

the final hours:

MAY 11, 2012

Walking through Havana on that first, glorious morning was like walking through a dream. The sun was shining, the streets were scrubbed clean for the Biennial, and my route took me through partially renovated streets that reflected the city's historic splendor. With Shillitto, I walked through cobbled squares closed to traffic using barriers of antique captured cannons, upended barrels pointed muzzle-down into the pavement, past verdant parks, past the colonial-era Cathedral, past Bodeguita del Medio, through the marble-floored interior courtyard of the elegant Wifredo Lam Center, around and under a grand staircase—and out through a side door into a cluttered, dusty courtyard littered with old leaves and construction debris with scarred and world-weary shipping containers unceremoniously dropped in the middle.

This was the place.

To watch Shillitto, Fanzone, and the construction crew in action that first day was to fully understand just how hard the project had been to realize. As I worked with Sidra Durst organizing seating charts and printing and preparing menus, I watched the crew race back and forth, adding finishing touches here, awnings there, and cleaning up the detritus. Over the course of the morning each and every one of them became drenched in sweat, their hair, clothes and skin slowly transformed into a matching beige, the color of the courtyard dust that clung thickly to them all, as though they had donned a common uniform, united in their effort to complete the work before the guests began to arrive in the late afternoon. As the head honcho—El Jefe, as they called him—Shillitto could easily have directed the workers to complete the remaining tasks, a common practice among many well-known international artists. Instead, he worked alongside them, leading Jorge, the Biennial director, to clap him on the back laughing, telling him he was reminded of Che. Che Guevara, a hero of the revolution, in an effort to foster a sense of social cohesion and promote equity, habitually spent his Sundays doing manual labor like construction and cutting sugar cane alongside the common workers, believing that volunteerism and hard work would pave the way for the success of the new nation.



Fish story

One of the curious things about trying to find proteins in Cuba is that fish and seafood—which would logically seem to be available in abundance since Cuba is an island—are very, very hard to come by. Hoping against hope that there was a way around the scarcity, Anita Lo had planned to work with fish. Her paladar

partner, Edgar Loyola, had been the proprietor of a sushi place, Sinfonía Roll, so it was a natural choice. They went to the docks with sous-chef Eduardo Vallelobo, and began to inquire about fresh fish but got nowhere. Finally, Lo and Vallelobo learned that the usual procedure was for boats to come clandestinely to a prearranged location where they would sell their catch directly. The guy on the dock, who had a freezer, would pull out a previously frozen fish for the fishermen to thaw and pass off as the day's catch at the government fish market. They were exceedingly nervous to have foreigners around, and liked cameras even less. Finally, Vallelobo's native Spanish and negotiating skills ensured that they had at least some high quality frozen fish to work with. As it happened, the menu that Lo and Loyola cooked was well received: maki with guava paste and tropical fruit, followed by grilled fillet of sailfish with radish and yuzu. The entrée was a "pork symphony" devised by Loyola with mojito sauce, homemade onion paste, and a malanga churro garnish. (Malanga is a root vegetable common on the island, often used to make delicious, garlicky fritters with parsley.) Lo's coconut rice pudding (the recipe for which appears in these pages) was light and refreshing, with the fruits and herbs coming straight from the farm: just the thing on a steamy evening.