



WHY LONDON?

Originally from Cuba, **Isabel Famosa** finds us easy to please but misses the music



I CAME to London two years ago with my parents when my father, who is a banker, was posted here. My family will soon be going home to Miami, where we live now, but I'm staying in London because I want to go to catering school here. I'm going to do a cookery course in Italy as well, which is so easy to get to from London. That's my favourite thing about this city, it feels as if it's at the heart of the world. I want to see a lot more of Europe, especially Spain, before I return home. I never expected London to be so fantastic for food or that I would learn so much about different cuisines. I'm addicted to Indian curries now. The only kind of food that isn't that good in London is Cajun and Mexican, which we have on every street corner in Miami.

I've been working part-time as a waitress because I want to learn the restaurant business from front to back. I find Londoners very friendly and much easier to please than Americans, who are very demanding. I think it's harder for Americans to travel because the standard of service you get in the US is so high. I love London for its culture and its history, but when it comes to everyday things, like ordering a coffee in Starbucks, you realise how much more customer-friendly it is in the USA.

I like the fact that I can be independent in London. In the US, the Latino culture is very strong, but here I'm just another face in the crowd. I love the anonymity of that. People sometimes ask me if I am Italian or even Asian. It's great living in a such a cosmopolitan place – you can be confused for anyone.

I would stay in London if it were easier to get into business here, but it's hard to make ends meet. The rents and the operating costs are just so high. And there is an energy in the US that you just don't find anywhere else. Besides, after a while I'd miss my family and the Latino music scene too bad.

● Isabel Famosa was talking to Catherine Moyo

How healthy is your home?

Greenpiece A new invention can treat asthma and reduce your heating bills. **Sarah Lonsdale** on how to avoid 'indoor pollution'

SAM Miller could teach most of us more than a thing or two about how to reduce the amount of chemicals in our homes. As an ME sufferer for the past 12 years, she made a huge effort to cut the chemicals when she felt she had found a powerful connection between them and her health.

"Before I realised the link between indoor air pollution and my health, I used to notice that if I passed a newly painted wall, or smelled a really strong synthetic perfume, I would feel sick," she says. "Now I realise quite how many household products were giving off chemicals and compounding my illness, and I have felt a lot better."

Sam, an art teacher, lives with her partner, Mark, and her dog and two cats in Hackney, east London. One of the changes she made in her kitchen was to chuck out her plastic chopping boards – which are routinely impregnated with antibacterial solutions – and replace them with wooden ones, which are naturally antibacterial. She has replaced chemical cleaners with the natural mineral borax which has cleaning properties, and replaced insecticide-laden mothballs with cedar wood balls. She now only uses essential oils as room scents and even gives her pets phosphate-free flea treatments. "I once made the mistake of buying scented toilet paper and it made my head ache. Could someone explain why we need fragranced toilet roll?"

With her chemical-free house, Sam's health is improving greatly. "But you don't need to have ME to reduce the chemicals in your house – everyone can benefit," she says. "And, of course, it's much better environmentally too."

Six-year-old Ella Stanley has recently joined her school football team. A relatively routine event these days, perhaps, but not for Ella, who as a toddler was so ill with asthma that she could barely break into a run without needing treatment from a nebuliser. Her severe attacks used to terrify her mother.

Then three years ago Ella moved with her mother, Beverley, and her three older siblings, from an old house to a new one, built with super-

insulation and ventilation, a Canadian Government invention called 'Super E'.

Super E houses were originally commissioned by the Government of Canada during the oil crises of the 1970s, when Canadians, who regularly endure winters of minus 30 degrees, became increasingly unhappy about their reliance on fossil fuel for heating their homes. The houses are virtually 100 per cent airtight and are ventilated through a mechanical system of vents and fans. Inhabitants began to find that not only were their heating bills reduced, but cases of asthma and other allergies were also falling dramatically.

"Most people in the West spend about 80 per cent of their time indoors, and during the winter, this rises to 90," says Jeff Culp, spokesman for Super E. "Yet, ironically, while people worry about pollution outside their homes, such as from cars and industry, it is often the air quality *inside* their homes that they should be concerned about."

Most cases of asthma in children are caused by allergens in the home, usually dust mites in carpets and microscopic mould spores caused by damp and humidity.

"It is these mould spores that the Super E homes are eliminating, by being properly ventilated," says Jeff Culp. And it is the absence of these spores that is now enabling Ella Stanley, who, says her mother, "is a real bright spark who loves to run around now she's healthy," to play for her school football team.

"We have only had to use her nebuliser once in the three years since we moved into this house," says Mrs Stanley, a volunteer primary school teaching assistant in Bognor Regis, Sussex. "What's more, I've only had to put the heating on a couple of times since we moved in – my heating bills are practically zero."

Indoor air pollution, or 'Sick Building Syndrome', can be responsible for all kinds of health problems from headaches, nausea and itchy eyes to more serious illness such as respiratory problems and even some kinds of cancer, according to the Buildings Research Establishment (BRE). Chemicals hazardous to human

'INDOOR AIR POLLUTION COULD CAUSE CANCER'



Safe as houses: Sam Miller has banished chemicals from her home and seen her health improve

ROOMS TO BREATHE

● Chuck out synthetic air fresheners. If you must scent a room, use essential oils of lavender, rose and geranium instead.

● Before you buy any carpets, upholstery or sofas, ask your retailer which ones have low emissions. For untreated upholstery and bedding, go to greenfibres.com.

● Use organic paints instead of vinyl ones. Available from ecomerchant.com – the colours are lovely, too.

● Make sure your home is well ventilated. Condensation build-up or mould – visible in a thin rust-brown line at the bottom of windows – is a good sign you need better ventilation.

● When you next get your kitchen done, have units built in solid wood or metal, not MDF, which contains the noxious chemical formaldehyde – the stuff we saw frogs preserved in

during school biology lessons – which causes eye irritation and respiratory problems and is known to be carcinogenic to humans in high doses. Indeed, much chipboard furniture contains formaldehyde, so it is always better to go for solid wood.

● Use natural cleaners, available from ecozone.co.uk. Alternatively, simply use vinegar, lemon juice and borax. You don't really need anything else.

● 'Super E' homes have been built in Sussex, Hackney, Kent and Dorking in Surrey. Mrs Joanna Haran, who moved into a development of 11 Super E homes in Hackney, built by Countryside Properties, says her electricity bills have been reduced from £150 a quarter to just £37. "It's like the Bahamas in here," she says.

For more information go to: super-e.com.

health are present in all kinds of domestic products, from flame retardants in sofas, carpet stain treatments, cleaners, mothballs and scented air fresheners.

These chemicals can build up, along with mould spores, in unventilated homes, and indoor air pollution is thought to be responsible for much of the recent sharp increase in childhood asthma.

Yet the current advice to make our homes more energy efficient, with double glazing and extra wall and loft insulation, may have the effect of sealing in chemicals.

"There is always a potential conflict between saving energy and reducing draughts, and preventing indoor irritants," says Derek Crump, indoor air quality expert at the BRE.

"In other European countries there are government-backed schemes encouraging manufacturers to make and label low-emitting products," he adds. "In the meantime, a good rule is: 'If it smells, there must be some chemical in it.'"