



Still Afloat

ONE WEEK'S FOOD IN APRIL

Grains & Other Starchy Foods: \$1.08**

Malanga (potatolike vegetable), 9.9 lb; bread ration, 8.8 lb; potato ration, 6.6 lb; white rice ration, 6.6 lb; pasta ration, spaghetti, 2.2 lb; cornmeal, 1 lb.

Dairy: \$6.05**

Yogurt ration, $\frac{1}{2}$ 1.9 gal; cheese, 2.2 lb.

Meat, Fish & Eggs: \$15.71**

Chicken, 3.3 lb; pork chops, 2.2 lb; egg ration, 12; fish, $\frac{1}{2}$ 1.1 lb, caught by Ramon; pork leg, frozen, 1 lb.

Fruits, Vegetables & Nuts: \$4.19

Watermelons, $\frac{1}{2}$ 26.5 lb; yellow bananas, 6.8 lb; oranges, 4.4 lb; pineapple, 2.6 lb; limes, 2.2 lb, for drinks and preparation of fish; papayas, 2.2 lb; guava, 1.1 lb; white onions, 4.2 lb; green cabbage, 1 head; black beans, 1.7 lb; red beans, 1.7 lb; lettuce, 1.4 lb; cucumbers, 1.1 lb; garlic, 1.1 lb; tomatoes, 1.1 lb; Doña Tine tomato sauce, 1 box; red pepper, 8 oz; green pepper, 8 oz.

Condiments: \$4.08**

Vegetable oil ration, 1.1 qt; white sugar, 2.2 lb; salsa, 12 oz; red and green chili peppers, 8.8 oz; salt, 8.8 oz; Ybama vinegar, 4 fl oz; mayonnaise, 2.5 fl oz; black pepper, 2 oz; Maggi allspice, 2 oz; oregano, 2 oz; Wong Wing soy sauce, 0.9 fl oz; La Anita baji (seasoning made from annatto seeds), 0.3 oz.

In a rare moment, when not surrounded by the in-laws and cousins with whom they share a Colonial-era house, the Costa family—Ramon Costa Allouis, 39, Sandra Raymond Mundi, 38, and their children Lisandra, 16, and Fabio, 6—in the courtyard of their extended family's home in Havana with one week's worth of food. Cooking methods: indoor gas stove, outdoor home-made BBQ grill. Food preservation: refrigerator, grandfather's freezer chest in the courtyard.

Snacks & Desserts: \$5.00

Cakes, small, 10.

Prepared Food: \$3.05

Spaghetti sauce, $\frac{1}{2}$ 1.1 qt; during the week Lisandra has lunch at school or joins her brother Mario at her aunt's apartment for rice, beans, eggs, and/or fish. Ramon and Sandra eat the same foods for lunch at their places of employment.

Restaurants: \$10.00

Once a week, Sandra likes to go for Chinese food with the whole family; she likes fried rice.

Beverages: \$7.60

Ciego Montero TuKola cola, 2 1.6-qt bottles; Cristal beer, 7 12-fl-oz cans; coffee ration, 1.1 lb; Amor liquor, 8.5 fl oz; tap water, for drinking and cooking.

Miscellaneous: **

Cerelec ration, $\frac{1}{2}$ fed to dog.

$\frac{1}{2}$ Not in Photo

Food Expenditure for One Week: 1,475.88 Cuban pesos/\$56.76

**Total value of food rations, if purchased locally: \$13.16

First-time visitors to Cuba often say that it looks like time stopped around 1960. With old-fashioned cars, crumbling historic architecture—and amazingly polite, respectful children—Havana exudes a charm reminiscent of Miami Beach, and America, before it became the land of corporate-owned hotels and fast-food joints. But time hasn't stopped in Cuba. Life continues—births, deaths, marriages, divorces, schooling, employment, and retirement.

ANGELINA AND EURIPIDES COSTA'S HAVANA HOME is both gathering spot and thoroughfare for the entire extended family and its circle of friends. Teenage boys headed for the bay tramp through the old Spanish Colonial with snorkels and spearfishing gear, then pass back through hours later, sandy-footed, proudly toting a sea fish or two. "Only a mouthful," observes the Costas' daughter Eulina, her smile softening the words. A troop of 6-year-olds zips in looking for the youngest Costa—Fabio, who tears off with them. Euripides, the family patriarch, just back from a government ration depot, walks through the house pulling the family's monthly food ration on a rickety cart. He's headed to the back courtyard, where bread goes into the deep freeze—food insurance—and rice is added to the family crock. Other times, he can be found in his rocking chair, bare feet straddling its rockers, watching TV in the living room, but keeping an eye out the window for friends who often stop by. He's retired from Cuba's nationalized cigar industry.

Euripides and Angelina partitioned off their small two-story house in Havana's Marianao District when their children began to marry. Eulina, now divorced, lives here with her children, Iris, 15, and Javier, 16. Her brother Orlando lived here as well, until he moved his family up the street. The Costas carved out a living space for Eulina's brother Ramon and his family off the courtyard—a concrete-block apartment, amazingly skinny for its height. Ramon and his wife, Sandra, have to pass through Euripides' or Eulina's part of the house to get to their apartment from the street—luckily, no one minds the interruptions.

Sandra says a quick hello to her father-in-law as she hurries through his house to hers

to prepare dinner. She's a courthouse secretary and always seems to be running late. Daughter Lisandra, 16, is washing vegetables at the sink outside her family's apartment. Her mother changes quickly into shorts and a striped top—even this early in April the weather is steamy—then pares and slices the potato-like *malanga* into wedges to make French fries in her small outdoor kitchen. She'll serve them with a spicy lime-juice-and-garlic *mojo* sauce and also make *congrí* (rice and beans), a standard Cuban accompaniment.

Sandra's son Fabio, 6, has arrived back home to weigh his dinner options. He checks out his mother's kitchen, then doubles back to see what is on his grandmother's menu, hoping for spaghetti. "*Arroz con pollo*," Fabio reports back. "I'll eat here." "His favorite food is spaghetti with cheese and sugar," says Sandra as she cooks the *malanga* fries. "He would eat it every night, if he could." What would he want to eat otherwise? Hot dogs, all day, every day.

Meanwhile, Ramon arrives home from work, sets the small table in their kitchen with mismatched plates and utensils, then opens a beer and hangs out with his father until dinner's ready. Christina Aguilera is blasting forth from the stereo in Eulina's part of the house, so the teenagers up on the roof can hear it. Christina's holding her own against a Spanish rapper enthusing from another stereo, and cheering football crowds on the TV in Euripides' living room.

Lisandra sits on the steep steps that lead to the "weight room"—a covered rooftop spot with a pigeon coop, bar bells, and a breeze—where two of her male cousins are working out and looking at their muscles in a small hand mirror. The rooftop served as the location of Eulina's beauty parlor until she moved the business down to the front room, facing the street, when the rules against private enterprise began to loosen.

Like most Cubans, Sandra and Ramon, who works at the port for the government-owned import company *Cubalse*, earn nearly the same government-paid salary per month—roughly the equivalent of \$15 U.S. More than half the population, including the Costas, also gets some kind of financial assistance from relatives living outside the country. The government takes 10 percent of that money as a tax. Utilities, transportation, and housing are heavily subsidized, and education and health care are free. All Cubans receive subsidized food, which is distributed monthly via a ration card. They pay a token amount for the food. Unfortunately, the

rations don't last the entire month, forcing Cubans to buy higher-priced food from farmers' markets and state stores, often with money sent by their émigré relatives.

In the early '90s, like many people living in Havana, the Costas used to raise pigs in their courtyard, one at a time, then slaughter and eat them. Virtually no one does this any more, because keeping a pigpen in the city is dirty and smelly. "It was too much trouble," says Euripides. And besides, meat is more readily available now.

Food rations vary, depending on what the government has available each month. There's always a pound or two of protein—some months, a little chicken; others, a soy and meat blend; sometimes even fish. Additional items might include coffee, sugar, salt, bread, beans, rice, and oil. Younger children get yogurt. Older adults might get Cerelac—an instant cereal. There might also be non-food items such as soap, toothpaste, detergent, and tobacco. Nothing goes to waste. No one in the family likes to eat the Cerelac, so they feed it to their guard dog, who spends his days leaning off the roof, barking at passersby.

EL BLOQUEO

El bloqueo (the blockade, as it is called), imposed by the United States during a dangerous game of superpower brinkmanship that has endured to this day, has, in the opinion of critics, both created hardships for the general populace and helped to make Fidel Castro a living icon—the proverbial David struggling against the U.S. Goliath. The economic embargo had less effect on the island nation when the Soviet bloc was still united and was Cuba's chief financial backer and military guardian. With the demise of the Soviet Union, Cuba's financial woes increased a hundredfold and Castro grudgingly allowed a market economy to emerge.

The Costa family bears no responsibility for the text in this chapter. It is based solely on observation. All information about the government was supplied by other sources.

CUBA

- Population: 11,308,764
- Population of Havana: 2,411,100
- Area in square miles: 42,792 (slightly smaller than Pennsylvania)
- Population density per square mile: 264
- Urban population: 76%
- Population born after Castro became head of state: 70%
- Life expectancy, male/female: 75/79 years
- Fertility rate (births per woman): 1.6
- Literacy rate, male/female, 15 years and older: 97/97%
- Caloric intake available daily per person: 3,152 calories
- Undernourished population: 11%
- Annual alcohol consumption per person (alcohol content only): 3.6 quarts
- GDP per person in PPP \$ (Purchasing Power Parity: an adjustment for what equivalent local goods would cost in the U.S.): \$5,259
- Total annual health expenditure per person in \$ and as a percent of GDP: \$185/7.2
- Physicians per 100,000 people: 596
- Overweight population, male/female: 55/57%
- Obese population, male/female: 12/21%
- Percent of population age 20 years and older with diabetes: 6
- Available supply of sugar and sweeteners per person per year: 137 pounds
- Meat consumption per person per year: 71 pounds
- McDonald's restaurants: 1 (on US base at Guantanamo)
- Cigarette consumption per person per year: 1,343

RATION RATIONALE

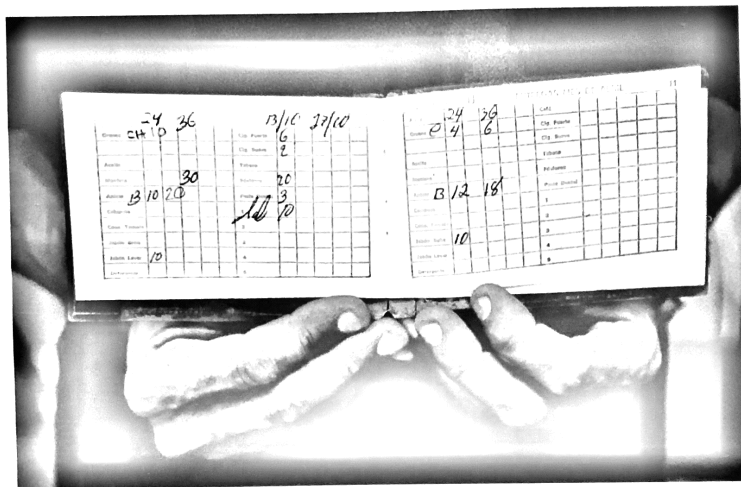
Since 1962, the Cuban government has issued every household a *libreta*, a ration book that entitles the family to purchase set quantities of food for next to nothing in the nation's thousands of state-run *bodegas* (grocery stores) and *placitas* (fruit and vegetable kiosks). In early 2005, for instance, half a kilogram (about a pound) of rice cost just 18 Cuban cents—six-tenths of a U.S. cent. In addition to their *libreta* food, children get free school lunches; many adults' offices also provide lunch; and the elderly eat in special subsidized restaurants.

Rice, dried beans, cooking oil, eggs, beef, soap, milk, bread, sugar, cigars, and coffee—all are available in the *bodegas* and *placitas*, although sometimes only in tiny quantities.

Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow subsidized the system with generous shipments of low-priced fuel and food. Afterward, things got tight. Cubans responded by planting urban gardens, which now produce more than a third of the country's vegetables. Still, there is often not quite enough; the monthly per-person beef ration is often equivalent to the meat in two Big Macs.

Today the *libreta* provides a third to a half of a typical family's food; Cubans must obtain the rest from the open agricultural markets, which Castro legalized in 1994 in another response to the fall of Communism worldwide. To Cubans, who typically make 200–300 pesos (\$8–\$12 USD) a month, these are ruinously expensive. On the open market in 2005, half a kilo of rice cost four pesos (15 cents, USD), twenty-two times the subsidized price.

Despite the flaws in the system, very few people go hungry—in stark contrast, as Cuban officials like to point out, to the situation in many other Latin American nations. Fidel Castro's many critics are unimpressed. In their view, the only reason food is rationed at all is because of the decline in agricultural productivity associated with the Communist system, which collectivized farms. As proof, they point out that many rationed substances, such as sugar, coffee, chicken, and cigars, were abundant in Cuba before the revolution.



FIELD NOTE

The best food in Cuba, my friend Alberto told me, is found in *paladares*—small government-licensed restaurants in private homes. I had been telling him how much I liked the typical Cuban combination *congrí* (rice and black beans mixed together), fried bananas, and *malanga*, a root that tastes a bit like potatoes and is prepared like French fries. My friend responded by leading the way to an alley in a neighborhood nearby. Between a crumbling Colonial-style house and an old garage we found ourselves in the arboreal courtyard of a *paladar*: a modest home outfitted with tables, chairs, and a TV suspended under a canopy behind the bar. A large middle-aged woman in an apron greeted us. Beside her stood the proud owner of the *paladar*, her husband, Ricardo Alfonso Rodríguez, who moonlights on weekends as the drummer in a rock band called the Taksons. After a warm welcome and a cold beer, I made the mistake of inquiring about his band. To make a long story short, in goes a videotape and on goes the TV, full blast. His band does not play the lyrical Cuban music celebrated in films like the *Buena Vista Social Club*. Half an hour later, steaming plates of pork and rice and beans arrived, accompanied by more beer, the latter being a surprisingly effective antidote to aural heavy metal poisoning. Oh, did I forget to mention the owner/drummer was a real short order cook? He was three feet tall.

— Peter

Cuban families receive ration cards (*above left*) that in theory let them obtain all their food staples at astonishingly low, state-subsidized prices. In practice, the cards don't quite cover everything, so Cubans must venture into the vastly more expensive *agromercados*, open markets that sell products from the few government-sanctioned private farms and surpluses from cooperative farms that have fulfilled their state quotas. With Sandra Costa carefully watching, a vendor (*bottom left*) measures out cornmeal mush in the Agromercado 19 y 78 open market in Havana's Marianao district.