

Bella Habana

-John Hoty

Finally, an authentic Cuban restaurant right on the beach! **Bella Habana** has opened its doors to beachgoers and snowbirds with, hands down, the best homemade Cuban cuisine around. Formerly the Red Grouper, **Bella Habana** hosted its munificent grand opening early in December to an anxious and ravenous crowd looking to sate their appetites with some of the most enticing, filling and delicious Cuban food ever introduced to us here in St. Pete Beach. But be warned, however: only the hungry may enter.

Bella Habana Restaurant owners Walter and Barb opened the Red Grouper last year and found that many of their loyal customers kept prodding them about why they hadn't eschewed the commonplace seafood restaurant and gone with their cultural instincts. Well, prod no more, loyal patrons, because Walter and Barb have heeded your advice and turned the Red Grouper into **Bella Habana**, their homespun Cuban kitchen where everything and anything on the menu has their own indigenous twist on great appetizers, sandwiches and entrees that are guaranteed to satisfy. For starters, feast your eyes on the appetizer section of the menu for succulent delights such as the Bandeja Mixta (a combo of roast pork, ham, Swiss cheese, Chorizo and olives), Chorizo "A la Espanola" (sliced Chorizo—a tasty sausage imported from Spain—sauteed with onions and olive oil and served with Cuban bread), or the leave-you-drooling Empanadas de Cangrejo - a homemade stone crab turnover with a hot sauce on the side for dunking. Delicious is an understatement, to suggest the very least. Move over to the "From the Land" segment of their portly menu and try the Lechon Asado, Bistec de Palomilla, Boliche Relleno, or the ever-popular Combo Cuba. You don't have to break out your Spanish-to-English dictionary for this place; every word on the carte means *mouth watering* and/or *sumptuous*. Tired of all the average Cuban sandwiches found at other beach locales? Wrap your paws around **Bella Habana's** Cuban sandwich and find out why nobody's going anywhere else. Seafood is still very available, only now it's not your run-of-the-mill offering like so many other establishments here on the beach. With their patented Cuban touches, all your favorite seafood dishes get a zestier, gratifying punch. And ooooh, the house specialties! **Bella Habana's** specialties are so awesome, so inspired, and so filling that they require a 2 person minimum and a nearly 45 minute grace period to prepare them justly. And after you've sampled their famous Paella de Mariscos - seafood yellow rice, filled with shrimp, scallops, mussels, stone crab, clams, calamari, grouper and lobster that is cooked with beer (sold!) and authentic Cuban spices - you'll never look at *any* food the same, ever. Leftovers are inevitable. All desserts, if there's room, are homemade, beckoning and seductive.

While patiently awaiting your meals, kick back, relax and enjoy **Bella Habana's** atmospheric touches that send you right over the Gulf and into the heart of Havana. Taste test one of their decadent margaritas or mojitos on special every day, 2-for-1. The wine selection ranges from reds and whites, all imported from Chile, Italy and Cuba, and their homemade sangria is never to

be ignored. More of a beer drinker? Treat yourself to their tap deliveries like Guinness, Bass, or a Stella. Thrill seekers can try the genuine Cuban espresso and coffees sure to keep those eyes open long after the sun goes down *and* comes back up. Live music courtesy of the *Hot Jazz Trio* bops into **Bella Habana** on the weekends for some of the hottest Latin jazz you'll ever hear. Everything you need for your authentic Cuban experience is all here.

Open Monday through Saturday from 11am to 10pm and Sundays from noon to 10pm, **Bella Habana** (5905 Gulf Boulevard in St. Pete Beach) is the ideal stage to quench your Cuban cravings. From their awesome homemade dishes, bona fide décor and aromas, to the standout hospitality of a friendly and attractive cast of servers, this truly marvelous eatery has everything just right. If you are a Cuban cuisine lover, as I am, then you'll never stray from this little piece of Havana sure to please every time. More information available at 367-1555.