



Peter Hvizdak / Hearst Connecticut Media

Owner and chef Luis Cubillan, of Mosaico restaurant, on Main Street in Branford with his employee and mother, chef Mary Cubillan, who cook Venezuelan urban food often created with an upscale twist.

Branford's Mosaico serves up Venezuelan street food

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By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — On the Fourth of July, Branford's Chris Doyle and his friends caught about 15 black sea bass. He knew exactly how he wanted to prepare them.

The week before, he'd had ceviche at Mosaico, the pocket-sized Venezuelan restaurant on Main Street in Branford. He'd ordered tostones, which are fried plantains. The chef, Luis Cubillan, asked if he wanted to try it with an octopus ceviche.

"It wasn't on the menu," he said. "It was out of this world."

When Doyle got home with his black sea bass a week later, he Googled ceviche, a Peruvian invention that involves marinating raw fish in citrus juices. He realized he was out of his depth. That was when he decided, as he put it, "to take it to the master."

Cubillan wasn't always a chef. Until 2015, he was living with his wife Jennifer and young daughter Hannah in Valencia, Venezuela's third largest city, about 100 miles west of Caracas.

He and Jennifer had good jobs. He managed logistics for a group of 12 restaurants around the country. She worked in human resources. They had a house, a car. They had a young daughter, Hannah, who's now 7.

What they didn't have was security. "We never felt safe," Jennifer said.

No wonder. By 2015, when Luis and Jennifer decided to make a new life for themselves, Venezuela, a lush, oil-rich region that formerly was Latin America's wealthiest country, had descended into chaos.

Its population of 300 million was "facing dire food and medicine shortages, frequent power outages



Mosaico specializes in arepas and other tasty offerings that can be eaten there or ordered for takeout.

... and rampant violent crime," news website Vox reported around that time.

In Valencia alone, "murders more than doubled in 2014," as USATODAY.com detailed, "pushing (it) to the world's seventh and the country's second most dangerous city."

Ultimately, the decision came down to one factor.

"We wanted to give our daughter a chance at a better life," Jennifer said.

In August 2015, they settled in Norwalk and are seeking political asylum.

"We left everything behind, family, friends, everything," she said.

Jennifer got a job in a laundromat, and currently works as a nanny for a Norwalk family. Luis worked as a dishwasher, a line cook, an Uber driver, and a pizza delivery man. He plowed snow. All the while, he was running a catering business in Venezuelan cuisine at their home.

"I learned cooking from my mother, my grandmother and my uncle," Luis said. That uncle, Giovanni Nessi, has three restaurants in Rome. "My uncle inspired me," Luis said.

"Always Luis has loved to cook, from when he was very young," said Jennifer, who met him in college 20 years ago. "Always his

dream has been to open a restaurant. I just feel so proud of him."

Fast forward to summer 2018. Jennifer had seen a listing for a restaurant to lease in Branford. One Sunday, they drove to Main Street.

"It was love at first sight," Luis said, referring to Branford. Likewise, the cozy confines of the space next door to Branford Jewelers. "It was what we'd been working for, saving for, ever since we got here."

"This place, is a miracle."

They opened in November, naming the restaurant Mosaico, after the combination of different flavors — from Spanish to Italian to French and American — that characterize Venezuelan cuisine. "My idea was to make my own original flavor," Luis said.

That rich gastronomic diversity might be one reason business has been humming since. Another may be the surge in popularity in Venezuelan urban food, boosted, no doubt, by an influx of Venezuelan immigration in recent years.

More simply, it's probably because, as Branford's Kathy Kessler put it on a recent afternoon at Mosaico, "it's tasty, it's filling, and it's light."

Particularly the arepa, a

small pita made with corn flour and filled with a variety of ingredients. Kessler was enjoying a Reina Pepiada Arepa with chicken and avocado. For Luis, who stuffs his arepas with everything from shredded beef with cheese or bacon to baked pork to black beans and scrambled eggs, the Latin American staple is, it seems, like a blank palette.

The arepa is not only "very healthy, because we make it in the oven, and don't fry it, and it's gluten-free, it also gives you a way to express yourself, be creative," he said, as he peeled and diced avocados in the spotless kitchen, which is wide open to the gently-lit front area.

Alongside Cubillan was his mother Mary, who was preparing Pabellon, a plate of rice, shredded beef in stew, stewed black beans, and sweet plantain. His mother-in-law also helped out. Rene Soto, a Guatemalan-born artist who lives in Norwalk, pitched in, his vibrant paintings adorning the walls.

It's a family affair at Mosaico and the customers, it seems, feel it too — especially, Chris Doyle.

When he brought in the black sea bass, "Luis said 'no problem,'" and got to work, Doyle recalled.

"What sets Luis apart is his attention to detail," Doyle said. "Something as simple as a (Caracas street) burger he puts his heart and soul into."

"If you go in and hang out a little while, you'll probably find out there's a lot more than what's on the menu."

Mosaico is on 539 Main St., Branford. 475-208-0380; for menu, visit places.singleplatform.com; to order take-out, visit seamless.com or grubhub.com.