

Lunch in the Time of Cholera

A visit to a Colombian restaurant shows how much the country still treasures its greatest writer



Great writer (and eater) Gabriel García Márquez in Cartagena

CARTAGENA During a recent visit to the city of Cartagena, I ventured to the Getsemani neighborhood to try La Cocina de Pepina, a restaurant renowned for its traditional cuisine—and for having had the late, great writer Gabriel García Márquez as a regular.

The place has two small rooms, the first with a cash bar and two small tables, the second with a few more tables and a mirror on the back wall. It's clearly a family enterprise. The striking green-eyed man who kept me outside until the restaurant opened—not five minutes to noon, not a minute to noon, but exactly at noon—was the nephew of the original owner, Maria Josefina Yances Guerra, also known as Pepina.

When I told him I was here because of García Márquez, the host, Christian, became softer. That's the wonderful and strange thing about Colombians—whenever I mention my favorite writer, they act as though I've come to see a family friend. For Christian, it's not just a matter of national pride; “Gabo” and his wife, Mercedes, were actual friends of his aunt's.

When not seating customers or taking orders, Christian would stop by my table and keep me company. Like the great novelist, he told me, his aunt grew up near Colombia's northern coast. As well as being an accomplished chef, Pepina was an intellectual, and whenever Gabo and his friends came in, she'd prepare something truly exceptional and then join them in conversation.

“Where is she now?” I asked. She died in the summer of 2014, Christian replied, a few months after Gabo. Later, he produced a cookbook Pepina had written. From it, I learned the many ways in which cooks here prepare seafood—from escabeche, which uses an acidic marinade created by the Moors in Spain, to frying, the preferred method among Afro-Colombians.

Pepina also lamented how modernity has diminished regional cuisine. Who wants to smoke, salt, braise, or boil a dish when one can simply refrigerate it and pop it in a microwave? Her concerns reminded me of Gabo's nostalgia for Colombia's vanishing riverboats. Some things take more time, but they are all the better for it. —YOO JIN NA