the appropriate minimum in a restaurant that accepts convertibles. Tipping in peso restaurants is not compulsory, but is greatly appreciated. Leaving 10 pesos or CUC\$0.50 in convertibles is a generous tip.

## Groceries

You're rarely spoiled for choice in Habana's uninspiring grocery stores. Certainly don't expect the jam-packed supermarket shelves that you might be familiar with back home. Imported goods such as pasta and cereal are often hard to come by and fresh produce – while organically grown and relatively abundant – is normally only seasonal.

The best-stocked grocery store in Habana Vieja is **Harris Brothers** (Map p220; O'Reilly No 526; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat), which sells everything from fresh pastries to diapers.

Supermarkets in Centro Habana include **Almacenes Ultra** (Map p222; Av Simón Bolívar No 109; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun), **La Época** (Map p222; cnr Av de Italia & Neptuno; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) and **Supermercado Isla de Cuba** (Map p222; cnr Máximo Gómez & Factoría; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun).

In Vedado **Supermercado Meridiano** (Map pp224-5; Galerías de Paseo, cnr Calle 1 & Paseo; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sun) has a good wine and liquor selection, and rather overpriced bread.

**Supermercado 70** (Map pp228-9; cnr Calle 70 & Av 3; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun), in Playa, is still known as the 'Diplomercado' from the days when you had to show a foreign passport to be able to shop here; it's gigantic and has a large selection. There is also a row of simple restaurant kiosks facing the supermarket.

See p112 for Habana's best agropecuarios.

## HABANA VIEJA

What it lacks in quality paladares, Habana Vieja makes up for in wonderfully atmospheric and meticulously restored government-run restaurants. Housed in old colonial buildings and offering such (relatively) adventurous culinary alternatives as pasta, pizza and Moroccan tagine, these places have an ambience that is invariably excellent, even if the food isn't quite cordon bleu standard.

**AL MEDINA** Map p220 Middle Eastern \$

☎ 867-1041; Oficinos No 12, btwn Obrapia & Obispo;

☎ noon-midnight

Habana takes on Middle Eastern cuisine in one of the city's oldest and most architecturally engaging Mudéjar buildings. Tucked into a beautiful patio off Calle Oficinos, Al Medina is where you can dine like a Moroccan sheik on lamb couscous (CUC\$10) and chicken tagine (CUC\$5) with a spicy twist. It's especially recommended for its massive veggie platter that comes with hummus, tabouleh, dolmas, pilaf and falafel.

### CAFÉ DE LAS INFUSIONES

Map p220 Café \$

Mercaderes btwn Obispo & Obrapia; ☎ 8am-11pm Wedged into Calle Mercaderes, this recently restored Habaguanex coffeehouse is a caffeine addict's heaven and boasts a wonderful resident pianist. Fancier than the Café Habano and more comprehensive

### HABANA VIEJA TOP FIVE

- Restaurante La Dominica (p115)
- Museo del Chocolate (p113)
- Mesón de la Flota (p114)
- Café de las Infusiones (left)
- Al Medina (left)

than the Escorial, here you can order more than a dozen different cuppas, including Irish coffee (CUC\$3.50), punch coffee (CUC\$5), mocha (CUC\$1) and cappuccino (CUC\$1.75).

**CAFÉ EL ESCORIAL** Map p220 Café \$

☎ 868-3545; Mercaderes No 317; ☎ 9am-9pm Habana Vieja's newest coffee bar is housed in a finely restored colonial mansion on the corner of Plaza Vieja and serves some of the best caffeine infusions in the city. Aside from *café cubana* (strong, sweet black coffee), *café con leche* (strong coffee with hot milk) and an eye-wateringly strong Cuban espresso, you can get frappés, coffee liquor and even a *daiquiri de café* (coffee daiquiri) here. There's also a small selection of sweet pastries.

**CAFÉ HABANO** Map p220 Café \$

A gritty, no-nonsense coffee bar on Calle Mercaderes, frequented mainly by Cubans, the Habano serves sweet, strong early-morning *café cubana* that gets plunked

## HABANA'S BEST AGROPECUARIOS

Agropecuarios are free-enterprise markets where farmers sell their surplus produce to private consumers (after selling a set quota to the state). They are not to be confused with organopónicos, which are urban vegetable gardens run by local community groups that sell organic produce from small on-site kiosks.

Agros are not only good for buying raw, fresh foods; they are also handy for getting Cuban pesos (every large market has a change booth), *cajitas* (full meals of salad, baked vegetables, rice flecked with black beans, and pork cutlets sold in little take-away boxes), fresh meat, bread, cut flowers and other natural products such as herbs, honey, spices and beeswax candles. Every market also has a *protección de consumidor* section with a scale where you can weigh what you've purchased. Go here if you think you've been ripped off (a merchant caught three times cheating is booted from the market). Most markets are closed Monday.

The following are some of Habana's biggest agropecuarios:

**Agropecuario Calle 17 & K** (Map pp224-5; Calle 17 & K, Vedado) A 'capped' market; prices are set by the government, so they're cheap, but selection is limited.

**Agropecuario Calles 19 & A** (Map pp224-5; Calle 19 btwn Calles A & B, Vedado) Habana's 'gourmet' market, with cauliflower, fresh herbs and rarer produce during shoulder seasons; prices reflect the selection.

**Agropecuario Calles 21 & J** (Map pp224-5; cnr Calles 21 & J, Vedado) Good selection, including potted plants; watch for overcharging.

**Agropecuario Sol** (Map p220; Sol btwn Habana & Compostela, Habana Vieja) A compact, well-stocked market with decent variety.

**Mercado Agropecuario Egido** (Map p222; Av de Bélgica btwn Corrales & Apodaca, Centro Habana) A gigantic market; the action is over by 2pm.

**Organopónico Plaza** (Map pp224-5; cnr Av de Colón & Panorama, Plaza) One of Habana's biggest organic farms with a retail market.

**Plaza de Mariano** (Map pp228-9; Av 51 & Calle 124, Mariano) Friendly local market with produce downstairs, and flowers and plants upstairs. Head east up Av 51 for amazingly varied peso shopping.

down straight in front of you on the bar. Don't expect anything fancy here – like, um, milk.

**CAFÉ O'REILLY** Map p220 Cuban \$  
O'Reilly No 203; ☎ 11am-3am

The O'Reilly is a good-old-fashioned 'spit-and-sawdust' café that sells drinks and snacks morning, noon and night. The bar is spread over two floors connected by a spiral staircase, with most of the action taking place upstairs. Grab an O'Reilly special sandwich (CUC\$3) and a beer, and listen out for the roaming troubadours.

**CAFÉ SANTO DOMINGO** Café \$  
Map p220 Obispo No 159; ☎ 9am-9pm

Nestled above a popular bakery, the Santo Domingo is an easy-to-miss café-restaurant that knocks up simple tasty snacks – fast! There are excellent sandwiches and creamy fruit shakes, and you can also grab a few pastries from the patisserie downstairs to enjoy with your coffee.

**CAFETERÍA TORRE LA VEGA** Cuban \$  
Map p220 Obrapia No 114a; ☎ 9am-9pm

A travelers' staple in the heart of Habana Vieja, Torre La Vega is the perfect place to catch a quick lunch while you're exploring the sights and sounds of intimate Calle Obrapia. Most tables are alfresco and there's a pleasant little park directly opposite where customers can sit and relax. Large bowls of spaghetti, pork, chicken and *ropa vieja* (shredded beef with tomatoes and onions) go for CUC\$3 or less, and while the food's not gourmet, it's a palatable snack in between sightseeing stops.

**LA BARRITA** Map p220 Cuban \$  
Edificio Bacardí, Av de las Misiones; ☎ 9am-7pm

If you're keen to stick your nose inside one of Latin America's finest art deco buildings, consider having a snack in this comfortable bar-restaurant on a mezzanine floor just inside the lobby of the illustrious *Edificio Bacardí* (p70). The simple menu churns out standard Cuban staples such as *bocadito*

*de queso* (cheese sandwich) but, with its leather chairs, friendly waiters and polished mahogany bar, there's oodles of old-world ambience to be had here. Sample one of the bar's many rum cocktails.

**MUSEO DEL CHOCOLATE** Café \$  
Map p220

**cnr Amargura & Mercaderes; ☎ 9am-8pm**  
Chocolate addicts beware. This quirky 'museum' in the heart of Habana Vieja offers a lethal dose of chocolate, chocolate and yet more chocolate. (And it's all made on the premises too.) Situated – with no irony intended – on the corner of narrow Calle Amargura (Bitterness St), this venerable sweet-toothed establishment is actually more a café than a museum, with a small cluster of marble tables set among an interesting assortment of chocolate paraphernalia. Not surprisingly everything on the delicious menu contains one all-pervading ingredient – have it hot, cold, white, dark, rich, or smooth, the stuff is divine whatever way you choose.

**RESTAURANTE HANOI** Cuban \$  
Map p220

☎ 867-1029; cnr Brasil & Bernaza; ☎ noon-11pm  
The name might be demonstrating solidarity with formerly communist Vietnam, but the food certainly isn't. Straight-up Cuban cuisine with a couple of fried rice dishes thrown in for good measure characterize this old-town favorite, which mixes Cuban clientele with a liberal smattering of travelers with their noses in their Lonely Planets. Set meals of chicken and pork start at CUC\$3, the tasty paella goes for CUC\$6.50, while the lobster (which the waiter will probably tell you is the house special) is a hefty CUC\$12.

**RESTAURANTE PUERTO DE SAGUA** Seafood \$  
Map p220

☎ 867-1026; Av de Bélgica No 603; ☎ noon-midnight  
Restaurante Puerto de Sagua is a nautical-themed eating joint in Habana Vieja's grittier southern quarter. It's characterized by its small porthole-style windows and serves mostly seafood at reasonable prices (CUC\$5 to CUC\$8). The jacketed waiters are courteous and friendly.

**BAR-RESTAURANTE CABAÑA** Cuban \$\$  
Map p220

☎ 860-5670; Tacón; ☎ 11am-midnight  
A longtime favorite with Habana bus drivers on the run to and from Varadero, the Cabaña is an unfussy Habaguanex place with alfresco seating and pleasant views across the harbor to the eastern forts. Main dishes highlight beef and come in fairly modest portions; they include *filet de res* (beef fillet; CUC\$5.50) and *filet mignon* (CUC\$8.50). There's a bar with a karaoke machine upstairs.

**EL CAFÉ MERCURIO** International \$\$  
Map p220

☎ 860-6188; Lonja del Comercio, Plaza de San Francisco de Asís; ☎ 24hr  
El Café Mercurio is an elegant indoor-outdoor café-restaurant with cappuccino machines, air-conditioning, intimate booths, smooth marble finishes and waiters in black ties. You can get decent main dishes here such as lobster and steak tartare, but it's also a great place for lunch or a snack. The formidable Cuban sandwich with ham, cheese and pork (CUC\$4.50) will easily keep you going until dinnertime. There are also some great desserts.

**EL SANTO ANGEL** Map p220 Cuban \$\$  
☎ 862-0617; cnr Brasil & San Ignacio;

☎ noon-midnight  
Often overlooked by restaurant-seeking travelers, El Santo Angel – which is situated in a gorgeous colonial house on Plaza Vieja's northwest corner – specializes in seafood, offering such dishes as *langosta mariposa* (butterflied lobster; CUC\$27), as well as fish in green sauce, and fish with roasted almonds, prawns and vinaigrette (both CUC\$10). It's a lovely spot to watch the goings-on in the square.

**LA MINA** Map p220 Cuban \$\$  
☎ 862-0216; Obispo No 109, btwn Oficios & Mercaderes; ☎ 24hr

Despite a rather mediocre menu, La Mina has always been a popular place for travelers thanks to its privileged position on the corner of Plaza de Armas. The building itself, which is of great historical value, used to be a girl's school and was one of the first structures in the old town to get the City Historian's makeover. The varied menu,

displayed on a stand in the street outside, contains chicken, pork and prawns cooked in a variety of ways, and the prices, which range from CUC\$7 to CUC\$10, are perfectly respectable. Once you've finished, there's a tempting **heladería** (ice-cream parlor) around the corner in Calle Oficios.

## LA TORRE DE MARFIL

Map p220 Chinese \$\$  
 ☎ 867-1038; Mercaderes No 111, btwn Obispo & Obrapia; ☎ noon-10pm Mon-Thu, noon-midnight Fri-Sun

Often dubbed Habana's best Chinese restaurant (though the chefs in Calle Cuchillo might disagree), this place, with its beaming waiters and bubbling fish tank, always seems to be at least three-quarters empty. But don't let the vacant tables put you off. The chop suey and chow mein plates – when they arrive – are huge, and the vegetables unusually fresh and crisp. After the hustle and bustle of the Barrio Chino (Chinatown) restaurants, the Torre feels infinitely quieter and more discreet.

## LA ZARAGOZANA

Map p220 Cuban, Spanish \$\$  
 ☎ 867-1040; Av de Bélgica btwn Obispo & Obrapia; ☎ noon-midnight

Established in 1830, La Zaragozana is Habana's oldest restaurant – though it's a long way from being its best. Behind its well-varnished wooden doors in noisy Av de Bélgica (Egido and Monserrate) lies an ample (and often deserted looking) seating area, plus what must be one of the city's longest bars. The Spanish-themed food – which includes the obligatory paella – is OK, but the ambience, amid assorted Iberian flags and memorabilia, can be a little dark and gloomy.

## MESÓN DE LA FLOTA

Map p220 Cuban, Spanish \$\$  
 ☎ 863-3838; Mercaderes btwn Amargura & Brasil; ☎ noon-midnight

Hotel, restaurant, bar, musicfest... is there no end to the Mesón de la Flota's talents? The primary reason to come to this venerable old coaching inn on cobbled Calle Mercaderes is for the masterful **flamenco shows** (p131), but on top of its well-known musical credentials, the Mesón can also churn out a mean dinner. The house specialty is tapas, with plenty of tasty options, including calamari,

garlic mushrooms, *tortilla* (potato omelet) and fried chickpeas with chorizo (CUC\$2 to CUC\$3 per plate), but there are also some excellent main courses too.

## PALADAR LA JULIA

Map p220 Cuban \$\$  
 ☎ 862-7438; O'Reilly No 506A btwn Bernaza & Villegas; ☎ noon-midnight

With an abundance of top government-run restaurants to choose from, Habana Vieja is something of a letdown in terms of paladares. Best of a meager bunch is the longstanding La Julia, an inconspicuous yet homely place wedged into a small downstairs room on Calle O'Reilly. The house specialty is pork with all the trimmings for approximately CUC\$10.

## PALADAR LA MULATA DEL SABOR

Map p220 Cuban \$\$  
 ☎ 867-5984; Sol No 153; ☎ noon-midnight

This OK paladar is hidden away behind Plaza Vieja on the corner of Sol and San Ignacio. The decor inside is quirky and the food refreshingly tasty; it includes plenty of egg-based vegetarian options. It's worth a turn if you've been overdosing on historic Habaguanex restaurants and want some authentic home cooking.

## RESTAURANTE EL CASTILLO DE FARNÉS

Map p220 Spanish \$\$  
 ☎ 867-1030; Av de Bélgica No 361; ☎ noon-midnight

Advertising itself as a Spanish-orientated restaurant (it was founded by a Catalan), El Castillo de Farnés has average food, with house specialties such as chickpeas and chorizo lacking the bite of the versions at Restaurante La Paella or the Mesón de la Flota; suffice to say it's usually busy. The varied seafood menu is in the CUC\$7 to CUC\$20 price range. Next door, the **sidewalk bar** that sits alongside traffic-choked Av de Bélgica is OK for a beer, although the car fumes can sometimes be asphyxiating.

## RESTAURANTE EL PATIO

Map p220 Cuban \$\$  
 ☎ 867-1034/5; San Ignacio No 54; ☎ restaurant noon-midnight, terrace 24hr

Possibly one of the most romantic settings on planet Earth when the hustlers stay

away, the mint stalks in your mojito are pressed to perfection and the band breaks spontaneously into your favorite tune, this place on the Plaza de la Catedral must be experienced at least once in the course of your Habana visit. Housed in the splendid **Palacio de los Marqueses de Aguas Claras** (p76), a onetime Spanish governor's mansion, El Patio relies more on its setting than its food, which isn't on a par with other less atmospheric places. But, for romantics, that's not the point. Anyone who wants to connect in any way with the dreamy essence of historic Habana Vieja should enjoy at least one drink at an alfresco table here.

## RESTAURANTE LA DOMINICA

Map p220 Italian \$\$  
 ☎ 860-2918; O'Reilly No 108; ☎ noon-midnight

Despite its tendency to be a little overgenerous with the olive oil, La Dominica – with its wood-fired pizza oven and al dente pasta – could quite legitimately stake its claim as Habana's finest Italian restaurant. Located in an elegantly restored establishment on Calle O'Reilly, the restaurant offers everything from spaghetti and pizza (CUC\$5 to CUC\$7) to shrimp and lobster (CUC\$10 to CUC\$18). Professional bands serenade diners with music that occasionally departs from the obligatory Buena Vista Social Club staples.

## RESTAURANTE LA PAELLA

Map p220 Spanish \$\$  
 ☎ 867-1037; cnr Oficios & Obrapia; ☎ noon-11pm

Attached to the rustic Hostal Valencia, the theme of this classic Habaguanex restaurant is that great Valencian gift to the culinary world – paella. Though popular elsewhere in Habana, the Spanish rice concoctions here are generally considered to be the city's best, and come in six different varieties ranging in price from CUC\$8 to CUC\$15. Decorated with plenty of Mediterranean greens and yellows, and continuing the old-world Spanish theme that characterizes the adjoining hotel, the restaurant has a very special ambience.

## CAFÉ DEL ORIENTE

Map p220 French \$\$\$  
 ☎ 860-6686; Oficios No 112; ☎ noon-11pm

Forget the 'café' title – this place is no wannabe Starbucks. In fact, you'll have to pinch

yourself to remember you're still in Cuba when you enter the doors of the confusingly named **Café del Oriente** restaurant on breezy Plaza de San Francisco de Asís. Firstly there's the fancy decor, which includes marble floors, an ornate plaster ceiling, mahogany paneling, a resident pianist (or string quartet) and powerful air-conditioning. Then there's the menu, a culinary extravaganza that includes smoked salmon, caviar (yes, caviar!), goose-liver pâté, lobster thermidor, *steak au poivre* (pepper steak), cheese and port. To top it all, service comes in a tux. There's just the small problem of the price, which starts at around CUC\$14 and maxes out in the CUC\$40 bracket...but what the hell!

## EL TEMPLETE

Map p220 Seafood \$\$\$  
 cnr San Pedro & Narciso López; ☎ 11am-midnight

This upscale restaurant opened in late 2004 and is situated less than 100m from its namesake temple, where the city of Habana was founded in 1519. Overlooking the harbor, the eating space is split into two halves: an outdoor alfresco area accommodated under a large awning, and a pleasant indoor dining room with starched tablecloths and expensive-looking wine glasses. For once the food quality lives up to the pretensions of the fancy decor, with seafood specialties spearheaded by shrimps and lobster. Count on forking out CUC\$15 minimum for a main course here.

## LA BODEGUITA DEL MEDIO

Map p220 Cuban \$\$\$  
 ☎ 867-1374; Empedrado No 207; ☎ noon-midnight

Habana's most celebrated restaurant is a cramped and markedly overrated eating establishment that was a relatively low-key bar until a certain Ernest Hemingway starting drinking here in the late 1930s. Reinventing itself from a seedy, bohemian drinking dive, La Bodeguita del Medio is now ground zero for the snap-happy tour bus crowd, with sightseers coming here in their droves to down a few icy mojitos and scrawl their signatures on the wall alongside those of illustrious visitors such as Nat King Cole, Salvador Allende and Harry Belafonte. The menu specialty is *comida criolla* (rice, beans and pork) – the full monty, Cuban style.

# CENTRO HABANA

Many of Centro Habana's best restaurants are clustered around Parque Central and Paseo de Martí (Prado), although visitors shouldn't overlook the growing clutch of Chinese places over on narrow Calle Cuchillo. Further west on Calle Concordia is the exquisite Paladar La Guarida, arguably one of the finest eating establishments in the city.

## ASOCIACIÓN CANARIA DE CUBA

Map p222 Cuban \$  
☎ 862-5284; Av de las Misiones No 258 btwn Neptuno & Animas; ☎ noon-8:30pm Wed-Sun  
One of a number of Spanish social clubs that serve food, the Asociación Canaria de Cuba, behind the Hotel Plaza, is housed in a venerable red-bricked building with a rather fancy lobby. By contrast the restaurant upstairs is a far more basic affair with strip lighting, plastic flowers and crummy tablecloths. But for regulars, the ambience is only secondary – the main reason to come here is for the food. The grilled lobster for CUC\$6.50 is one of the city's biggest bargains; add in shrimp enchiladas for CUC\$5, and beef stew or pork steak for CUC\$2, and you're laughing all the way to the change booth.

## EL GRAN DRAGON

Map p222 Chinese \$  
☎ 861-5396; Cuchillo No 1 btwn Rayo & Zanja; ☎ 11am-midnight  
First on the left as you enter Calle Cuchillo from Calle Zanja, this is as good an introduction as any to the energetic pulse of Habana's Barrio Chino (p81). Specialties include wonton soup, chop suey, chow mein and fried rice, and the prices come in at less than CUC\$5 a dish; it's a good place for vegetarians. The restaurant is spread over three floors and has alfresco dining options.

## FERIA LOS FORNOS

Map p222 Cuban \$  
☎ 861-5924; Neptuno btwn Paseo de Martí & Consulado; ☎ 24hr  
Shoehorned behind a clothes shop on Calle Neptuno, where tourist Habana meets the gritty reality of bustling Centro, Los Fornos is cheap, simple and usually open. Beyond that pickings are thin, unless you're keen to see what 45 years of rationing has done to Cuban cooking.

## CENTRO HABANA TOP FIVE

- Paladar La Guarida (p118)
- Los Nardos (below)
- Restaurante Tien-Tan (opposite)
- Los Portales (below)
- Prado y Neptuno (p118)

## LOS GIJONÉS

Map p222 Cuban \$  
Paseo de Martí No 309; ☎ noon-midnight  
A good restaurant run by the Asturianas Society, Los Gijonés is situated upstairs in a dark mahogany dining room in the Centro Asturianos on Paseo de Martí and Virtudes. The *ropa vieja* with rice, potatoes and salad (CUC\$5) is tasty here, as are the prawns. Service is a little slow, but there's a charming resident violinist who'll keep you entertained with some wonderfully melancholy renditions of Mozart and Vivaldi.

## LOS NARDOS

Map p222 Cuban \$  
☎ 863-2985; Paseo de Martí No 563; ☎ noon-midnight  
Directly opposite the Capitolio but easy to miss, Los Nardos has been in operation since 2002 and is one of a handful of semi-private Habana restaurants operated by the Spanish Asturianas society; there is another restaurant called Los Asturianitos (☎ noon-midnight) in the same building. Touted in some quarters as one of the best eateries in the city, this unprepossessing but well-designed property is decked out in cedar, mahogany and leather, and serves up such astoundingly delicious dishes as lobster in a Catalan sauce, garlic prawns with sautéed vegetables and authentic Spanish paella. Portions are huge and the prices, which start at CUC\$3 to CUC\$4 for chicken and pork dishes, are unbelievably cheap.

## LOS PORTALES

Map p222 International \$  
☎ 860-8583; Hotel Plaza, Agramonte No 267; ☎ noon-10pm  
The primary – nay only – reason to come to this ground-floor restaurant in the four-star Hotel Plaza is for the pizza, which – rather surprisingly – is among the best and cheapest in Habana. Don't be put off by the restaurant's fancy decor (the tables and chairs look as if they've been decked out for a wedding) – the prices here are very reasonable. A decent pizza with one or two

extra toppings shouldn't cost you more than CUC\$4. The *flan* (baked custard with caramel glaze) makes for a nice dessert.

## PALADAR AMISTAD DE LANZAROTE

Map p222 Cuban \$  
☎ 863-6172; Amistad No 211 btwn Neptuno & San Miguel; ☎ noon-midnight  
Paladar Amistad de Lanzarote charges CUC\$6 for most meals. The portions are large, the staff speak English, and you can enjoy your pork and rice amid the cheerful clutter of crowded Centro Habana.

## PASTERLERÍA FRANCESA

Map p222 Café \$  
Paseo de Martí No 411; ☎ 9am-11pm  
With a great location among the five-star hotels, this place sells delicious pastries, sturdy sandwiches and OK coffee. The swarming *jinetas* (women who attach themselves to male foreigners for monetary or material gain) spoil the French flavor a little and the service is slow, but for convenience it can't be beaten.

## RANCHO COQUITO

Map p222 Cuban \$  
Malecón No 107 btwn Genios & Crespo; ☎ 6pm-midnight  
At last, a decent restaurant on the Malecón (Av de Maceo). Run by the Spanish Asturianas society, the Rancho is an unpretentious and inconspicuous food joint (look for the waiter posted outside) that overlooks Habana's dreamy 8km sea drive and is frequented mainly by Cubans. Hidden upstairs with a balcony containing outdoor seating that looks out over the wild and tempestuous Straits of Florida, the restaurant serves food that is both tasty and unbelievably cheap. Paella goes for CUC\$7, *garbanzos fritos* (fried chickpeas) for CUC\$5, *tortilla* for CUC\$3 and a reasonably sized portion of lobster pan-fried in butter for a mere CUC\$6.

## RESTAURANTE OASIS

Map p222 Cuban \$  
☎ 863-3829; Paseo de Martí No 256; ☎ 2pm-3am  
The Oasis is housed in the Centro Cultural de Arabe, but don't be fooled by the Middle Eastern myth. The food here is bog-standard Cuban, and not particularly good at that – unless you have a penchant for dodgy hot dogs or soggy sandwiches – but it's the kind of place where's you'll see Cubans eating, and it makes no provision for 'Western'

palates. The shop downstairs is handy for late-night groceries, but the weekend disco is a *jinetas*-fest.

## RESTAURANTE TIEN-TAN

Map p222 Chinese \$  
☎ 861-5478; Calle Cuchillo No 17, btwn Zanja & San Nicolás; ☎ 11am-11pm  
One of the Barrio Chino's best authentic Chinese restaurants, Tien-Tan (Temple of Heaven) is a Cuban institution run by a Chinese-Cuban couple that offers diners an astounding 130 different dishes. With such a complex and varied menu you might have thought that a) you would be in for a long wait, and b) the food would, at best, be average, but thankfully neither is the case. Service is lightening fast and the food – which includes crispy vegetables and real Chinese sauces – is tasty. Try chop suey with vegetables or chicken with cashew nuts, and sit outside in action-packed Cuchillo, one of Habana's most colorful and fastest-growing food streets.

## VEJELO AMIGO (LOU PANG YAU)

Map p222 Chinese \$  
☎ 861-8095; Dragones No 356 btwn Manrique & San Nicolás; ☎ noon-midnight  
Situated in a large upstairs room in Calle Dragones, Viejo Amigo wins plenty of kudos for decor, with waitresses in Chinese-style dresses and a large painting of Sun Yat Sen hung reverently on the wall. The downside is the menu, which is a little limited, particularly when compared to some of the Cuchillo joints nearby. As if to make amends, portions sizes are absolutely huge. Fortunately the staff will box up any leftovers for you to take away afterwards.

## CENTRO ANDALUZ

Map p222 Spanish \$  
☎ 863-6745; Paseo de Martí No 104 btwn Genios & Refugio; ☎ 8-11pm Tue-Sun  
Another Spanish social club with a restaurant, the Centro Andaluz resembles an old 19th-century Andalusian flamenco bar, with a chipped wooden stage, equally chipped *azulejos* (glazed tiles) and soulful music. The center serves reasonable meals, including a house paella for two, various fish dishes, and pork fillets with rice and beans, and you can see good flamenco dancing (p131) here most evenings. Opening times can be a little sporadic.

## PALADAR BELLAMAR

Map p222 Cuban \$\$

☎ 861-0023; Virtudes No 169; 🕒 noon-10pm  
A friendly family-run paladar, this tiny eating joint is squeezed into a front room that looks out onto the street. Inside the walls have been scribbled on, Bodeguita del Medio style, with the comments and signatures of customers past. However, unlike its more famous culinary cohort, the Bellamar is usually deserted. This is a shame considering the food (which includes classic chicken, pork and fish dishes) is rather tasty and starts at a very reasonable CUC\$6 a plate.

## PALADAR DOÑA BLANQUITA

Map p222 Cuban \$\$

Paseo de Martí No 158 btwn Colón & Refugio;

🕒 noon-midnight

Paladar Doña Blanca overlooks Paseo de Martí and is one of Centro Habana's best-placed paladares. On entry, you'll be handed a proper typewritten menu listing main plates in the CUC\$7 to CUC\$9 range. You can dine in the elegant salon or on the pleasant terrace overlooking the promenade.

## PALADAR TORRESSÓN

Map p222 Cuban \$\$

Malecón No 27; 🕒 noon-midnight

Situated at the eastern end of the Malecón with a great view of the Castillo de los Tres Santos Reyes Magos del Morro, the Paladar Torressón takes up the 2nd floor of a suitably dilapidated seafront tenement. Complete meals of meat or fish cost between CUC\$10 and CUC\$15, but the views are free and – not surprisingly – stupendous.

## PRADO Y NEPTUNO

Map p222 Italian \$\$

☎ 860-9636; cnr Paseo de Martí & Neptuno;

🕒 noon-5pm & 6:30-11:30pm

The pizza at this Italian-themed restaurant is not nearly Habana's best although, judging by the crowds, you could be forgiven for thinking that the cooks were native Neapolitans. None of this detracts from the restaurant's popularity, however, or its comfortable decor characterized by dark tinted windows, colorful tiles and green ceiling lamps that hang low over the individual tables. Just off Parque Central, the P & N is a good place to escape the hotel

buffet for a night. There's a good selection of Italian wines in the bar.

## PALADAR LA GUARIDA

Map p222 International \$\$\$

☎ 866-9047; Concordia No 418 btwn Gervasio

& Escobar; 🕒 noon-3pm & 7pm-midnight

Located on the top floor of a spectacularly dilapidated Habana tenement, La Guarida's lofty reputation rests on its movie-location setting (*Fresa y Chocolate* was filmed in this building) and a clutch of swashbuckling newspaper reviews (including the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*). The food, as might be expected, is up there with Habana's best, shoeorning its captivating blend of Cuban *nueva cocina* (p18) into dishes such as sea bass in a coconut reduction, and chicken with honey and lemon sauce. Reservations required.

## VEDADO

Better than Centro Habana, but not in the same bracket as Playa and Miramar, Vedado is hit-and-miss in the paladar stakes. Shop around until you find something appetizing. The state-run sector includes two vegetarian restaurants, an Italian trattoria and even a place that specializes in rabbit dishes.

## BIKI VEGETARIAN RESTAURANT

Map pp224-5 Vegetarian \$

☎ 879-6406; cnr Calzada de Infanta & San Lázaro,

🕒 noon-10pm Tue-Sun

This vegetarian buffet that charges in Cuban pesos is one of Habana's more unusual restaurant offerings. Biki has dozens of good selections laid out cafeteria style in easy-to-reach trays; join the line and pick from several fresh juices and salads, veggie paella, fried rice or stuffed peppers, root vegetables and desserts such as rice pudding.

## BIM BOM

Map pp224-5 Ice-Cream Parlor \$

☎ 879-2892; cnr Calzada de Infanta & Calle 23;

🕒 10am-midnight

The famous Coppelia isn't Cuba's only ice-cream institution. Somewhere down the list in the 'not-half-bad' category is *Bim Bom*, an islandwide *helado* (ice cream) chain that serves a deliciously creamy version of the stuff in flavors such as coffee, condensed milk, and rum and raisin. Try it and see.

## CAFÉ TV

Map pp224-5 International \$

☎ 33-44-99; cnr Calles N & 19; 🕒 10am-9pm  
In the bowels of the Focsa building lies one of Habana's best-kept secrets. Café TV is an up-and-coming performance space lauded by those in the know for its hilarious comedy nights, but it's also a cheap and tasty eating option if you're willing to brave the frigid air-conditioning and rather forbidding underground entry tunnel. Head here for fresh burgers (CUC\$2), healthy salad (CUC\$1.50), pasta (CUC\$4) and *Gordon Bleu* (chicken stuffed with ham and cheese; CUC\$5). The tables are laid out simply in a café style, and the walls are adorned with black-and-white Cuban TV and movie memorabilia.

## CAFETERÍA SOFÍA

Map pp224-5 Cuban \$

cnr Calles 23 & 0; 🕒 24hr

The 24-hour Cafetería Sofía is on busy Calle 23 (La Rampa), resulting in an above-average amount of noisy passing trade. It's a cheap, if slightly seedy, central option with regular live music. Look out for the special breakfast offers. The people-watching potential here is excellent.

## COPPELIA

Map pp224-5 Ice-Cream Parlor \$

☎ 832-6184; cnr Calles 23 & L; 🕒 11am-11pm  
To come to Habana and not visit the Coppelía is like going to New York and missing the Empire State Building. Why? Well, firstly, it's a city institution and a fascinating glimpse into the intricacies of everyday Cuban life and, secondly, the ice cream is mouthwateringly delicious. See also p120.

## EL LUGAR

Map pp224-5 Cuban \$

☎ 204-5162; cnr Calles 49C & 28A; 🕒 noon-

midnight  
If you're in leafy Parque Almendares, check out this restaurant, which offers fantastic value. For under CUC\$5 you get a juicy pork filet, a whole heap of *congrí* (rice flecked with black beans), salad, *tostones* (fried plantain patties), ice cream and coffee. There's a talented trio playing nights. The attached pizza place is good too.

## G-CAFÉ

Map pp224-5 Café \$

cnr Calles 23 & G; 🕒 10am-11pm  
This café is the ultimate student hangout, with arty wall drawings and a modernist mural, a patio with lots of greenery, and more than 400 books and magazines to

## VEDADO TOP FIVE

- Restaurante La Torre (p122)
- La Rampa Cafetería (p120)
- Coppelia (left)
- Paladar Le Chansonnier (p122)
- Café TV (left)

read, borrow and buy. As well as deftly concocted mojitos and chunky sandwiches, there is *trova* (traditional poetic singing), jazz and poetry.

## PALMARES CENTRO

Map pp224-5 Cuban \$

cnr Calles 23 & P; 🕒 24hr  
The Palmares group has many incarnations in Cuba – from the internationally lauded *El Aljibe* (p123) in Miramar to greasy little beach barbecues in Santiago and Baracoa. This café on busy Calle 23 falls into the latter category, and is OK if you're desperate for a 2am *perro caliente* (hot dog). Otherwise you're better off satisfying your hunger pangs elsewhere.

## PAN.COM

Map pp224-5 International \$

☎ 53-50-40; cnr Calles 17 & 10; 🕒 10am-2am  
A new Habana fast-food joint with two branches, Pan.com is a great place to find comfort food if you're missing chunky burgers, fresh club sandwiches and authentic French fries. Even the cheese-and-ham sandwiches here are good. The original, better branch is in Miramar (p122).

## RESTAURANTE VEGETARIANO

CARMELO

Map pp224-5 Vegetarian \$

☎ 832-4495; Calzada btwn Calles D & E; 🕒 noon-

midnight Tue-Sun  
This place has the same menu as *Biki* (opposite), but is in a much nicer locale opposite the Teatro Amadeo Roldán, and has patio dining and a full bar. Be careful with overcharging; prices should be in Cuban pesos rather than convertibles.

## CAFÉ CONCERTO EL GATO TUERTO

Map pp224-5 Cuban \$

☎ 66-22-24; Calle 0 No 14 btwn Calles 17 & 19;

🕒 noon-midnight  
Café Concerto El Gato Tuerto (the One-Eyed Cat) is a chic café and bar that hosts

## MAKING CENTS OF COPPELIA

Until you've gone slack jawed watching a young woman with a model's body wolf down nine scoops of ice cream followed by a cake à la mode with childish delight, you haven't eaten at Coppelia (p119). It is truly a cultural phenomenon without equal, and waiting a near eternity to enter the weirdly futuristic but retro halls of this Habana ice-cream institution is an essential part of getting to know Cuba and the Cubans. Loitering around the perimeter, strategically positioned security guards try to usher foreigners toward the Coppelia's sterile convertibles café but, with a little persistence and a few persuasive words in Spanish, there's no reason why you can't join one of the long and seemingly disorganized queues on the periphery of the peso part. Ah...the queues. Hard though it may be to believe, there is a system, which many foreigners don't observe or get. Here's how it works.

There are several entrances to Coppelia, each with their own menu, line and dining area. Diehards cruise the different entrances to see what's on each menu. What the menu says and what's actually on offer once you're inside is another story, but more often than not you'll encounter *fresa y chocolate* (strawberry and chocolate), coconut, banana and orange-pineapple, so it's not just vanilla (though Coppelia's vanilla is luscious). Shout out *¿Quién es último?* (Who is last?) as you approach the line and remember to log the face of whoever is in front of you. Sections are seated all at once, so some 20 people are let in en masse and are shown to their section. A server comes around, tells you what's available, takes your order and brings back the goods. They come around afterward to collect your money. Rainy days are traditionally slow here, so you might minimize wait times by showing up then.

The language of ice-cream love is complex here. Suffice to say, a movie at Cine Yara across the street, followed by a *jimagua* (two scoops of ice cream) at Coppelia is the classic Habana date.

tacked onto the side of the Hotel Habana Libre. Superfast service and surgical cleanliness are second nature here and the nonsense kitchen serves up excellent milk shakes (CUC\$4), filling – and healthy – salads (CUC\$6), a mean club sandwich (CUC\$6) and to-die-for chocolate brownies in hot fudge sauce (CUC\$3). If you just can't handle another mouthful of rice, beans and deep-fried chicken, this is your get-out-of-jail card.

### MESÓN LA CHORRERA

Map pp224-5 Cuban, Spanish \$\$  
☎ 33-45-21; Malecón btwn Calles 18 & 20;  
🕒 noon-2am

The Mesón La Chorrera is in the Torreón de Santa Dorotea de la Chorrera (p89), an old fortified tower that marks the western extremity of the Malecón. The restaurant serves up a Spanish-influenced menu in a unique oceanside setting, and sometimes lays on music.

### PALADAR ARIES

Map pp224-5 Cuban \$\$  
☎ 831-9668; Ave Universidad No 456 btwn Calles J & K; 🕒 noon-midnight

Serving traditional Cuban fare mixed with what are generously referred to as 'international dishes,' this nicely decked-out place in a house dating from 1925 is conveniently located behind the university. There are occasionally wandering troubadours.

### PALADAR DECAMERON

Map pp224-5 Italian \$\$  
☎ 832-2444; Línea No 753 btwn Paseo & Calle 2;  
🕒 noon-midnight

Ugly from the outside but far prettier within, the Decameron is an intimate Italian restaurant where you can order from the varied menu with abandon. Veggie pizza, lasagna bolognese, a sinful *calabaza* (pumpkinlike squash) soup – it's all good. There's a decent wine selection and vegetarians will find heavenly options. Figure on CUC\$10 to CUC\$12 per person.

### PALADAR EL HELECHO

Map pp224-5 Cuban \$\$  
☎ 831-3552; Calle 6 No 203 btwn Línea & Calle 11;  
🕒 noon-10:30pm Wed-Thu

Tucked in a tree-lined side street in western Vedado, this romantic little place is a long-time favorite. The nice atmosphere is complemented by decent prices (around the CUC\$5 mark) and good portions. The food is remarkably tasty; try the chicken soup.

### PALADAR GRINGO VIEJO

Map pp224-5 Cuban \$\$  
☎ 831-1946; Calle 21 No 454 btwn Calles E & F;  
🕒 noon-11pm

Paladar Gringo Viejo offers a good atmosphere and large portions of invariably brilliant food. It has recently reopened after a lengthy refurbishment and appears to have lost none of its culinary creativity.

### PALADAR LOS AMIGOS

Map pp224-5 Cuban \$\$  
Calle M No 253; 🕒 noon-midnight  
Situated in the back of a prerevolutionary house near the Hotel Victoria, Paladar Los Amigos serves good Cuban meals for CUC\$10, including side plates. It is regularly recommended by locals.

**PALADAR NEREI** Map pp224-5 Cuban \$\$  
cnr Calles 19 & L; 🕒 noon-midnight Mon-Fri, 6pm-midnight Sat & Sun

Ah, the Nerei, the only paladar in central Habana where you can get whole roast pig on a spit (or so the owners will tell you). The pluses here are numerous: huge portions (almost too huge), an extensive menu, and a pleasant alfresco seating area arranged around a sleepy veranda that overlooks

quiet(ish) Calle 19. The downside is the price piracy; insist on seeing a written menu first.

### RESTAURANTE 1830

Map pp224-5 Cuban \$\$  
☎ 55-30-90; Calzada No 1252 cnr Calle 20;  
🕒 noon-10pm

One of Habana's most elegant restaurants is this glittering old stalwart, refurbished in 2001. Chandeliers, antique furniture and palacelike table settings are two a penny here, and the food includes duck, pork and chicken in lemon-and-honey sauce (which is rapidly becoming Cuba's gourmet specialty). After the kitchen closes at 10pm, there's live music and salsa dancing in the garden behind the restaurant (don't come on a windy night).

### RESTAURANTE WAKAMBA

Map pp224-5 Cuban \$\$  
☎ 878-4526; Calle 0 btwn Calles 23 & Humboldt;  
🕒 24hr

One of several restaurants in Calle O, the Wakamba has been serving customers since 1956. It is named after an African tribe and subregion in Kenya and, prior to the revolution, it was a famous nightclub. Today it serves good cheap food such as chicken stuffed with ham, chorizo, olives and cheese for approximately CUC\$7. An adjacent *cafeteria* (🕒 24hr) has hot dogs and other snacks.

### TRATTORIA MARAKAS

Map pp224-5 Italian \$\$  
☎ 33-37-40; Calle 0 No 260 btwn Calles 23 & 25;  
🕒 10am-11pm

Don't be put off by the cheap Formica tables and the dodgy map of Italy on the wall; real olive oil, parmesan and mozzarella cheese, plus a wood oven, mean that the pizza in this Italian trattoria is among the city's best. Also on offer are Greek salads, tortellini with red sauce, and spinach-stuffed cannelloni; the menu is long and few items are over CUC\$8.

### PALADAR EL HURÓN AZUL

Map pp224-5 Cuban \$\$\$  
☎ 879-1691; Humboldt No 153; 🕒 noon-midnight  
This place is often touted as one of Habana's best private restaurants and, although the food might be tasty, the windowless

live music (p137) on Fridays and Saturdays. The restaurant upstairs, meanwhile, serves good soup, reasonably priced *ropa vieja*, and excellent lobster fried in butter with a little sweet-and-sour sauce (CUC\$20).

### EL CONEJITO

Map pp224-5 Cuban \$\$  
☎ 832-4671; Calle M No 206; 🕒 noon-midnight  
This surreal restaurant-bar housed in a red-bricked Tudor-style mansion in central Vedado serves rabbit (CUC\$8), rabbit and yet more rabbit, along with a few more standard Cuban staples such as chicken, beef, fish and lobster. As German-meets-Cuban-meets-Tudor, with an amiable resident pianist serenading all comers. If all this doesn't sound too freaky, give it a whirl.

### LA CASONA DE 17

Map pp224-5 Cuban \$\$  
☎ 33-45-29; Calle 17 No 60; 🕒 noon-2am  
Housed in a wonderful eclectic mansion opposite the modernist Edificio Focsa, this small restaurant offers reasonable, if overpriced, food in an attractive early-20th-century setting. The menu specializes in chicken and rice dishes.

### LA RAMPA CAFETERÍA

Map pp224-5 International \$\$  
cnr Calles 23 & L; 🕒 24hr  
One of Vedado's most welcome culinary oases is this authentic American-style diner

interior combined with the preponderance of after-dinner smokers can leave your meal tasting more like nicotine than chicken in orange sauce. Nonetheless the Hurón Azul (Blue Ferret) boasts plenty of original food and is locally famous for its adventurous smoked pork served with a pineapple salsa. That said, it's not cheap, averaging CUC\$15 a pop, plus a 10% service charge is added to every bill. You may want to consider booking ahead as there isn't much room for waiting.

### PALADAR LE CHANSONNIER

Map pp224-5 **French \$\$\$**  
 ☎ 832-1576; Calle J No 257 btwn Calles 13 & 15;  
 🕒 12:30pm-12:30am

A great place to dine if a) you can find it (there's no sign), and b) it's open (the staff seem to be in the habit of taking regular sabbaticals). Hidden in an elegant dining room in a faded mansion-turned-paladar, it's not just the name of this place that's French; French wine, French furniture and French flavors also predominate. House specialties include rabbit in red-wine sauce, chicken smothered in mushrooms, Dijon pork chops, and gigantic salads for herbivores. It's also one of Habana's few truly gay-friendly establishments. Phone ahead to check it's open.

### PALADAR MARPOLY

Map pp224-5 **Cuban \$\$\$**  
 ☎ 832-2471; Calle K No 154 btwn Línea & Calle 11;  
 🕒 noon-1am

An unsigned – and hence hard-to-find – paladar just off Línea, the Marpoly offers good food, including a seafood platter, and a great selection of wines in luxurious surroundings.

### RESTAURANTE LA TORRE

Map pp224-5 **French \$\$\$**  
 ☎ 832-2451; Edificio Focsa, Calle 17 No 55;  
 🕒 noon-midnight

One of Habana's tallest and most talked about restaurants is perched high above downtown Vedado atop the 36-story Edificio Focsa (p84). A colossus of modernist architecture and French-Cuban haute cuisine, this lofty fine-dining extravaganza combines sweeping city views with a progressive French-inspired menu that serves everything from artichokes to foie

gras to almond tart. The prices at CUC\$30 a pop are as distinctly un-Cuban as the ingredients, but with this level of service, it's probably worth it.

## PLAYA & MARIANAO

Playa is paladar heaven and boasts the best selection of quality private restaurants in Cuba. Not to be outdone, the Cuban government has also set up some excellent state-run eating establishments here.

### CAFETERÍA 3 Y 62 Map pp228-9 **Cuban \$**

☎ 204-0369; cnr Av 3 & Calle 62; 🕒 8am-11pm  
 If you're staying in one of the pricey hotels and want a cheaper place to eat, then try this place on the eastern side of the Russian embassy. It's a varied mix of five or six cheap permanent booths selling beer, biscuits, fried chicken and sandwiches, and the prices are rarely more than a couple of convertibles.

### PAIN DE PARIS Map pp228-9 **Bakery, Café \$**

Marina Hemingway, cnr Av 5 & Calle 248;  
 🕒 8am-6pm  
 Next door to Pizza Nova, just past the entrance to Marina Hemingway, is a branch of Cuba's best bakery chain. It sells chocolate croissants, pastries, soft drinks, cakes and coffee. There's another good branch in Vedado (Calle 25 No 164 btwn Calzada de Infanta & Calle O; 🕒 8am-midnight).

### PAN.COM Map pp228-9 **International \$**

☎ 204-4232; Av 7 cnr Calle 26, Miramar; 🕒 24hr  
 One of two Pan.com establishments presently operating in Habana, the clean and friendly Miramar branch is easily the best. Set on tree-lined Av 7 opposite El Aljibe, the menu at this Cuban version of the Subway sandwich chain is extensive and includes hearty sandwiches, fantastic burgers and ice-cream milk shakes to die for. Seating is in a shaded outdoor patio and service is surprisingly warm and efficient – it's the ultimate Habana comfort-food haven. The other branch is in Vedado (p119).

### PIZZA NOVA Map pp228-9 **Pizza \$**

☎ 204-1150; Marina Hemingway, cnr Av 5 & Calle 248; 🕒 noon-midnight  
 Best of a scanty choice of restaurants in Marina Hemingway and billing itself as the

## PLAYA & MARIANAO TOP FIVE

- Paladar La Cocina de Lilliam (p125)
- Paladar La Fontana (p126)
- El Aljibe (below)
- Paladar La Esperanza (p125)
- Paladar Calle 10 (p124)

best pizza joint in Habana, Pizza Nova is a great place to end up after an all-day fishing or diving outing. Otherwise the pepperoni (which is allegedly imported from Canada) isn't worth the 20km journey to get here

### DON CANGREJO Map pp228-9 **Seafood \$\$**

☎ 204-4169; Av 1 No 1606 btwn Calles 16 & 18;  
 🕒 noon-midnight  
 Perched strategically on the rocky shores of Miramar, this unique seafood restaurant is run by the Ministry of Fisheries and scores high points for atmosphere and service. Fresh fish dishes include red snapper, grouper and prawns (CUC\$8 to CUC\$12), while lobster plucked from the pit on the terrace comes in at CUC\$20 to CUC\$25. There's a pool table and swimming pool, an inexpensive pizza-and-grill menu, and one of Habana's classic signs out front.

### DOS GARDENIAS

Map pp228-9 **Chinese, Pizza \$\$**  
 El Rincón del Bolero; ☎ 204-2353; cnr Av 7 & Calle 28; 🕒 noon-midnight  
 Next door to El Aljibe is Dos Gardenias, an upscale complex with several restaurants, bars and shops; you'll have a choice of pizza and Chinese food. Dos Gardenias also has nightly shows beginning at 9pm.

### EL ALJIBE Map pp228-9 **Cuban \$\$**

☎ 204-1583/4; Av 7 btwn Calles 24 & 26; 🕒 noon-midnight  
 On paper a humble Palmares restaurant, in reality a rip-roaring culinary extravaganza, El Aljibe has been delighting both Cuban and foreign taste buds for years. The hype surrounds the gastronomic mysteries of just one dish, the *pollo asado* (roast chicken), which is served up with as-much-as-you-can-eat helpings of white rice, black beans, fried plantain, French fries and salad. The accompanying bitter-orange sauce is said to be a state secret.

### EL CHELO Map pp228-9 **Cuban \$**

☎ 204-3301; Av 5 btwn Calles 188 & 192, Flores;  
 🕒 noon-midnight  
 El Chelo is situated in the swanky Club Habana (p91), 18km west of the city center. Perched in front of the sparkling Straits of Florida and a well-raked scimitar of private beach, El Chelo serves everything from a CUC\$5 *ropa vieja* to a CUC\$25 lobster. The decor is suitably luxurious.

### EL PALENQUE Map pp228-9 **Cuban, Italian \$\$**

☎ 208-8167; cnr Calles 17 & 190; 🕒 10am-10pm  
 Located next to the Pabexpo exhibition center, this huge place sprawls beneath a series of open-sided *bohios* (thatched huts) and offers an extensive menu at prices cheap enough to attract both Cubans and foreigners. The cuisine is Cuban-Italian, with pizzas starting at CUC\$3, steak and fries coming in at CUC\$9, and *langosta mariposa* maxing out at CUC\$22. As well as sit-down tables there are smaller booths, and stores that sell everything from cigars to imported apples.

### LA CECILIA Map pp228-9 **Cuban \$**

☎ 204-1562; Av 5 No 11010 btwn Calles 110 & 112;  
 🕒 noon-midnight  
 Opposite the Servi-Cupet gas station in Playa, La Cecilia is an upscale garden restaurant run by government company Palmares. The menu features mainly Cuban cuisine, especially lobster and steak; prices vary, but you can pick up quality meat bruschettas and tender *ropa vieja* here for as little as CUC\$6, making it much cheaper than most Miramar eating joints. On occasion La Cecilia hosts excellent live music in its attractive back garden; however, rather than hiring the usual staid guitar trios, the management promotes full-on dance bands that knock out classic Benny Moré hits, with hip-gyrating rhythms and stabbing trumpets, well into the night. On quieter evenings the La Cecilia is equally alluring, with acres of tables laid out under the romantic thatched-roof garden and large parrots squawking in their cages.

### LA PAILA Map pp228-9 **Cuban \$**

☎ 267-1771; Ave 51A No 8827 btwn Calles 88B & 88C; 🕒 noon-midnight  
 If this place wasn't so off the beaten track, it would be in Habana's top five. With just a few tables ensconced in a garden replete



## PALADARES

Paladares are small family-run restaurants that are permitted to operate as private entities on the payment of a monthly tax to the government. First established in 1995 during the economic chaos of the *período especial* (special period), paladares owe much of their success to the sharp increase in tourist traffic on the island, and the bold experimentation of the local chefs who, despite a paucity of decent ingredients, have heroically managed to keep the traditions of Cuban cooking alive.

Legally paladares are only supposed to offer 12 seats and are prohibited from selling lobster, beef or shrimps (which are government monopolies). The reality, however, is often rather different. Through secrecy, guile, or a surreptitious bending of the rules, most Habana paladares pack well over a dozen people into carefully concealed dining rooms or romantically lit back gardens and, with meal prices hovering in the CUC\$15 to CUC\$20 bracket, business has never been better.

Although the atmosphere in various paladares can differ significantly, the food in these unique private restaurants is almost always of a superior quality to the uninspiring rations offered elsewhere. Indeed, following big reviews in the *New York Times*, the *Guardian* and *Cigar Aficionado*, leading paladares such as La Guarida (p118), La Cocina de Lilliam (opposite) and La Fontana (p126) have even started to attract international attention.

with soft-lit lanterns, this is the most romantic paladar no one knows about. And the food is infallible. It does a great *bistec Uruguayo* (fried, breaded pork stuffed with ham and cheese), and its pizzas are famous; both dishes are less than CUC\$5.

### LE SELECT Map pp228-9 Cuban \$\$

☎ 207-7410; Av 5 cnr Calle 30; 🍴 restaurant  
10am-9pm, bar 10am-midnight  
This minicomplex – complete with swimming pool, boutiques, bars and restaurant – is spread across the grounds of a 1950s Miramar mansion that was used after the revolution by a certain Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara. Reopened a few years back to serve the neighborhood’s affluent diplomatic community (what would Che have said?), the fancily named Le Select hasn’t yet lived up to the hype. While the architecture might be quasi-Italian Renaissance, you’ll get far better food elsewhere.

### PALADAR CALLE 10

Map pp228-9 Cuban \$\$  
☎ 205-3970; Calle 10 No 314, btwn Avs 3 & 5;  
🕒 noon-midnight  
Paladar Calle 10 is situated in – um – Calle 10 and, while the name might be a little unimaginative, the food certainly isn’t. In fact, the meals served up in this rather fetching mansion-cum-gourmet-restaurant could well be some of the best in Cuba. Set up barbecue style in the owner’s back garden, the paladar has alfresco seating arranged under an attractive thatched canopy. The printed menu is both varied and

adventurous, and delicious dishes include *ropa vieja* (CUC\$7), chicken in balsamic vinegar (CUC\$8), and chicken in lemon-and-honey glaze (CUC\$7.50). Portions are huge and arrive with assorted roasted vegetables and memorable pureed potato. There are even profiteroles for dessert.

### PALADAR EL BUGANVIL

Map pp228-9 Cuban \$\$  
☎ 271-4791; Calle 190 No 1501 btwn Calles 15 & 17; 🕒 noon-midnight  
For Habana’s old hands, El Buganvil is what you’ll have come to expect from a choice Playa paladar, but for comparative newbies this will still be a rare treat. Take the house special *loma ahumado* (smoked pork) with piles of rice and yucca outside amid the blooming bougainvillea, and all those memories of bad tinned ham and insipid melted cheese will quickly fade away.

### PALADAR MI JARDÍN

Map pp228-9 Mexican \$\$  
☎ 203-4627; Calle 66 No 517; 🕒 noon-midnight  
It’s a rare Cuban menu that offers chicken mole, tacos and quesadillas, which makes this Mexican place a keeper. Dining beneath the vine-covered trellis in the garden is recommended, as is the fish Veracruz.

### EL RANCHO PALCO

Map pp228-9 Cuban \$\$\$  
☎ 208-9346; cnr Av 19 & Calle 140; 🕒 noon-11pm  
Situated in a forest near the Palacio de las Convenciones, El Rancho Palco has one of

the finest thatched roofs you’ll likely ever see. This place has terrific ambience all the time, but it’s particularly good at night, when live salsa music fills the air. Ceiling fans help keep the atmosphere cool. Beef is the specialty here, with fillets ranging in price from CUC\$15 to CUC\$35. Fish dishes, chicken and shrimp are also good.

### EL TOCORORO

Map pp228-9 International, Japanese \$\$\$  
☎ 202-4530; Calle 18 No 302; 🕒 noon-midnight  
Once considered (along with El Aljibe) to be one of Habana’s finest government-run restaurants, El Tocatororo has lost ground to its competitors in recent years and is often criticized for being overpriced. Nonetheless the candlelit tables and inviting garden are still worth a visit, while the unprinted menu, with such luxuries as lobster’s tail and (occasionally) ostrich, still has the ability to surprise. Bank on paying for everything right down to the bread basket, and be aware of a 10% service charge. As an added bonus, El Tocatororo now has a small attached sushi bar and restaurant called Sakura (meals over CUC\$15; 🕒 noon-midnight). It’s the only place in Cuba where you can find real Japanese food.

### LA CASA DE QUINTA Y 16

Map pp228-9 International \$\$\$  
☎ 206-9509; Av 5 cnr Calle 16; 🕒 noon-10:30pm  
La Casa de Quinta y 16 is an upscale ranch-style restaurant tacked onto a Casa del Habano (p155) cigar shop. Housed in a funky modernist building with a pleasant wood interior, the restaurant presents its food as daily specials, including prawns (CUC\$9), grilled fish (CUC\$17), paella (CUC\$18) and fettuccini alfredo (CUC\$12). All mains are served with a glass of wine. Owners of local casas particulares (private houses that let out rooms to foreigners) always rave about this place.

### LA FERMINIA Map pp228-9 Cuban \$\$\$

☎ 33-67-86; Av 5 No 18207; 🕒 noon-11pm  
Habana gets swanky at this memorable restaurant set in an elegant converted colonial mansion along one of Av 5’s leafier stretches. Dine inside, in one of a handful of beautifully furnished rooms, or outside on a glorious garden patio – it doesn’t really matter. The point is the food. A wonderful

mixed grill pulled straight from the fire, or a thick filet mignon will set you back more than CUC\$20, but it will be money well spent. It also offers lobster tails panfried in breadcrumbs. Not surprisingly La Ferminia is considered to be one of Habana’s finest restaurants and the establishment operates a strict dress code: no shorts or (for guys) sleeveless T-shirts. Fidel Castro has – allegedly – dined here.

### LA MAISON Map pp228-9 Cuban \$\$\$

☎ 204-1543; cnr Calle 16 & Av 7; 🕒 noon-midnight  
If you’re out in Miramar, it would be a shame to pass over the opportunity to dine in La Maison (p138, p155), Habana’s premier fashion house. A full meal in the restaurant followed by a fashion show and music performance will set you back CUC\$30. The ‘chic’ menu includes chicken, pork and turkey dishes.

### PALADAR LA COCINA DE LILLIAM

Map pp228-9 International \$\$\$  
☎ 209-6514; Calle 48 No 1311 btwn Calles 13 & 15; 🕒 noon-midnight  
Slick service, secluded ambience and freshly cooked food to die for, La Cocina de Lilliam has all the ingredients of a prize-winning restaurant par excellence. It’s no wonder that Jimmy Carter made a pit stop here during his landmark 2002 visit (for the record he had *ropa vieja*). Set in an illustrious villa and surrounded by a garden of trickling fountains and lush tropical plants, the restaurant has such Cuban rarities as chicken mousse and tuna bruschetta, and an atmosphere more European than Caribbean. Not a cheese-and-ham sandwich in sight!

### PALADAR LA ESPERANZA

Map pp228-9 Cuban \$\$\$  
☎ 202-4361; Calle 16 No 105 btwn Avs 1 & 3; 🕒 6:30-11pm Fri-Wed  
Few would disagree that the food, ambience and gastronomic creativity showcased at this unassuming Miramar paladar puts it among Habana’s (and undoubtedly Cuba’s) best eating establishments. While unspacious from the street, the house is a riot of quirky antiques, old portraits and refined 1940s furnishings inside. It’s almost as if the decor has been left untouched since the day Castro’s guerrillas marched past in 1959

and nationalized the whole neighborhood. The food, which is produced in a standardized family kitchen, includes such exquisite dishes as *pollo luna de miel* (chicken flambéed in rum), fish marinated in white wine, lemon and garlic, and lamb brochette. It's expensive but memorable.

### PALADAR LA FONTANA

Map pp228-9 International \$\$\$

☎ 202-8337; Calle 3A No 305; ☎ noon-midnight  
Habana discovers the barbecue or, more to the point, the full-on charcoal grill. Huge portions of meat and fish are served up in this amiable villa-cum-paladar, so go easy on the starters, which include quails' eggs, fried chickpeas, and crab mixed with eggplant. La Fontana specializes in just about everything you'll never see elsewhere in Cuba, from lasagna to huge steaks. Big-shot reviews from *Cigar Aficionado* and the *Chicago Tribune* testify to the burgeoning legend.

### PALADAR LOS CACTUS DE 33

Map pp228-9 Cuban \$\$\$

☎ 203-5139; Av 33 No 3405 btwn Calles 34 & 36, Playa; ☎ noon-midnight  
Reviewed in international lifestyle magazines and used as a setting for TV specials, this place has impeccable service, elegant surroundings, well-prepared food and (in a Cuban context) outrageous prices. A full pork meal with all the trimmings is pushing CUC\$20; the house special, chicken breast with mushrooms, olives and cheese, costs even more. Situated on a quiet street a block from Miramar's arterial Calle 31, the house is characterized by a lone cactus that stands guard in the front yard.

### PALADAR VISTAMAR

Map pp228-9 Seafood \$\$\$

☎ 203-8328; Av 1 btwn Calles 22 & 24; ☎ noon-midnight  
The Paladar Vistamar is in the 2nd-floor family-room-turned-restaurant of a private residence in Miramar that faces the sea. The oceanside ambience is embellished by a beautiful swimming pool that spills its water into the sea. If enjoying delicious seafood dishes overlooking the crashing ocean sounds enticing, this could be your bag. Most mains run from CUC\$8 to CUC\$15 with salad.

## EASTERN HABANA

Eastern Habana's eating options are centered on the two large historic forts that border the harbor channel. Outside of this, the larger neighborhoods of Regla and Guanabacoa have very few palatable restaurants, although the fishing village of Cojimar boasts the ever popular La Terraza, a former Hemingway favorite.

### BAR EL POLVORÍN Map p227 Café \$

☎ 860-9990; Castillo de los Tres Santos Reyes

Magnos del Morro, Parque Histórico Militar Morro-Cabaña; ☎ 10am-4am

This bar is just beyond Restaurante Los Doce Apóstoles, and offers drinks and light snacks on a patio overlooking the bay. There's zero shade here, but it's perfect for those famous Habana sunsets. Watch out for the energetic dancing that goes on into the small hours at weekends.

### CINCO ESQUINAS Map p230 Café \$

cnr Calixto García & 24 de Febrero, Regla;

☎ 9am-10pm

Looking for somewhere to eat in Regla is like looking for the Niagara Falls in the Sahara. Bring a packed lunch! If desperation sets in, there are drinks and a few edible tidbits available at this Palmares place situated on 'Five Corners' in between the Parque Guaicamar and the Colina Lenin. There's a vastly unhealthy chicken booth nearby.

### RESTAURANTE LAS ORISHAS Map p231 International \$

cnr Martí & Lamas, Guanabacoa; ☎ 10am-midnight  
This Santería-themed place in Guanabacoa has a very pleasant garden bar in a courtyard with colorful Afro-Cuban sculptures. The menu is reasonable and varied, with everything from a CUC\$1 microwaved cheese pizza to a CUC\$20-plus lobster. There's good rumba music (p139) here at weekends.

### PALADAR DOÑA CARMELA Map p227 Cuban \$\$

☎ 863-6048; Calle B No 10, Parque Histórico

Militar Morro-Cabaña; ☎ 7-11pm

A good private dining option when it's open, this paladar offers quality chicken, pork and seafood in a very pleasant alfresco setting. It makes a good dinner before or

after the *cañonazo* (shooting of the cannons) at Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña, but check ahead as opening times can be irregular.

### RESTAURANTE LA DIVINA PASTORA Map p227 Cuban \$\$

☎ 860-8341; Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña,

Parque Histórico Militar Morro-Cabaña;

☎ noon-11pm

Just beyond the Dársena de los Franceses is a battery of huge 18th-century cannons. Located behind the guns, the upscale but approachable La Divina Pastora offers well-prepared seafood, including lobster and fish. You can also just sit and soak in the views with an icy Cristal and some crisp *tostones*.

### RESTAURANTE LA TERRAZA Map p231 Seafood \$\$

☎ 93-92-32; Calle 152 No 161, Cojimar;

☎ restaurant noon-11pm, bar 10.30am-11pm

Another shrine to the ghost of Ernest Hemingway, La Terraza specializes in seafood such as stuffed squid (CUC\$7) and paella (CUC\$7 to CUC\$15), and does a roaring trade with the hordes of Papa fans who drop by daily. The terrace dining room overlooking the bay is pleasant. More atmospheric, however, is the old bar out front, where mojitos still only cost a couple of convertibles. Check out the classic wooden refrigerators and don't miss the black-and-white photos of Hemingway in the terrace dining room.

### RESTAURANTE LOS DOCE APÓSTOLES Map p227 Cuban \$\$

☎ 863-8285; Castillo de los Tres Santos Reyes

Magnos del Morro, Parque Histórico Militar

Morro-Cabaña; ☎ noon-11pm

Set in the shadow of El Morro, this restaurant is named for the battery of 12 cannons atop its ramparts. It serves *comida criolla*, and is a better-than-average government-run kitchen. Prices are fair.

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## OUTER HABANA

Outer Habana has scant fare for travelers unless they're happy surviving on peso pizza and cheese-and-ham sandwiches. There are, however, two restaurants of note in and around Parque Lenin.

### LAS RUINAS Map p232 International \$\$\$

☎ 57-82-86; Cortina de la Presa; ☎ 11am-midnight Tue-Sun

On the southeast side of Parque Lenin, Las Ruinas is one of Habana's most celebrated restaurants – at least in an architectural sense. It's a striking combination of an old ruined sugar mill juxtaposed with offbeat modern architecture that includes some eye-catching stained-glass windows designed by Cuban artist René Portocarrero. Antique furnishings enhance the elegant atmosphere inside, but the food – which is grossly overpriced – doesn't quite live up to the lavish setting. The menu includes lobster, plus a selection of Cuban and Italian dishes, and you'll be lucky to get much change out of CUC\$30. Overrated.

### RESTAURANTE EL BAMBÚ Map p232 Vegetarian \$\$\$

☎ 54-72-78; Jardín Botánico Nacional; ☎ noon-5pm Tue-Sun

This is the first and finest in vegetarian dining in Habana and has led the way in government efforts to educate *habaneros* (inhabitants of Habana) in the benefits of a meatless diet. The all-you-can-eat lunch buffet is served alfresco deep in the botanical gardens (p96), with the natural setting paralleling the wholesome tastiness of the food. For CUC\$15 you can help yourself to unlimited amounts of soup, salad, root vegetables, tamales and eggplant caviar; herbs grown on the premises figure prominently in the dishes. Juices, desserts and coffee are on offer too. It makes an excellent trip when coupled with a visit to the gardens.