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**Book Excerpt: *The Columbia Restaurant: Celebrating a Century of History, Culture, and Cuisine***

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*Editor's note: We are pleased that the University Press of Florida has allowed us to print an excerpt from *The Columbia Restaurant: Celebrating a Century of History, Culture, and Cuisine*, by Andrew T. Huse (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009) pp. 74-76.*

## PARADE FEVER

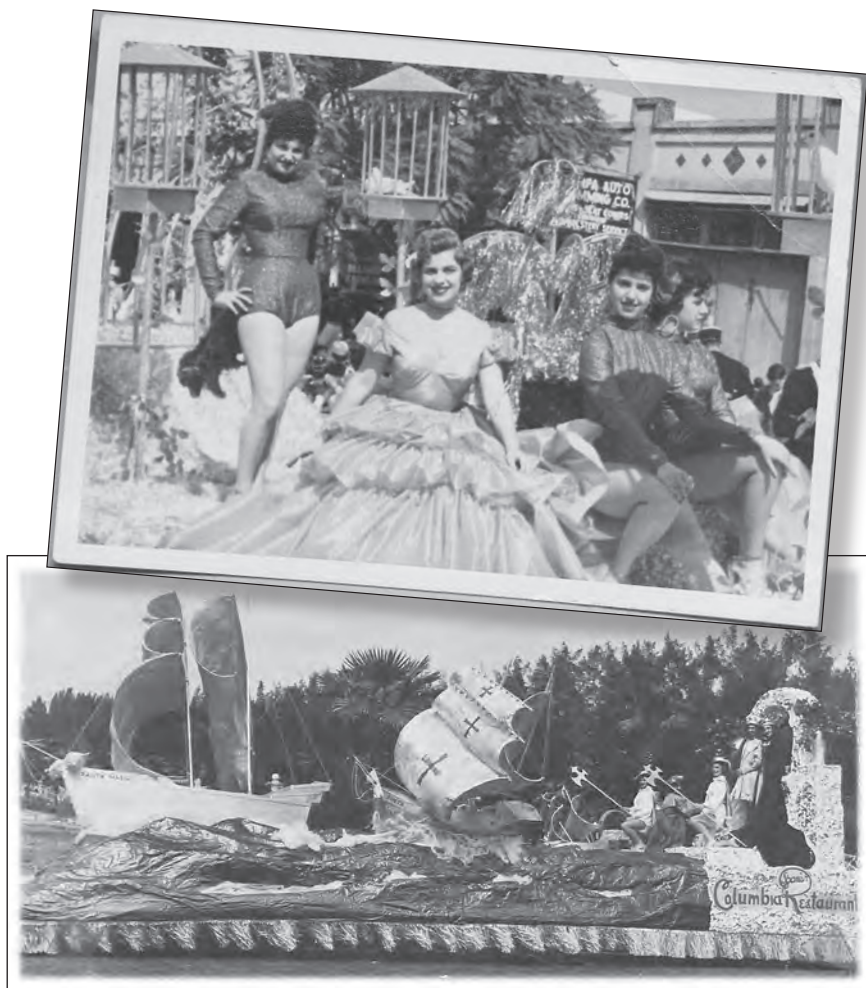
Columbia owner Casimiro Hernandez caught parade fever in 1937, never to find a cure. After he expanded the restaurant with the Don Quixote and Patio rooms, he wanted publicity. In the days before television, parades offered businesses the opportunity to employ live-action advertising. The local parade circuit provided a promising and treacherous route for the Columbia's many floats. "Running the largest Spanish restaurant in America often seems simple compared to entering one float in a parade," *Tampa Tribune* writer and Columbia PR man Paul Wilder confessed. "Sketches have to be rushed, pretty girls have to be hunted to add decoration to the float, schedules have to be worked out, all sorts of things."

Although they won prizes around the state, the Columbia's floats seemed to be jinxed. In Sarasota, a driver rear-ended a float depicting Columbus' three caravels. Casimiro once built a float so tall it smashed into an awning on Tampa's Franklin Street. On another occasion, a float would not fit through an underpass and snagged power lines wherever it went. It took Casimiro's steel determination to persist in such ruin, float by float.

The war and gasoline rationing stopped floats in 1942, but parades crisscrossed Florida again four years later. The Columbia did amazing things with tin foil and papier-mâché. No theme was too fanciful or ambitious. Casimiro ordered the construction of dragons, genies emerging from bottles, seascapes with "live mermaids," and surf-tossed beaches.

In 1946, the Columbia's annual Gasparilla float cost about \$1,000 to construct. It weighed three tons. A later float held a piano and orchestra. Another contained a replica of the Patio's fountain. A live girl's face peered out from the papier-mâché statue. A float depicting the struggle between Don Quixote and a windmill required six weeks of labor.

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*Courtesy of USF Tampa Special Collections, Gonzmart Family/Columbia Restaurant Collection*

(top) The posing ladies and caged birds on the Columbia's fiftieth anniversary float, 1955; Columbus and his caravels sailed again in this elaborate parade float, circa 1950. Many of the Columbia's floats met unfortunate ends.

It is also notable just how many things could go wrong in so many places. Most Florida cities celebrated winter festivals with parades, and Casimiro entered Columbia floats in as many as possible. So many tired paraders once sat on a float it dragged along the street. On other occasions, it ran out of gas on the way to Sarasota; the masts of Columbus's three ships had to be lowered to pass safely under power lines; and the engine overheated during a St. Petersburg parade, billowing smoke and alarming spectators.

During another parade in St. Petersburg, a float's gas line became clogged. A resourceful crew member stretched himself under the open hood and poured gas into the carburetor so the float could pass the reviewing stand under its own power. On another occasion, the zipper broke on a girl's dress. Instead of basking in glory, she spent the rest of the parade sitting on the back of the float, huddled in a coat.

One of the more ambitious floats—"Love's Young Dream"—met an unfortunate end during Tampa's Gasparilla parade. It passed the reviewing stand in Plant Park without incident. After being parked in a warehouse at Drew Park for two hours, it caught fire. Crews scrambled to drive other floats away from the smoke and flames. Harry Burnett, who built the float, burned his hands trying to smother the flames. The fire department kindly avoided spraying undamaged parts of the float.

With the help of his wife, Burnett patched up the float, replacing cardboard and floral paper in time for the Knight parade the next day. The cosmetically restored float made the starting line. Then, the generator failed. Without lights and music, the float would serve little purpose in the nighttime parade. The crew from the Pan-American Airways float helped install a new generator.

"Love's Young Dream" shone bright that night until the new generator died three blocks from the end of the route. The embattled float went to Winter Haven the next week. "If anything happens, we apologize in advance right now," management explained. "You just can't out figure the obstinacy of inanimate floats."

Every year, the Columbia's parade floats demonstrated Casimiro's dogged determination to soldier on. He eliminated flimsy building materials such as tissue and tinsel. In 1950, he resolved to build new floats to serve multiple parades.

Preparation paid off the next year, when Casimiro equipped his float with a fire extinguisher. In a Sarasota parade, a nearby float caught fire at the starting line. The Columbia saved the day by suppressing the flames until firefighters arrived. Shortly afterward, the float trouble officially ended: During a Strawberry Festival parade in Plant City, no crashes took place, nothing caught fire, and nothing broke down. Not a single mishap occurred.

Perhaps the jinx just skipped a few years. In the Gasparilla parade of 1955, four birds in cages adorned the restaurant's massive 50th anniversary float. Bystanders along the parade route watched one of the homing pigeons slip between the bars and fly away, presumably home, wherever that was. The crew then tied the others in place so they wouldn't finish the parade with four empty cages. Undeterred, Casimiro doubled the contingent of birds for the Knight parade that year.

In 1956, he left nothing to chance. He equipped the float with two generators—one for the float and one for the truck—to provide illumination during the Knight parade. Of course, the unthinkable happened. While flamenco dancers cavorted around thatched Cuban huts, all the lights on the float suddenly went out. One of the generators had died, and so did the Columbia's illuminated entry into the Knight parade. "We at the Columbia, you may guess, were just crushed, plain crushed," Wilder wrote. "The parade is over now, and things are beginning to look bright again."

## Spanish Bean Soup

This is the soup that made the Columbia famous for food. The Columbia's founder, Casimiro Hernandez Sr., adapted his version from the heavy, multi-course cocido madrilenò stew of Spain. He served parts of the original altogether for a new version. By the 1920s, newspapers boasted of Tampa's three great delights: sunshine, cigars, and soup. For a thicker soup, stew it long.

<i>½ pound garbanzo beans (chickpeas), dried</i>	<i>1 onion, finely chopped</i>
<i>1 ham bone</i>	<i>1 chorizo (Spanish sausage), sliced in thin rounds</i>
<i>1 beef bone</i>	<i>2 potatoes, peeled and cut in quarters</i>
<i>2 quarts water</i>	<i>Pinch of saffron</i>
<i>1 tablespoon salt</i>	<i>½ teaspoon paprika</i>
<i>¼ pound salt pork, cut in thin strips</i>	

Wash garbanzos. Soak overnight with 1 tablespoon salt in enough water to cover beans. Drain the salted water from the beans. Place beans in 4-quart soup kettle; add 2 quarts of water, ham and beef bones. Cook for 45 minutes over low heat, skimming foam from the top. Fry salt pork slowly in a skillet. Add chopped onion and sauté lightly. Add to beans along with potatoes, paprika and saffron. Add salt to taste. When potatoes are tender, remove from heat and add chorizo. Serve hot in deep soup bowls. Serves 4.