

Black Bean grows into a winner

By Ashby Stiff

SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

The Black Bean. Cute name for a cute Cuban *cucina* that recently sprouted on the Parkway.

Lots of places have come and gone in this location, the last called Good Time Charlie's. But after three reconnaissance forays to the Bean in a week, we're betting it's a sticker.

Why? Because it zeroes in on what lots of Tallahasseeans like: both familiar and creative Cuban dishes, whopper portions and sub-zero prices, offered with patient menu explanations and wide smiles.

Not surprising, this, given that the new proprietors are Robert Morales, who was an originator of, and formerly with, the west side's venerable Gordo's, and his effervescent cousin Patty Swain.

It's obvious that the cousins and their young crew are getting a big kick out of the new restaurant and its patrons. When ordering, a casual query as to the degree of salting of Arroz con Pollo instantly brought a soufflé cup of the item for sampling. That's called going the extra mile.

We counted some 50 seats in a well-scrubbed, many-windowed dining room that's freshly creamy gold with garnet booth upholstery, a red tile floor, plants and pictures. The tableware's plastic, the cutlery is too, but it's good, sturdy stuff that works.

We must say, though, those tiny, fragile tissue napkins give us a fit, dispensed as they are from a Lucite-type box with an opening so narrow that you have to tease one out with a fingernail. In this ultra-casual setting, a big, fat (and cost effective) roll of paper towels would work for us.

Seven days a week the Bean serves lunch and dinner (Sundays from noon to 5 p.m. only) to an eclectic clientele of office types, teens, collegians, seniors and families. And get this:



Address: 2205 Apalachee Parkway; 656-7848

Hours: 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Saturday; noon-5 p.m. Sunday

Payment: Major credit cards and local checks accepted

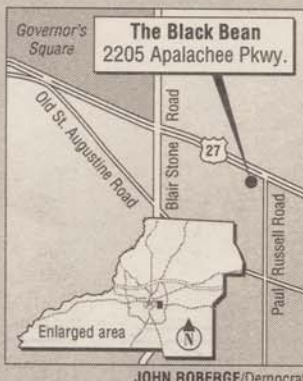
Average tab: \$9.50, dinner

Dress code: Casual

Wheelchair accessible: Yes

Beverage service: Alcohol is not served.

Reservations: No



JOHN ROBERGE/Democrat

Little kids eat free.

The system is simple. You place your order and pay at the cashier's counter, then hunt up a table, have a seat and await delivery of the meal. At busy times, it's helpful to place the numbered order slip in full view of the server, to facilitate matching dinners to diners.

Chef Rafael Antomarchy's menu ambitiously offers goodly assortments of apps, salads, wraps, pressed and grilled sandwiches, dinners, desserts and milk-infused cafes con leche. We sampled a bit of almost every category.

As we scouted starters, a pair of crisp-crust, ham-filled Croquetas (\$1.10) snagged honorable mention. A zesty Black Bean Soup (\$2.50) proved almost as tasty as the excellent black beans — a 12-ounce Styro cupful — that, with an also-giant rice mold, are a side choice with dinners. A Beef Empanada (\$1.95) came credibly picadillo-

filled, but with an overly generous fluting, we thought, of quite heavy pastry.

Not to be missed, though, is signature Black Bean Gumbo (\$4.95). It's a dark and habanero-spiced award winner made fresh daily with baby shrimp, fish, plenty of andouille sausage, pureed black beans, spices and very little rice extender. To the side comes a generous hunk of Cuban bread.

Another signature specialty, Black Bean Club Salad (\$5.95), yielded three heaping platefuls when we got it home. In it we found fresh greens, bell pepper rings, carrot, red onion, cukes, cilantro, grape tomatoes, black beans and garbanzo beans, topped with loads of ham, turkey, cheese and bacon. Try it with yogurt-thick Spanish Ranch Dressing. It's deluxe.

On the flip side, a 9-inch Cuban sandwich isn't the Bean's best shot. One of 15 pressed or grilled sandwich

■ **What's cooking?** If you have culinary news, send information to Ashby Stiff (e-mail: dining@ashbystiff.com, or fax: 386-1997) or Zilpha Underwood, Democrat features editor (e-mail: zunderwood@tallahassee.com).

choices, its thick and singularly chewy bread slices overwhelm a normal layering of sweet ham, seasoned pork, Swiss cheese, mustard and pickles. We'd have a word with the baker, folks.

After it was returned for a warm-up (on a smoking-busy Friday evening), Arroz con Pollo (\$7.95) brought a prime example of this old Cuban favorite. It's chock-full of chicken, and its rice base appeared almost Spanish red from the mix of kicky spices and ingredients that flavored it.

Awfully good, too, was the same-priced platter of Masitas. Its crispy-outside, tender-inside chunks of pork, topped with grilled onions and mojo, came with crunchy, salted tostones, black beans and rice.

Dessert? Flan, of course, for \$2.95. But how about like-priced, signature Guava Cheesecake, its graham-crinker crust filled with a blend of condensed milk, guava and cream cheese? Or maybe cinnamon-sugar-dusted, fried pastry Churros (\$1.95) with Cafe con Leche or Hot Chocolate for a yummo finish?

The Black Bean. A restaurant as likable as its name.