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JIN WEI-QI, CHINA

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HAVANA NIGHTS

Bomba Tacos & Rum brings Cuban food, color, music and fun to suburban Ohio.

By Steve Kaufman, Contributing Writer

Cuban cuisine is catching on in the U.S. Partly due to the curiosity built up over nearly 60 years of a travel and trade ban between the two countries (which was lifted last year), and partly because of the romance Americans have with the culture and cuisine of Latin America.

Paladar Holdings LLC (Woodmere, Ohio), which owns a chain of traditional Paladar Latin Kitchen restaurants in the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic U.S., decided to take advantage of this growing interest by launching a new concept called Bomba Tacos & Rum – more casual and informal than its other restaurants, and more exotic, too.

The name says it all. "Bomba" is a rhythmic, percussive music and dance that originated in Puerto Rico among the slaves working the sugar cane fields in the late 1800s. "It was actually rebellious music [at the time]," explains Kristie Oldham, design and trend director of Cleveland-based Richardson Design, which spearheaded the restaurant's look and feel. "The music was really expressing a way for slaves to escape from their sadness or troubles."

There's no sadness in the Bomba restaurant approach, however. Oldham says, rather, the design concept is "Live Loud" – a celebration of the color and noise, happiness and openness of the Cuban street life.

"Everything is open to the outside," notes Oldham, through the large windows, hurricane shutters, wrought iron gates, patios and open garage doors that ring the restaurant's exterior. The noise and music pour out of the

restaurant. "In Havana, the doors are always open because of the heat," she says, "and this provides an invitation to neighbors."

Inside, the colors are bright and vibrant, but with a deliberate, slightly aged appearance. "Americans' image of Cuba includes the ornate architecture that became weathered over time, the effects of both the Caribbean climate and the general (economic) decay that descended over Cuba," says Oldham. But "decay" is not the theme here. Rather, Oldham explains, it's "a place to 'Live Loud' and escape. It's passionate, smart, adventurous, lively, exotic and sultry."

Millennials are the target audience, she explains. "The idea is that it be comfortable and inviting, but also exotic and interesting – a fun place for suburban parents to go for a date night." As a result, there's a variety of seating choices, from the bar to cozy booths to traditional family dining tables and festive communal tables – a staple in Latin American culture.

Part of the fun is the restaurant's focus on rum, not yet a mainstream liquor for American tastes. The classic bar is filled with an extensive offering of rum and bartenders trained to mix rum punches, piña coladas, daiquiris, Cuba libres and the signature mojitos. "Many Americans retain the memories of the great rum drinks they had on Caribbean vacations," says Oldham. For others who might be totally unfamiliar, she says, there's an introductory primer on the spirit – "sort of a 'Rum 101' class" – that serves flights and explains how rum is distilled, much like they do at breweries and wineries.

Because rum is distilled in copper pots, copper is one of the signature materials throughout the space, along with a "rich tobacco brown" shade of wood, stucco walls and vibrant colors, such as fuchsia, teal, yellow and various shades of red and blue.

Paladar introduced the concept into two suburban locations in northern Ohio, including Rocky River, outside of Cleveland, and Fairlawn, outside of Akron.

"The idea was that this would bring urban flair to a suburban demographic," Oldham explains. "So it needed to be approachable on the one hand, and sultry and exotic on the other. You could go there for an after-work happy hour, or you could bring the whole family."

She says the chefs took authentic Cuban and Latin dishes and Americanized them. "And we did the same with our architecture and design."

LEFT: ROCKY RIVER, OHIO, LOCATION; TOP/MIDDLE: FAIRLAWN, OHIO, LOCATION; BOTTOM: ROCKY RIVER, OHIO, LOCATION

PROJECT SUPPLIERS

RETAILER
Bomba Tacos & Rum, Cleveland
Paladar Holdings LLC, Woodmere, Ohio

DESIGN
Richardson Design, Cleveland

ARCHITECTURE
Studio Techne Inc., Cleveland

GENERAL CONTRACTOR
The Krill Co., Cleveland (Rocky River location)
Welty Building Company Ltd., Cleveland (Fairlawn location)

CEILINGS
Decorative Ceiling Tiles, Margate, Fla.
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