



A peek through the windows of Miami's coffee culture 2:04

RESTAURANT NEWS & REVIEWS

What one man learned after visiting 100 Cuban coffee 'ventanitas' along Calle Ocho

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She holds all the power.

So Jacob Katel is extra nice to the window waitress at La Palma restaurant's "ventanita," one of Miami's ubiquitous walk-up windows, as she makes the black-gold jet fuel that powers Miami. Too much sugar mixed into the first drops of fresh-brewed espresso and the resulting Cuban coffee will be cloying. Too little and, ugh, *que amargo!* A bitter pill.

"She can make or break it. If she likes you or doesn't like you. If she's in a good mood or a bad mood. You got to treat her with respect," he says as cars race four feet away on Southwest Eighth Street on a recent Tuesday.

Katel sips the 3/4 ounces of steaming *café cubano* from the tiny, corrugated plastic cup and his whole face changes.

"Yeah, that's it right there! Woo!" he says.

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Jake Katel finishes his Cuban coffee at La Palma, one of his favorite "ventanitas," which has been open since 1979.

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She got it just right, Katel said. And he should know. Katel, a writer, photographer and artist, spent six weeks documenting Miami's ventanita culture by visiting more than 100 walk-up windows, mostly along Calle Ocho, but from Key Biscayne to the edge of the Everglades.

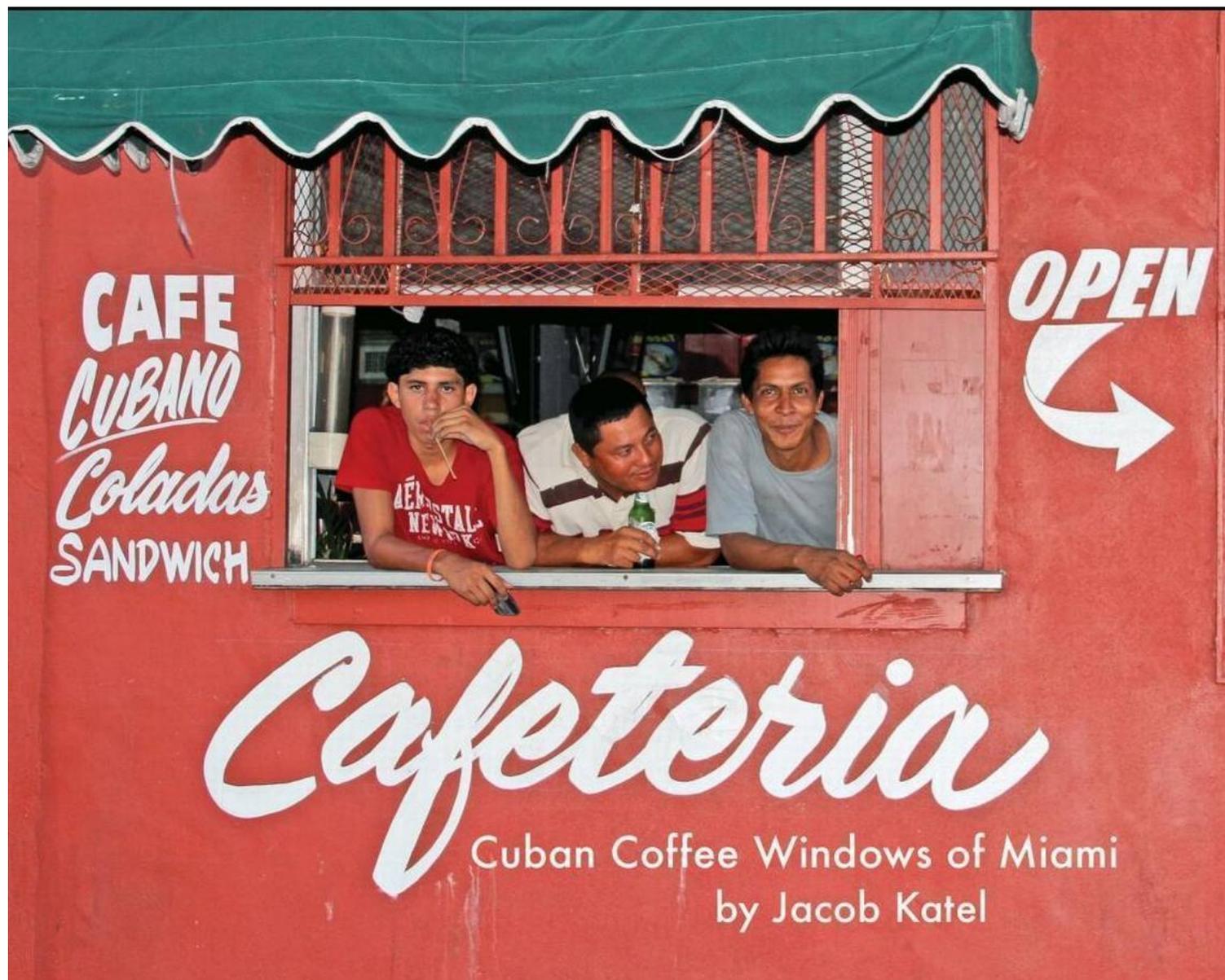
The result was "Cuban Coffee Windows of Miami," a picture-rich, 417-page book that he will discuss at next month's Miami Book Fair, which runs Nov. 12-18. It is available as an E-book or print-on-demand through Amazon.

"I wanted to attempt to show as many as humanly possible," Katel said.

His trek across Southwest Eighth Street was a self-guided education. Katel, 35, was raised in Miami, the son of Russian-Jewish parents. He used to watch them drink Cuban coffee, but he never took part. It wasn't until he left South Florida for several years after graduating from Coral Gables High and returned at 20 that he walked up to a ventanita and asked for his first colada.

"I was living in a kitchen cabinet warehouse that my friend's dad owned behind Palmetto Hospital in Hialeah and playing in a hardcore punk rock band called Hellhounds," he wrote in an email. "I walked over to the gas station a couple blocks away with the guys from the band and learned what a colada was and how to order, and I guess it changed my life."

The people he met at the ventanita, the conversations he overheard — that's where he felt connected to Miami culture. And it was unlike anything he'd experienced anywhere else.



In "Cuban Coffee Windows of Miami," writer and photographer Jacob Katel documented his visits to more than 100 "ventanitas" along Southwest 8th Street in Miami. Courtesy Jacob Katel

The ventanita was where he stopped in the middle of the day as a freelance writer and photographer to get story ideas, hear the latest Miami gossip and fuel himself for the second half of the day. In the wee hours, the 24-hour ventanitas, such as the one at La Palma (6091 SW Eighth St., West Miami), is where he met Miami's second shift.

“You could strike up a conversation with someone and never see them again, but learn something that could change your life,” he said. “It could be a cop standing next to a drug dealer. It could be rich person standing next to a poor person who plays the lottery right there and becomes a rich person.”

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That pointed mix of cultures is what drew Katel to writing about and photographing Miami’s ventanitas. He decided to let Calle Ocho be the road map for his research, tracing Miami’s growth from east to west. And he went at all times of day and night.

There he met the characters that make up Miami. The Colombian guy who claimed to have delivered provisions from the cities to the native populations in the jungles of Colombia. The Miami-Dade bus driver fueling up for his fifth colada of the day. The Grammy-nominated Locos Por Juana after a gig. A woman who claimed her father was a Sandinista. (“She was maybe crazy but maybe not. You couldn’t tell. But I’m not there to judge them,” Katel said.)

Fact and fiction wove together, as it so often does in the Magic City.

“You can learn all these things in a conversation over a cup of coffee,” Katel said.



Jacob Katel calls Cuban coffee “jet fuel,” a mix of caffeine and sugar that he spent six weeks documenting at Miami’s walk-up windows.

Jacob Katel - Courtesy “Cuban Coffee Windows of Miami”

In the year since he made his trip, some spots opened and closed. Others, such as Versailles and Oasis cafe, remain living ventanita monuments.

“Some things need to be documented, especially in Miami, where things come and go, are built and disappear like sandcastles,” Katel said.

As he speaks, the restaurant’s manager, Pablo Fajardo, approaches, and joins the conversation, gathering around the coffee that draws them.

Katel learns that Pitbull used to serenade one of the late, older ventanita waitresses here. And Sen. Marco Rubio, who grew up in the neighborhood across the street in West Miami, playfully nicknamed one of the longtime waitresses La Guajira because she is from Cuba's farming country of Oriente.



Writer and photographer Jacob Katel found that cultures meld as well as the sugar and caffeine at Miami's "ventanitas" such as this one at El Cristo Restaurant, in the heart of Little Havana.

Jacob Katel - Courtesy "Cuban Coffee Windows of Miami"

Those Miami stories — a mix of factual and apocryphal — give the ventanitas their character.

"They say about Cuban coffee that the beans are from Brazil. The machine is from Italy. The waitress is from Honduras. So what makes it Cuban coffee?" he said. "It's the way you make it. That *mezcla* — that mix — is a true Miami thing."

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CUBAN COFFEE 101

Cafecito or Café Cubano: A small but potent dose of Cuban coffee served in a thimble-sized cup. Twice as strong as American coffee and super sweet, you can sip or down it like a shot.

Colada: This is what you order when you want to make friends. It typically comes in a large Styrofoam cup, with a stack of four or more small plastic cups. Pour and pass around at the counter or bring it back to the office. You may get that raise after all.

Café con leche: A Latin latte – hot, steamed milk with a shot of Cuban coffee. If you’re watching your sugar intake, ask for sin azucar (without sugar) and add the sweet stuff to your own taste. Good for breakfast or as a comforting cup of warmth on one of Miami’s rain-soaked afternoons.

Cortadito: Cuban coffee with a few tablespoons of milk (a short café con leche). This is a good introduction to cafecito if the straight stuff seems too strong at first.

Jodi Mailander Farrell



Photographer Jake Katel set out to tell the story of Miami’s love affair with Cuban coffee by photographing all the “ventanitas” on Calle Ocho, from the beach to the Everglades. He is photographed at La Palma, one of his favorite “ventanitas,” on Tuesday, October 24, 2017. **CARL JUSTE** - cjuste@miamiherald.com

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