



Chef Douglas Rodriguez made a name for himself three decades ago as a member of the Mango Gang. These days, he's finding his second wind inside and outside of the kitchen.

# THE ORIGINAL GANGSTER

BY NILA DO SIMON PHOTOGRAPHY BY FELIPE CUEVAS





The restaurant MojitoBar & Plates by Douglas Rodriguez features the chef's latest creations, including crispy shrimp chicharrónes (above) and smoked pork carnitas tacos with guacamole and pickled cabbage (opposite page).

When he was 7 years old, Douglas Rodriguez remembers tasting French onion soup for the first time. He had casually ordered it at a New York City restaurant not knowing that this bowl would, as he puts it today, “give me goosebumps.”

Rodriguez recalls even as a kid studying how the onions, broth, herbs and cheese blended in that bowl. “I kept taking smaller and smaller sips of the soup so that it would last,” he says. “I didn’t want it to end. It was so good.”

The next day, Rodriguez made up his mind that he wanted to have French onion soup on his own schedule; that he didn’t need to go to a restaurant to enjoy it. So he asked his mom to take him to the nearest Macy’s to buy a slow cooker and then to the library to check out a cookbook.

Now 52, Rodriguez’s prolific culinary CV has more to it than just soup. Born in New York City to Cuban immigrants, Rodriguez made a name for himself in South Florida as a member of the Mango Gang, a trailblazing group of chefs (including Norman Van Aken, Allen Susser and Mark Militello) who put regional cuisine on the national map in the ’80s and ’90s. (A little historical context: Until that time, South Florida was hardly a haven for innovative, upscale dining. The Mango Gang,

with its highly trained members who often blended Caribbean and Latin flavors with sharp stateside presentations, helped the region’s culinary landscape develop into what it is today.)

In 1989, the 24-year-old Rodriguez opened the original location for Yuca, a high-end Cuban restaurant in Coral Gables, a few miles from Miami’s traditionally Cuban neighborhood Calle Ocho. The elegant, modern interpretations of island dishes earned him the Chef of the Year, Miami award from The Chefs of America and two Rising Star Chef of the Year nominations from the James Beard Foundation (he would go on to win the Rising Star Chef of the Year award in 1996). The honors brought him distinction among culinary professionals, along with a new, self-appointed nickname: the Godfather of Nuevo Latino Cuisine. More importantly, Yuca, an acronym for Young Upscale Cuban-Americans, garnered praise from the very people he named the restaurant after, who still talk about the restaurant today.

Other notable notches on Rodriguez’s culinary belt include now-shuttered New York City restaurants Chicama and Patria—the latter of which received a coveted three-star rating by *The New York Times*—and beloved Philadelphia restaurant Alma de Cuba, an eatery backed by famed restaurateur Stephen Starr.

These days, Rodriguez wants to share his love of Cuban cuisine



“My dream is to open a restaurant and cooking studio in Cuba.”

—Douglas Rodriguez



Queso fundido with chorizo from Mojito & Plates by Douglas Rodriguez.

with others. Since 2013, he's led regular culinary tours to Cuba, taking tourists who are intrigued by the land of *ropa vieja*, along with the occasional “Top Chef” alumni who crave to cook alongside Cuban chefs. It's a cultural exchange of sorts, a hands-on study abroad program that puts Cuban fare and culture at the top of the lesson plan.

The tours haven't come without critics, though. Rodriguez admits the tours have been polarizing within the Cuban-American community, and he's even lost a few friends as a result of the trips. He's been accused of supporting the Castro regime and of exploiting the country's poor condition by parading wealthy Americans around it. To that end, Rodriguez pleads innocent. “There's nothing political about these tours,” he shrugs.

But the trips have been eye-opening for the clients as well as for Rodriguez, who says traveling to his parents' homeland has taught him not just about cuisine, but also about his heritage. In addition to Cuban chefs, Rodriguez says he has met historians who have introduced him to “secret recipes for Cuban dishes that most Cubans don't even know about.” He intends to produce a cookbook that will include these underground recipes. Like with all godfathers, though, Rodriguez has a master plan in mind: “My dream is to open a restaurant and cooking studio in Cuba,” he says.

When I meet Rodriguez at Alma de Cuba, he's sitting in the dimly lit restaurant on a plush white banquette seat that's flush against the wall, his hands clasped together, fingers loosely intertwined on the dark tabletop, looking like, well, the Godfather. There's a calmness about him, a stillness that surrounds this Godfather despite the

beginning murmurs of dinner service.

As restaurants come and go, Alma de Cuba, which means the “soul of Cuba,” is one of two Rodriguez restaurants still standing. Open since 2001, the three-story restaurant sticks out among Philadelphia's colonial and downtown buildings with its bright yellow facade—complete with ornately bordered white windows—that looks like it could have been plucked straight from Havana.

The idea to come to Philadelphia occurred when Starr, then a burgeoning restaurateur who had amassed only a fraction of his current 34 worldwide restaurants, was dining at Chicama. A few dishes in, he asked to speak to Rodriguez. As the two chatted, Starr said to Rodriguez, “I'm going to open a Latin restaurant in Philadelphia with or without you, but I'd rather do that with you.”

The chef's other still-standing restaurant is Mojito & Plates by Douglas Rodriguez in Sawgrass Mills, which opened in the spring. If you have a hard time believing someone like Rodriguez—a James Beard Award-winning chef whose restaurant Julia Child picked to dine at for her 80th birthday—would be connected to an establishment with the words “mojito” and “bar” in its name, then you wouldn't be alone. Although the original Bayside Marketplace and new Sawgrass Mills locations are known for their neon lights and pulsating music, Rodriguez wanted to prove that really, really, really good food could be paired with a place like this. While patrons might come in for the atmosphere and drinks, they'll find a surprising dose of incredible tapas and ceviches. Perhaps this is his way of proving that there's still a little Mango Gangster in him—that the Godfather can do just about anything. ■



A James Beard Award-winning chef, Douglas Rodriguez recently opened MojitoBar & Plates by Douglas Rodriguez and is leading culinary tours to Cuba.