From Cuba to Cornelia St., never losing the flavor

PROFILE

BY KAREN KRAMER

In the enclave of restaurants that form Cornelia St.'s restaurant row there is a small shoebox of a place that feels personal and intimate rather than cramped. That's because the owner of Little Havana — Lydia Mesa-Marti Betancourt Sharpe, a warm, energetic woman with an open demeanor — tries to bring a feeling of family to everything she does.

Closeness of family, cooking and education have been the ongoing pillars of her life, whether here in New York or in Cuba where she was born 73 years ago.

"Forty-five years here in this country, my English isn't very good," she says in a charming accent. "I was born in Cuba in Pinar del Rio. It is the tobacco area. We grew up surrounded by family. They were simple tobacco farmers, campesinos. We were seven brothers and sisters, a beautiful family. We were all very close."

But in the countryside of Cuba at that time, opportunities were limited, and anyone who wanted to get a higher education had to try to find it in the capital city of Havana. Sharpe arrived there by herself at the age of 15 and stayed with her aunt, hoping to attend the university and get a degree.

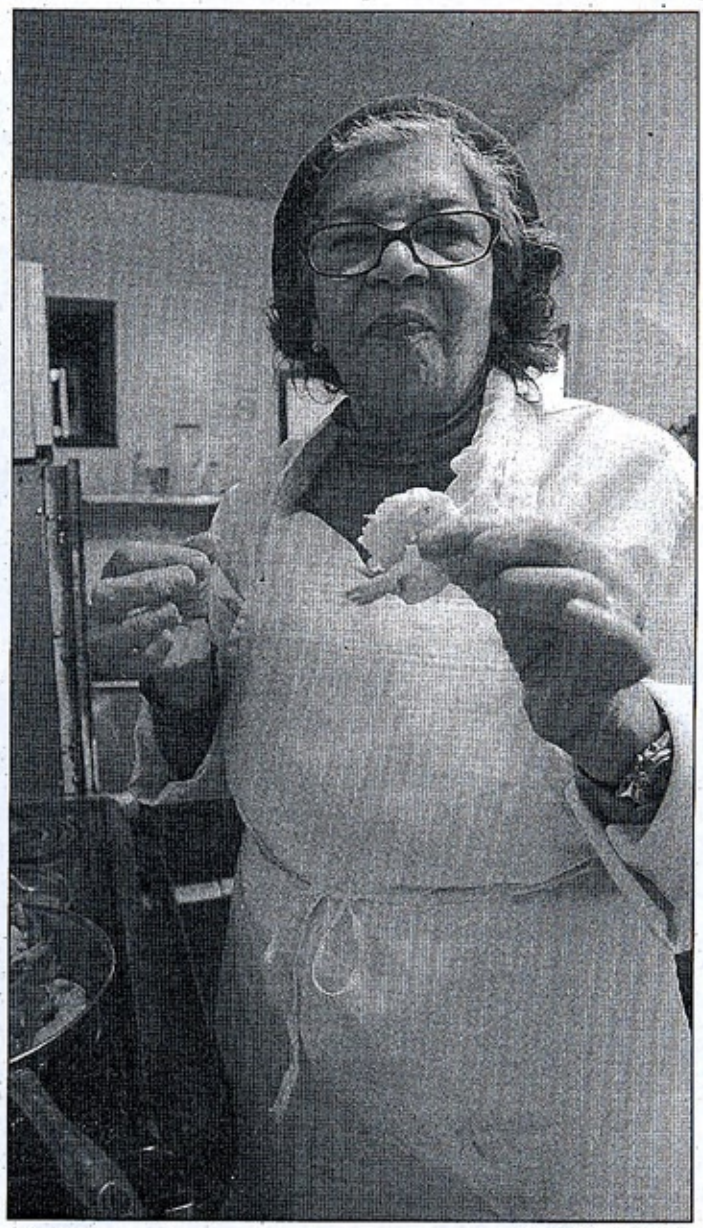
"Everyone in my family loved to have the education," she says with her animated expression. "My brother studied to be a doctor. I went to the university two years because I wanted to be a lawyer. But when the revolution was starting, everybody had a lot of problems in Havana.... That was about 1954-'56. There were a lot of terrorists. They put bombs in a lot of places. They killed people. My family wasn't political so I didn't have direct problems. But coming from the countryside we were afraid and I stopped going to the college. After a little while they closed the university for three years. I worked in a factory canning fish. The Japanese brought the tuna. We put tuna fish into cans."

In Havana she met the man who would become her first husband, Juan-Rene Betancourt. He had studied law and knew Castro. But he was not a Communist and felt that life would be better for them if they could leave Cuba. The couple had their wedding three days before they left the country.

"We came to Miami for a few days and later we came to New York," she recalls. At the time [1960], Miami had a lot of discrimination and my husband was dark. A black guy. I was in fear for him. He was a lawyer but he never dominated the language. He was a smart guy, he wrote books, but it was hard for him to get work here."

The couple felt they might have a better chance in New York and left the South. In New York they lived in a hotel on W. 73rd St. She worked in the lab at Roosevelt Hospital doing blood work until she became pregnant with her daughter, the first of her two children.

"We were poor. Sometimes we couldn't pay the rent but the owner of the hotel admired my husband so much. My husband was an educated man but he cleaned Mister Softee trucks at night for $2 a truck. But anyway we were happy. He would bring ice cream at night. He was doing something. He was working. With that money we could pay the hotel."



Villager photo by O. Sakamaki

Lydia Mesa-Marti Betancourt Sharpe, owner of Little Havana restaurant on Cornelia St.

Eventually Betancourt earned his master's degree in education and started teaching high school mathematics. Sharpe was able to stay home with the children. But when their son was 12 and their daughter 13, Betancourt died of a heart attack. Sharpe started a new job taking care of the elderly. "I wanted to give a good education to my children, to my husband's children, because education was always so important to him. My son passed a test and went to Hunter High School. Both of my children graduated from Princeton."

After her son graduated, he got a job running a restaurant concession in Fort Tryon Park, a few blocks from the Upper Manhattan neighborhood they had moved to from the hotel. He asked his mother to come in and help him manage it. "I started there in 1993. It wasn't Cuban food but I was good at managing, helping out. Everybody loved me in the restaurant because I managed it very well. That was my first experience with a restaurant. After I was working there seven years my son gave it up to work in computers but I wanted to keep going with a restaurant. I was looking for a location to see if I could make it."

It was serendipity that brought her to the Village, but it didn't come directly. Once again it was her search for higher education that brought a change to Sharpe's life. When Sharpe's children were getting ready to apply to college she hoped that they would be able to attend an Ivy League school. She attended a meeting at the Harvard Club where a representative, a man named Howard Sharpe, held a meeting with her. "I went to this meeting for my children to talk to someone about college. This man was interviewing my children for the schools. He went to Harvard. He's American. We fell in love."

Howard lived in Greenwich Village and when they married several years after meeting, Lydia had to commute to Fort Tryon Park to work in her son's restaurant. But when she wanted to find a place of her own, she started to look for something a bit closer to the Village.

"I found this place on Cornelia St. It used to belong to a psychic. I wanted to open a restaurant and I was looking for a little place to serve sandwiches. But now it's a regular restaurant. It's successful. The people love the Cuban food. This is the food I know how to cook. I grew up with the black beans, with the rice, with the chicken, with the ropa vieja" (shredded beef — literally, "old clothes").

It's important to Lydia Sharpe to try and keep things authentic. Since it's not possible to import goods from Cuba, she tries to keep it as similar as she can. She's very aware that the ingredients must be fresh and as natural as possible.

"I get the good beans from a special place. My beans are organic. That's closer to the Cuban beans, Cuban style."

And with her desire to keep things personal and intimate she utilizes the resources around the Village, preferring to deal with small merchants whom she knows by name, people she can call up personally on the phone. "Ottomanelli's Butcher over there? They love me. Any time I call Frank [the owner], he knows me. I get all my beef at Ottomanelli's. All my beef. I order on the telephone. Frank is my friend."

A restaurateur who 'grew up with the black beans, with the rice, with the chicken, with the ropa vieja.'

After a long and resilient life how does Lydia Sharpe see the future?

"I'm eight years here already. I have the lease for two more years but I don't know what I'm going to do after that. If the landlord is going to charge a lot more money I couldn't afford it. It's only 19 chairs."

In the meantime, so many different types of people come to the 19-chair restaurant...locals, tourists, and celebrities alike. In the back of the place Lydia Sharpe keeps a small book in which customers can write comments. One note comes from a woman who talks about living in the Village for years and on her last night before moving away chooses to eat in Little Havana as her last memory of her time in Greenwich Village. Orlando "El Duque" Hernandez, the former Yankee/current White Sox pitcher, often comes with an entourage to savor the Cuban cuisine he grew up with. Another note is from actress Glenn Close who came with her husband and raved about the food. But the note that is most revealing about the place comes not from a customer but from Lydia Sharpe herself. It is a handwritten piece of paper taped to the front window. It says, simply, "Absolutely Authentic Family Cuban Restaurant."