

## Cafecito Cubano

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When I say the word “coffee,” I don’t want to invoke the wrong image in your mind. To many, coffee is the iced vanilla latte that you pick up at Starbucks or McCafe before work, or the instant cup of Folgers your parents make on Monday mornings, or the Affogato you tried at that one Italian place on a dinner date. See, my coffee isn’t any of that. My coffee isn’t mud or joe or java. Even using the word coffee to describe it could be considered a sin, so forgive me God for having equated my *cafecito* to any of those other drinks because it’s not that. It goes by different names.

The first time you have *cafecito*, it’s not in pure form. What you have is *cafe con leche*, a cup of the strongest sweetest cuban espresso diluted by milk that your *tia abuela* steamed for you in the saucepan. And, if you’re like me, your coffee virginity was stolen by your *pomito*, a baby bottle, because you could barely chew solids let alone hold a mug in your hand. *Cafe con leche* are the training wheels you attach to your bicycle as you attempt to pedal up this caffeinated hierarchy. It’s your go to drink order at Vicky or Ricky or Sergio’s when *Mami* wants to pick up *croquetas* and *pastelitos* at the Cuban bakery in the corner. It’s the aroma of Sunday mornings after cousin sleepovers, arriving at the table together to find a tray of *tostada*, *cafe con leche*’s best friend. Eyes swollen from so little sleep and stomachs yearning for the sensation of that buttery bread soaked in sweetness, we’d dip our strips of toast straight into those mugs and make messes of our plates as the golden liquid dripped everywhere. And *cafe con leche* might be for babies, but you never let it go. You order it at Versailles, the most famous Cuban spot in town, on the night of your best friend’s graduation. It doesn’t matter that it’s 11 pm or that you’re eighteen now, you want to feel as young and carefree as you did all those times you weren’t old enough to drink a real *cafecito*.

The older you get, the quicker your taste for it evolves. Pale mugs of *cafe con leche* become scalding styrofoam to-go cups of *cortadito*, a smaller caramel-colored one to one ratio of cuban espresso to milk, a more mature version of what you were so used to. Eventually, you learn to ditch the milk altogether and drink your *cafecito* the way you’ve watched adults do so your entire life, holding that disposable espresso shot cup between your thumb and your index finger, or being allowed a serving in one of your *abuela*’s collectible *tacitas*, colorful miniature mugs with matching saucers. This essential evolution is seamless: as you grow taller, the cup grows smaller. But the simplicity changes when you learn to make *cafecito* on your own. That’s when finally, after years of drinking droves of dark brew, you get some skin in the game.

You load the *cafetera* up with staple brands like *Cafe Bustelo* or *La Llave* while your heart pounds beneath your chest. The trick to brewing the perfect cup is in what we call *espumita*, and *espumita* is a waiting game. As the coffeemaker stirs, you painstakingly pray that you will catch the very first bit of brew. The goal is to pour that first draw onto a cushion of sugar, mix until your wrist cramps, and create a foamy frothy substance that will give your espresso the kick that makes it Cuban—the kick that makes it *yours*. Once you’ve served your first batch of *cafecito cubano*, once it’s met the mouths and obtained the approval of the most experienced espresso sippers you know, that is when you’ve been on both ends of this dark brown bargain.

Recently, however, I discovered another end. One that’s just as bittersweet as our infamous

drink of choice. To have my morning cup of *cafecito* is more than just routine; it's a reminder. A daily reminder of how fortunate I am to have been born into this life when someone like my mother, who prepares this drink for me, was born into the brutal reality that exists ninety miles away from the shores of the country my *abuelo* and *abuela* sacrificed everything to bring her to. A country that became their home. My lively Miami coexists with my mother's hot Havana a stretch of ocean away. My *abuela*'s souvenir *tazas* depict images of big cities like New York and Chicago while her walls are covered in bright blue ceramics of her island.

And what a coincidence, then, that Chicago is the city you'll fly into this Fall as you go on to start college. How do you tell her that you're going to leave this home they've built for you? How do you say that you're going to find a new home in a different place altogether? Well, you have to ask them to put their faith in you. To trust that you soaked up not just the coffee, but the example they set for you. That you wouldn't know how to take risks like these if it weren't for the kinds they'd taken to get you here. And will that ease their minds? Will their worrying cease once they've heard those words spill out of your coffee covered lips? I'm not entirely certain. But I've packed my *cafetera*, and I bought ground coffee of my own. So, this is where the third end of the bargain becomes mine to bear. Now, I take our treacherous but terrific liquid legacy with me across a country vastly greater than the small island it started on and serve it up for others to indulge in, so that I might live out the dreams of my ancestors who never found a way out. And for those who did, I'll be living proof that it was worth it.