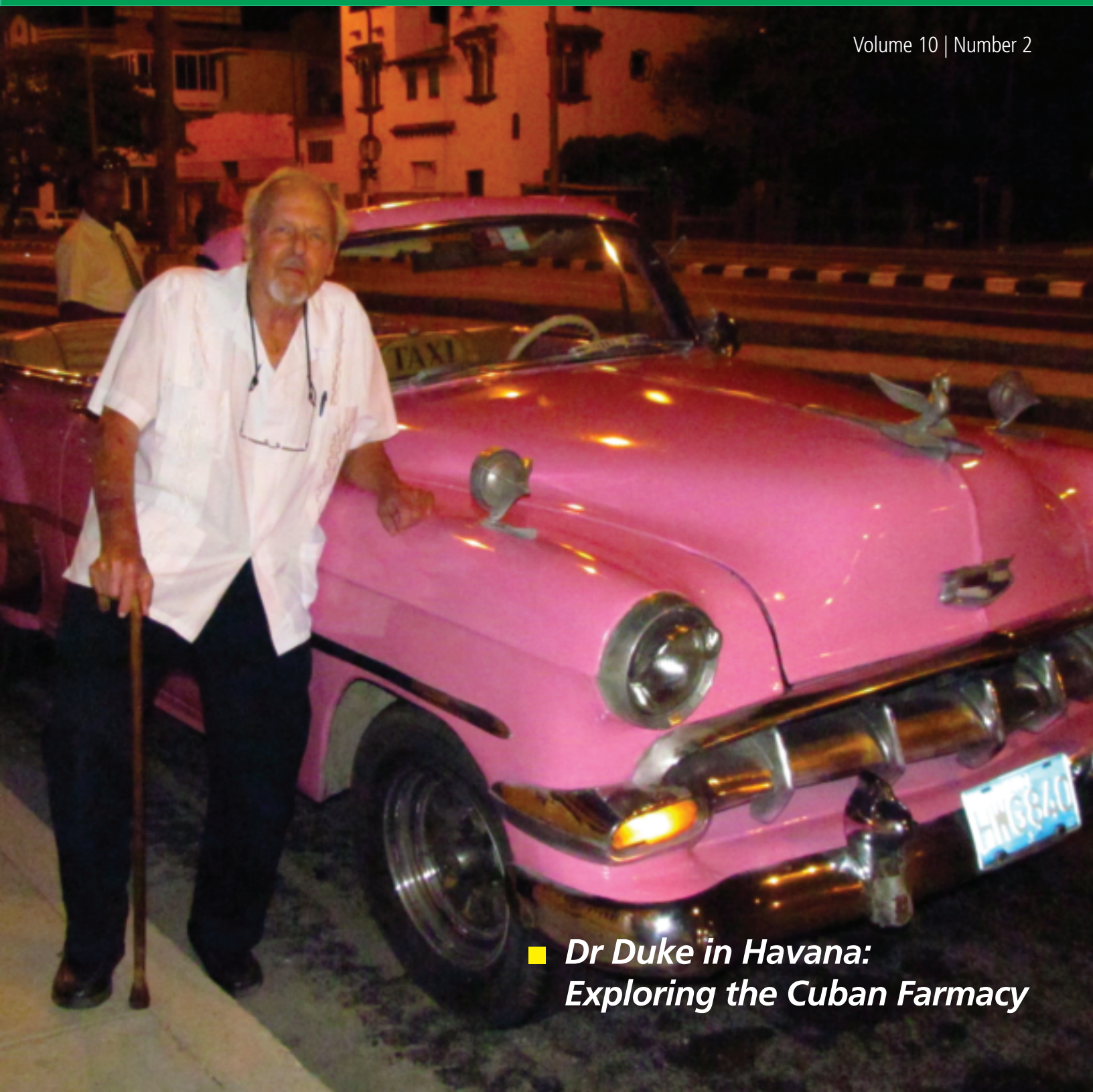


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■ *Dr Duke in Havana:
Exploring the Cuban Pharmacy*

Jim Duke's Cuban Food Farmacy Trip

Jim Duke

At the luncheon we enjoyed at the Cuban Botanical Gardens, there was a healthy and delightful array of fruits and veggies. Here I enumerate some of the more important items I enjoyed during that marvelous and healthy luncheon.

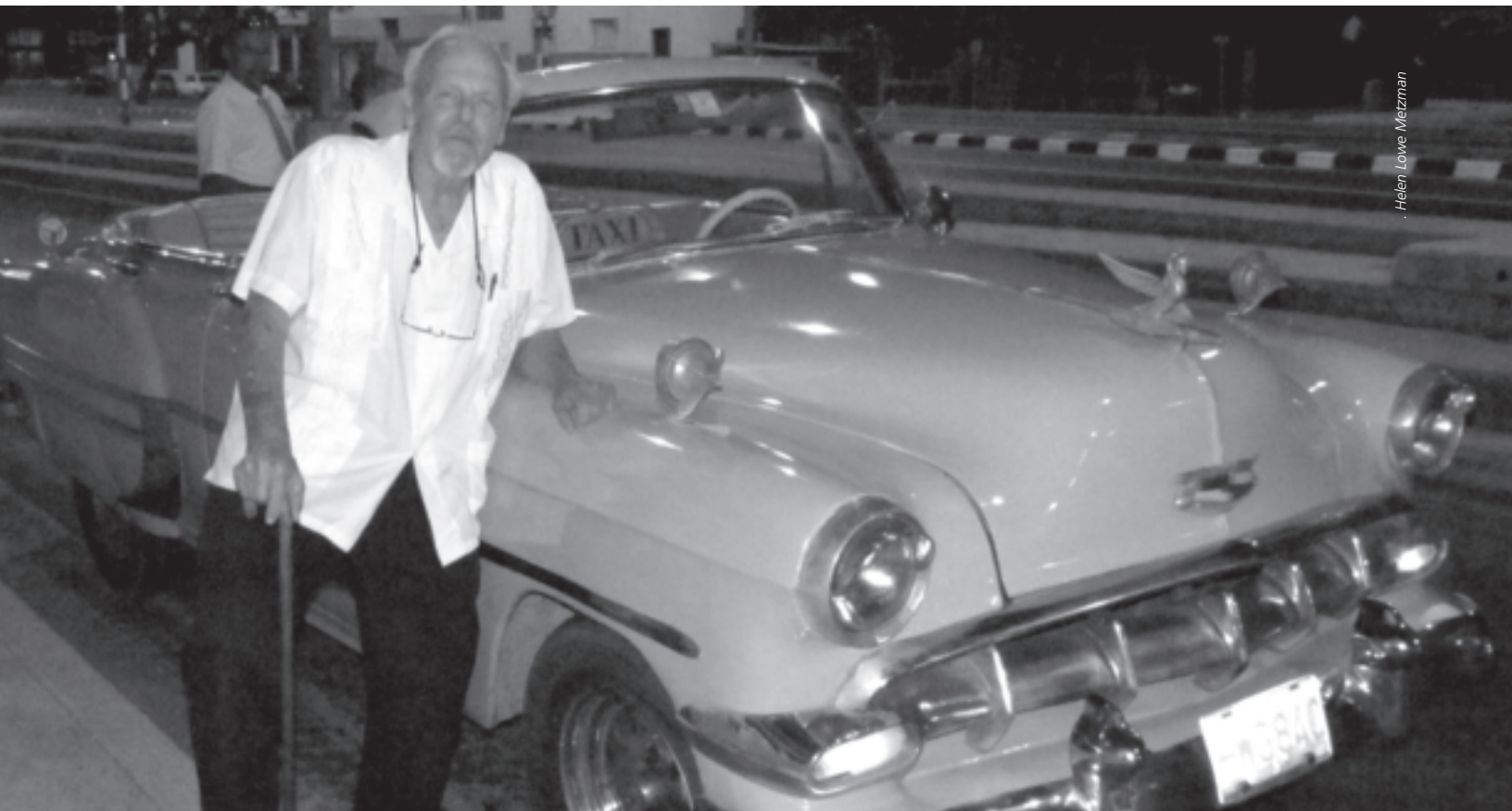
First there was the eternal, infernal mojito with its diced spearmint. Ironically spearmint contains several volatile compounds which do what Aricept® does, preventing the breakdown of acetylcholine, the cerebral messenger at the synapses. As of my last tally, my computer listed carvone, carvacrol, 1,8-cineole, p-cymene, elemol, isomenthone, limonene, menthol, menthone, piperitenone, pulegone, gamma-terpinene, terpinen-4-ol, thymol, viridiflorol, count them, 15 natural antiacetylcholinesterase phytochemicals, absorbed via inhalation, perorally, or

transdermally (from Duke's Phytochemical Database). Aricept® contains one unnatural anticholinesterase chemical with lots of side effects.

Your mojito probably contains most of these, all of which have been described from spearmint, and indeed many other mints, e.g., rosemary, sage, and lemonbalm, proven to slow the breakdown of the cerebral messengers (acetylcholine, butylcholine, perhaps choline itself), and all in my cream d'mentia. Please remember though, easy on the alcohol! It is contraindicated in Alzheimer's, cerebral plaque, and dementia!!!

And a word about the Spanish paella, which some of us experienced while in Cuba. With many of us approaching the age of dementia, we should recognize that paella with mojitos (remember, very weak or non-alcoholic) might

the Duke heading out to his 83rd birthday dinner





be a double whammy as a dementia preventative.

Most paella is colored yellow with saffron which has some chemical or chemicals that have been proven to help with both dementia and depression. Iran, a major producer of the labor-intensive saffron, has performed clinical studies showing that very small amounts of saffron have impressive effects. I recommend it. A lot of people come back at me and say they would not believe an Iranian study. I disagree heartily, feeling that in most countries the agencies try to help the citizenry. I trust the Iranian study more than the FDA-approved study(ies) that approved the Aricept®. Lamentably, I do not believe that Big Pharma and the FDA are trying to improve the health of the American citizenry.

Ironically, saffron is mentioned only once in the Bible. But scholars do not agree. Some claim it is the Iranian/Spanish saffron, *Crocus sativus*. Others claim the Biblical saffron is the Oriental turmeric, *Curcuma longa*, of Asian Indian and Chinese origin, one of the most important anticancer herbs. But, most important for dementia, this unrelated spice also prevents dementia and depression. It seems to curb the so-called Beta-Plaque of the brain, which seems to be more important in dementia than the anticholinesterase activity in our mojitos. What to do? Be generous with both the *Crocus sativus* and *Curcuma longa* in your paella and other dishes.

Back to lunch at the botanical garden. I have never seen so many cases of the color code in action. To your health, eat as many colorful veggies as possible for better health, the wider the variety the better. They were especially generous with many examples of good sources of lycopene, with four foods or beverages made from guava, *Psidium guajava*, almost a weed tree in tropical America. And there was the African watermelon, *Citrullus lanatus*, and, the American tomato, and the pink grapefruit, which, unlike the yellow grapefruit is rich in lycopene. Any and all of these might reduce your odds of hormone-related cancers. But the red hibiscus petals some of us ingested with our luncheon, were healthy due to anthocyanins and beta-hydroxy acids, also good for the complexion.

Many, if not all members of the cabbage family contain cancer-preventing isothiocyanates and indoles and a few contain sulforaphane, the more piquant the better. So do the petals of the nasturtium flowers some of us ate. And the horseradish tree, *Moringa oleifera*, we

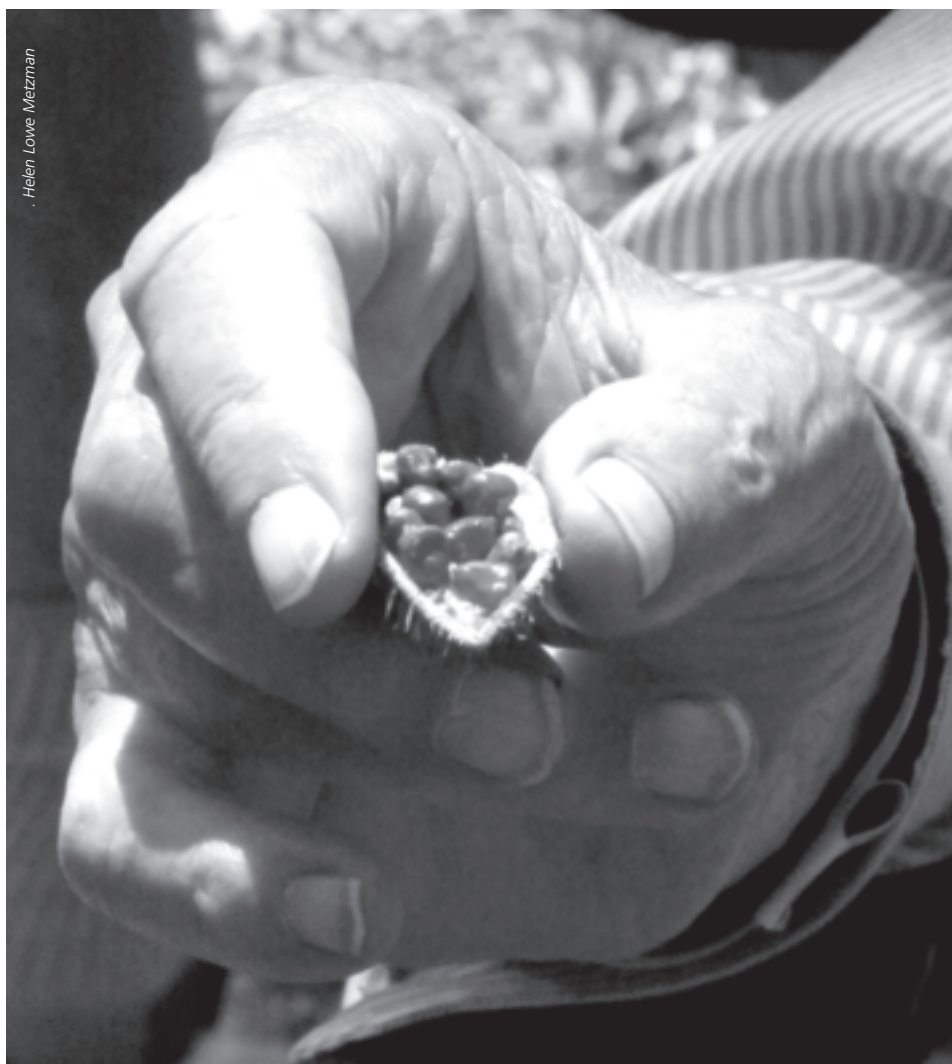
talked about in those lovely mountains above Trinidad. The purple cabbages also contain anthocyanins.

The fruta bomba (papaya elsewhere), *Carica papaya*, and pineapple, *Ananas comosus*, contain proteolytic enzymes with a lot of proven biological activities. Of course, papaya juice and citrus juice was available at all our breakfasts.

What could be more important to those who are vegetarian (by religion, choice, or for wise fear of red meat) than beans? We have been overpromoted with soy and underpromoted with our native American beans, like butter beans, lima beans, navy beans, pinto beans, string beans and most important of all, the Cuban black beans, the blacker, the better, as far as anthocyanins are concerned. The white navy and pinto beans have little or no anthocyanins. Surprisingly all these American beans have the same estrogenic isoflavones (biochanin,

Far Left: Jim with guide Andres at Escambray Mountains, Sierra de Sancti Spiritus

Below: Jim holding *Bixa orellana* (annatto)



Helen Lowe Meizman

daidzein, formononetin, and most ballyhooed, genistein). Some of the American beans have more isoflavones than the soybean. In moderation, the isoflavones seem to favor anticancer activity. For years soy claimed that it alone contain genistein. Bunk.

As in beans, color is important in native American corns, the white corn, delicious, but lacking the beneficial carotenoids found in yellow corns, and the anthocyanins so prevalent in the so-called blue, black, or purple corns. And the corn silks has many biological activities,

The flesh of the native American squashes and pumpkins are rich in health-giving carotenoids, while roasted pumpkin seeds are a tasty snack for senior dudes like Duke (me), with zinc and three amino acids good for the prostate problems that beset all males if they live long enough. In concert with Amazonian Brazil nuts, richest source of selenium, dare I say, nuts for the prostate. One cousin, two years older than me, was chemically castrated for his prostate cancer, and was suffering, of all things, male menopause. Recent studies show that the sage grown and sold in Cuba can ease menopausal symptoms.

On the streets of Havana, I saw the ubiquitous weed purslane, *Portulaca oleracea*, which ranges in America

from Amazonia to Alaska. It is one of the world's richest sources of beta carotene, vitamins C and E, all wrapped up with the highest omega-3 composition of any leafy vegetable. One more Latin American herbs with high omega-3s is the chia of chia pet fame. Purslane is to me, one of the most delicious of weeds, raw or cooked or pickled, and if you get caught without your adrenaline kit, ball some up under your tongue and you will get a sublingual equivalent of adrenaline.

A lot of us got more cilantro than we wanted here and there. To me, it is a love/hate herb, and about ten percent of the people in my classes hate it. Fortunately for me, my garden crew likes it. In temperate America, the cilantro flavor and health benefits are due to the temperate herb, coriander, *Coriandrum sativum*. In tropical America, this is due to a weedy herb that looks like a thistle, called culantro, *Eryngium foetidum*, and the coriander haters will agree, it smells fetid, like its epithet. Me, I like it. One day I was visited by a companion-plant master gardener wanting to protect his tomatoes from stick bugs (which incidentally have been aromatically linked to the aroma of cilantro). He speculated that coriander or cilantro might help. I voted instead for pulegone-containing mints, many of which grow in Cuba.

Proper consumption of adequate quantities of these Amazon wonders (and echoing the TV commercials, in concert with a prudent and varied diet and exercise regime), harvested renewably, could improve your health while improving the health of the Amazon Rain Forest and our planetary environment. While I am impressed with all of these and think that increased consumption of these (in lieu of reduced animal fats, etc.) by North Americans could do them as much good as going on the Childers, Cretan, or Mediterranean diets, I can also see how using this Amazonian diet renewably and wisely might even help the health of the planet, helping us preserve the vital lungs of our hemisphere (the Amazon rain forest), thereby improving the health of our individual lungs, hearts and other vital organs.

I'll have afterthoughts about our Cuban food pharmacy for years to come, and I may be compulsive enough to write more on it. I'd like to go again, but only when I can fly straight from Baltimore to Havana, and when I can have more time in the country and less on the quaint cobblestone city tours. Cobblestones and cities are not my element; my element is the greenery.

Mojitos waiting to be made at the Buena Vista Social Club





Above: Medicina Natural y Traditional at the Apothecary in Havana

Below: Curcuma longa (turmeric) drying in an organic cooperative farm in Havana

