

Molly Mandell

James Burke



MADE IN CUBA

LUSTER

El Negro

Farmer

El Negro recently turned 70, he reveals. He is perched on a chair outside of his kitchen, a small freestanding structure that he built himself and one of the oldest constructions on the property. Inside, his wife Amarylis is preparing lunch—a chicken butchered that morning alongside the popular black-bean-and-rice staple *arroz congri* and fresh tomatoes. Her stove consists of a grate atop a small wood fire, and neighbors praise her cooking as some of the best in the area. Alongside the midday meal, El Negro serves his take on the mojito: coconut water, anise flower and orange rind, all from the yard, in addition to the staples, sugar and rum.

Like most Cuban farmers, El Negro wears a long-sleeve, button-down shirt and pants despite bludgeoning heat and high humidity. He takes a sip from his glass of rum, which he drinks neat, and adds, “This is where I was born and raised. This same land.” The land is also his livelihood, his security and his passion. “Here, the chicken we eat is raised in the yard,” he explains. “The egg is laid by the hen. The beans, rice, vegetables, fruit? They come from the field.”

Much of what El Negro has learned and the philosophy he has developed is self-taught. “My father worked in agriculture,” he says. “But he did not understand or appreciate things: to plant trees so that they last longer than you and the others that come back to enjoy them—your children and grandchildren, friends and neighbors.” El Negro relishes sharing mangoes from his trees with visitors and drinking coffee grown in his own backyard. “I may be very poor, but for me, this is the best life” he muses. “I have lived as God intended. I have my job, my wife, my children, and there is nothing more.”

El Negro is largely self-sufficient. There is of course his food, most of which comes from the immediate surroundings. There is his house, which he built with the help of his children, friends and neighbors in the early 2010s. There are his oxen, which he calls “Cuba’s machinery,” and small things, like the knife sheath that he made from a retired boot. There are also his plant-based remedies. “We practically never have to go to the pharmacy,” he beams with pride. Amarylis adds, “I was asthmatic when I moved here, but he cured me.”

Familiarity with medicinal plants is relatively common in Cuba. “This knowledge comes from Cuba’s natives, from our ancestors. It has been passed from generation to generation,” he says. The farmer goes on to describe cures for the flu, throat infections, osteoarthritis and ulcers. He notes, however, that younger generations are increasingly disinterested and that the practice is becoming a lost art. He laments this change and is combatting it by sharing his expertise with his community and kin.

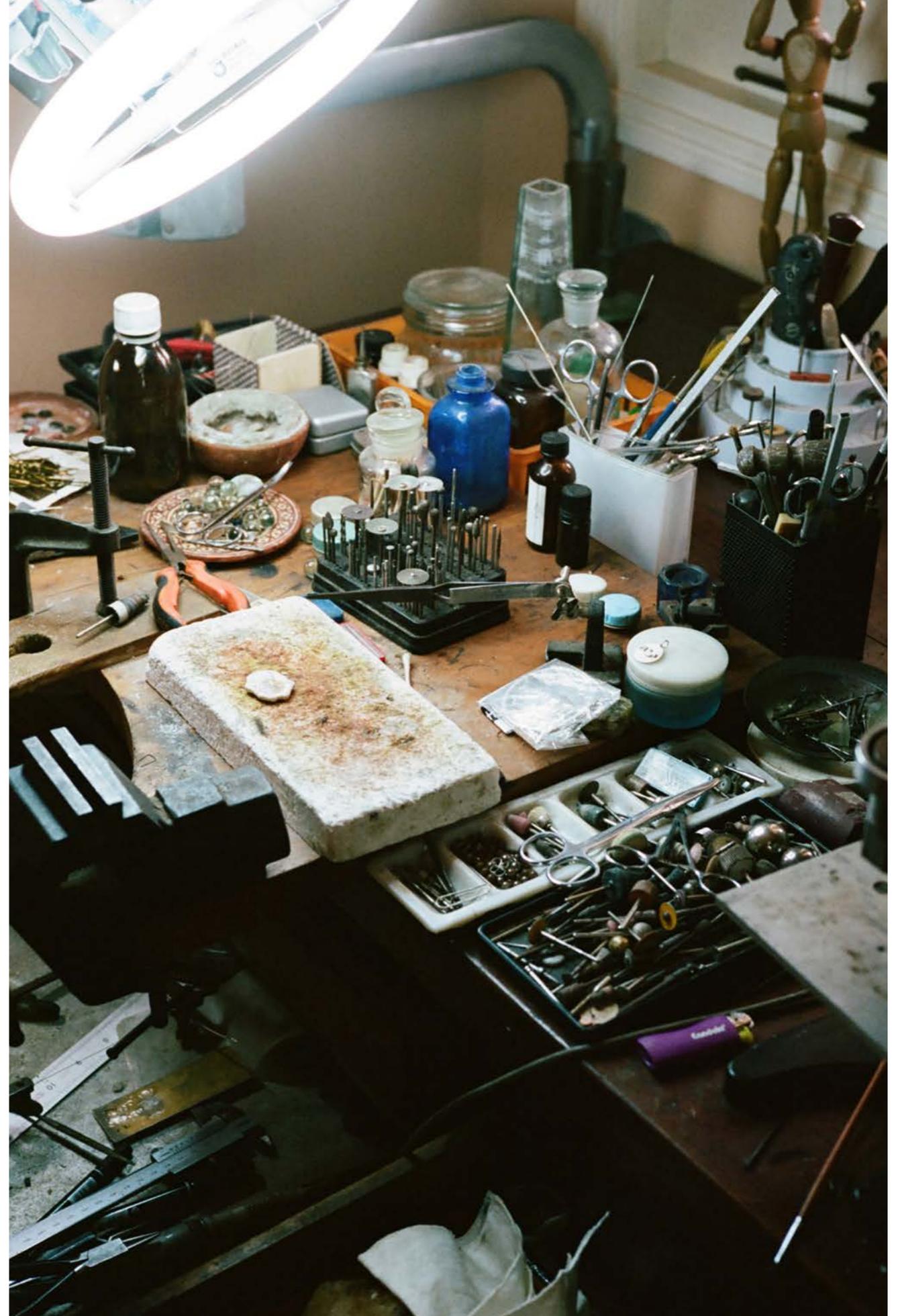
El Negro and Amarylis have cultivated a modern-day Cuban “Brady Bunch” family. Each has two children from former marriages and together, they have one son. The pair also has eleven grandchildren, which makes for lively family reunions (El Negro’s favorite is the annual New Year’s pig roast). El Negro has taught Amarylis and his children about life on the land and while he hopes to pass along his skills to the rest of the family, sharing his values is his principal goal. “I want to teach them to be honest, never to take from or harm anyone else, to study hard and to work and live with everything that they have.”





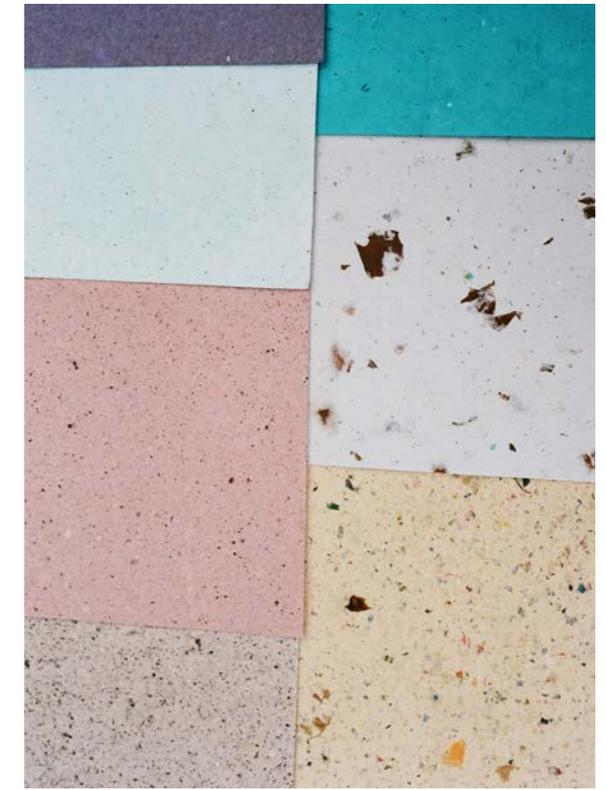
Ana Livia

Jewelry Designer



Ana Livia

Jewelry Designer



All around Yuyú, sheets of soon-to-be paper are affixed to cloths and hang dry like recently cleaned laundry. Bits of chopped up paper and cardboard, categorized by color, wait in big plastic bags to be soaked in water. After they are wetted and sufficiently softened, the pieces are scooped into a standard kitchen blender, accompanied by a liquid solution, and pulverized. The pulp is then poured into a large basin—a plastic barrel halved lengthwise (for most of the operation's existence, Yuyú has used her daughter's baby bath).

Yuyú demonstrates the next step, as she often does for local schools and youth groups, by dipping a screen into the basin to cover it in the pulp. She places a recycled piece of fabric on top and the excess water is removed with a sponge. The process repeats until a stack of wet paper is placed in the handmade press and squeezed, before being hung to dry.

"Really, it is the process that is the hallmark of my work," Yuyú says. "We sometimes face difficulties, a lack of certain materials, but with the strength and resilience to understand what is possible: making beautiful, high-quality products from the resources available to us." In addition to notebooks and folders that she sells to visitors, she creates pamphlets for the same foundation that supported her start and menus for local restaurants.

Though she has successfully built a sustainable business and prides herself on an aesthetic line of products, Yuyú still feels that her efforts are just the tip of the iceberg in generating a more environmentally conscious culture. It is that greater objective that drives her day in and day out: "I want to contribute just one grain of awareness to society about the need to make a better, healthier world. That is my true goal." Such ambitions, she notes, are what makes her work both exciting and difficult. "The most challenging part of my job is getting people to understand the significance of using recycled paper," she says. "But it's so satisfying to see the finished product, to know that it's made from something discarded, something that we have given a new life."

Kadir likens restoring formerly vibrant neon signs to giving someone a makeover. When they are displayed, he says, they allow viewers to reflect on Cuba's economic and social situation.



On Happiness

In 2017, when Daymé Arocena released her second full-length album *Cubafonia*, *The Guardian* dubbed her “Cuba’s finest young female singer.” *NPR* went on to describe her sound as “a magical mash up of The Queen of Latin Music, Celia Cruz, and The Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin.” Despite her successes, Arocena remains modest, timid even, off the stage. Yet, like her voice, the musician’s laugh is powerful, her spirit contagious. A visit to her childhood home, filled with photos of her and her younger brother—think Quinceañera and other early milestones—feels more like an afternoon with a childhood best friend than one of the most successful young musicians in Cuba. Sitting in her living room, bowl of strawberry ice cream in hand, Arocena muses on the definition of happiness.

I grew up in a little neighborhood called Santo Suarez, in the Diez de Octubre municipality of Havana. There is no other way for me to describe this neighborhood than to say that it’s the place of rumba. People dance in the streets, play dominoes, drink rum. I was raised in a small house—there were 22 of us and two bedrooms. But thinking back on home, my memories aren’t of hardship. They are of my family laughing, happy.

I was born in 1992. It was a complicated moment in Cuba, the Special Period. We often had no electricity. Every time that the lights went out, my family would sing. They had plates, spoons, forks, and would bang them on the windows, filling the house with rumba and dance. With those times came lots of heavy moments in Cuba, but I remember how much fun my family had together. Their spirit is with me every single day, and it is that spirit that keeps me going. In a way, these experiences were reminiscent of how the slaves lived in Cuba. They worked incredibly hard, the sun cooking and burning their skin. But they were always singing. That is the spirit of Africa—there’s this song I love that says, “We don’t have caviar, but we have corn.” The most important gift that my family and neighborhood gave me is this reminder: even when there is trouble, you can smile.

There are things from other parts of the world that I’d like to bring to Cuba, namely information, but this lesson is one that people in many other places should learn. My job requires a lot of travel, and I see that a many people elsewhere focus too heavily on their problems. They don’t recognize that there are solutions available to them in their very own hands. Perhaps they don’t see all of the wonderful things that they have in their lives. While traveling, I encounter many people who seem depressed, who feel alone in the world or like God has forgotten them. There is so much sadness and anger. It seems like people are constantly searching for that special something that they believe will make them happy, when they could probably be content with much less than they already have.

In Cuba, creativity and inventiveness are essential. We often have to extend the lives of our belongings, items that other parts of the world considered trash 20 years ago (or more!). It’s our way to survive, to extend our own lives. If these things can live longer, it feels like we can too.

The beauty of being a Cuban person, of Cuba, becomes clearer to me when I’m in other parts of the world. How we live, and how we survive, inspires me. People here are largely optimistic. Rather than give up, we find a way to keep going. We invent, and some of those inventions are just beautiful. What it really boils down to is that we are always looking for a solution; it seems like much of the world has forgotten how to do that.

Every time that the lights went out, my family would sing. They had plates, spoons, forks, and would bang them on the windows, filling the house with rumba and dance.





“We cook with only the vegetables and legumes of our region—it makes us feel closer to our roots,” says Yunalvis, who is best known by friends and family as Yuni.

Neither Yuni, nor her employees (which include her two sisters), have a formal culinary education. Rather, the entrepreneur’s background is in automation engineering. In 2014, after Raúl Castro loosened regulations governing private enterprise, she decided to change her career path and put her passion for food and nutrition to better use. “All the conditions had adapted so that my dream could finally become a reality,” she recalls.

Today, her bustling restaurant Camino al Sol stands out amongst its contemporaries: in a country where meat is frequently a meal staple, Yuni’s vegetarian-only offerings may come as a surprise. The menu changes daily and includes fresh salads, soups, tarts and variations on veggie burgers. The kitchen also offers two pasta dishes, occasionally a Cuban take on a classic like gnocchi made from the root vegetable *malanga* instead of the potato. Next to the cash register sits a colorful display of fresh pastas that customers can purchase to cook at home. In addition to a traditional version, they offer more unconventional noodles made with things like cilantro, beet, curry and ginger.

“Innovation is about observing what you have and making it to the next step without fear,” Yuni explains. In other words, she looks at the ingredients on hand and transforms them for her customers. “We have to continuously observe this process, especially in food. It allows us to give people the joy of a new day.” When asked how she learns unfamiliar techniques and skills, she responds simply, “from my own everyday experience.” Experimentation is her *modus operandi*.

It comes as no surprise, then, that she is not discouraged, but motivated, by ingredient shortages, import restrictions and the lack of wholesale markets. In fact, to support the business, Yuni also acquired a farm, which she manages alongside her husband Luca. It grants her easier access to fresh vegetables, fruits and herbs and full control over the way that her produce is grown and harvested. On visits to the farm, Yuni exudes love for what she has created. “To be in this wonderful land, to breathe in the air and take in the sun each morning? It is the best grace that our food could receive,” she enthuses.

The self-taught nutritionist hopes that she can offer more than a satisfying meal, but also an enlightened perspective. Eventually, she wants to provide workshops for locals, especially children, whose brains she believes are more malleable. “I don’t think that there are rules to follow when changing a diet,” Yuni muses. “Nutrition is very unique to each person.” However, Cuban fare is fairly homogenous, she says, and with her work, she tries to convey that there are alternative ways of eating (in her case, vegetarianism).

“The climate is becoming more hostile,” she adds, “which means that we need to re-evaluate our impact on the world.” To do so, she believes that “we need to expand this beautiful dialogue with our earth,” a task, she says, “that also brings us closer to our own human condition.”

