

mountain BITES

BY APRIL ORCUTT

Peru's new culinary scene has expanded far from guinea pig and Andean potatoes into a rich, varied cuisine focusing on local ingredients, creative themes, organic vegetables, beautiful presentations and food as a tool for social change.

With influences from Quechua/Inca, Amazon, Spanish, African, Japanese, Chinese and many other cultures, Peru has developed a compelling food culture with Lima becoming a leader in Latin fusion cuisine. During three weeks of travel there, I discovered some of Peru's best foodie experiences.

SOPHISTICATED ALTITUDE DINING

The soft green-and-white disk served on a slab of stone on my plate at Central, one of the most innovative restaurants in Lima, looked like a glorious chunk of blue cheese sprinkled with Parmesan and parsley. Psyched up for savoury, I took a bite – only to discover it was a sweet dessert made of a white-flesh Andean fruit called *cherimoya*, a Peruvian mint named *muña*, coffee, coca leaves (yes, those coca

leaves) and chaco clay – all edible ingredients found around 1,750 metres in elevation.

Central's owner and executive-chef, Virgilio Martinez, uses the elevation theme to explore and discover diverse natural ingredients ranging from the Pacific coast to the Andes Mountains to the Amazon rainforest. His team of anthropologists, linguists and nutritionists travel the country to learn about biodiversity and bring back foods known to locals. (His sister, Malena, a doctor, tests the food. "I want to make sure we're not poisoning anyone," he says, "or getting you high.") In the process, he gives people in poor, remote areas another way to make a living by collecting and selling those ingredients.

My *Entorno de la Hoja de Coca* dessert translates as "Environment of the Coca Leaf." Martinez's *Altura Extrema* (Extreme Altitude) dish from 4,200 metres includes two types of

potatoes plus cushuro, an amino-acid-rich but tasteless, current-sized, blue-green algae that absorbs other flavours. The *Expedición Paita* (Paita Expedition) features frogfish and deep-water algae from 25 metres under the sea, but I particularly liked the surprising variety of flavours and textures in *Diversidad de Maíz* (Diversity of Corn), from 1,800 metres.

In addition to presenting food-as-art and tantalising taste buds, Central's nearly two dozen sous-chefs bustle around behind a huge glass window in the open kitchen, stirring pots, dabbing comestibles onto plates and decorating dishes with splashes of sauces. Choose your table carefully, and it's like watching a gigantic, really-wide-screen, live-action reality show while you eat.

ORGANIC AND DELICIOUS

Claiming to be the only certified-organic restaurant not just in Lima but in Peru, AlmaZen (meaning "Zen Soul") creates complex vegetarian cuisine with subtle flavours. The "Queen Avocado" stuffed with steamed vegetables in a cashew-and-dill sauce and the Napoleon lasagna with thin layers of

mushrooms, asparagus, squash and grilled zucchini with cashew and tree-tomato (tomatillo) sauces were delectable.

AlmaZen's owners, Enrique Vera "Henry" DuBois and his wife, Mariella Matos, helped start Lima's weekly organic farmers market, *Bioferia de Miraflores*, which now has a couple of dozen stalls. Vendors sell local honey, bee pollen, tomatoes, broccoli, asparagus, roman broccoli, lettuce, celery, onions, radishes, kohlrabi, eggplant, varieties of squash, cacao (chocolate) pods, quinoa, kiwicha, kafiwa, sweet-tart aguaymanto berries, and a selection of Peru's 3,000 varieties of potatoes.

CHEFS IN TRAINING

Gastón Acurio, the international star of Peruvian cuisine and a master chef who trains young chefs at his *Instituto Culinario Pachacútec* (ICP), located this culinary arts institute in Pachacútec, an extremely poor neighbourhood near Lima. His goal was to use food as a social tool to change people's lives by enrolling disadvantaged youth in a two-year culinary program. After graduating, many work in his 35 restaurants

HOME GROWN

Clockwise from left: A sous-chef at Central restaurant in Lima; A finished plate of seafood at Central restaurant; Gregorio Mamani (left) says building a greenhouse and selling vegetables has allowed him to work at home instead of spending half the year away working as a porter along the Inca Trail; Executive chef Victor Alvarez del Villar of Hawa restaurant, showing the vegetables, herbs and edible flowers in his garden at the resort.

Opposite page: Quechua farmers in the Andes Mountains of Peru raise mostly potatoes and a few grains.

Opening spread: The writer thought the inexpensive but rich cream-of-vegetable soup at Panza Verde café was sublime.



around the world while others go to Michelin-star restaurants in Europe. Having eaten at ICP, I can understand the success rate – the food the budding cooks prepare is excellent.

Student-chef Jesus Beliot made a traditional Incan dish called *causa*. He flattened mashed yellow potatoes into a 10-centimetre square then covered it with cooked tuna, onions, avocado and yellow chillies, rolled it into a cylinder and sliced it. The sweet-spicy interior contrasted with the soft flavourful potato wrapping for a scrumptious mix. I lost count of how many I ate.

While student-chef Nora Paucar layered a vegetarian lasagna with wild black mushrooms, garlic, basil, cheese, spinach, carrots, white-wine-and-bechamel and tomato sauces, Maria Louisa Tohalino explained why she entered the program: "I liked to cook for my family and see the smiles on their faces when they taste my food," she said. "It's like heaven for me." The *causa*, artistically-arranged salad, lasagna and traditional chicken-and-cilantro-rice dish were like heaven to those of us on a food tour with Culture Xplorers, currently the only travel company that brings visitors to ICP. Ultra-heavenly was the dessert – *suipiro de limeña*, meaning "sigh of a woman from Lima" – a rich vanilla custard topped with port meringue. I nearly missed my bus while finishing my last spoonful.

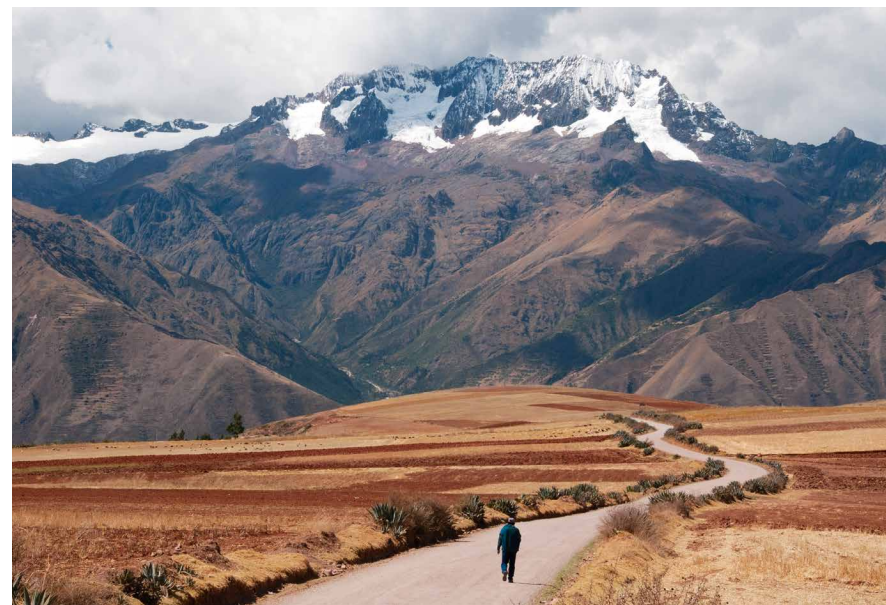
ACTUAL ALTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

The city of Cusco, a 90-minute flight east from Lima, lies at an elevation of 3,450 metres in the Andes Mountains and is the gateway to the *Valle Sagrado* or Sacred Valley of the Incas – and to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of 500-year-old Inca ruins at Machu Picchu. Cusco also furthers Peru's status as purveyor of refined food. The upscale restaurant Inti Raymi

(meaning "Festival of the Sun" in Quechua) is across the street from Qorikancha, the most important Inca temple to the sun god, and in the Palacio del Inka hotel, which was built partially on finely crafted stone foundations from Inca buildings. Inti Raymi emphasises organic ingredients grown locally or in the nearby Sacred Valley. I found the subtle potato-cream soup "scented with white truffle" divine, but the extensive menu included local trout ceviche, quinoa-coated chicken and herb-crusted alpaca with local Maras salt. I was intrigued by the "Chocolate Round" dessert featuring 60 per cent chocolate mousse over cold cheese and pisco sour foam and a "hot donut filled with pisco-scented chocolate, port wine, fruits-of-the-forest sauce and tomato jelly."

2,000-YEAR-OLD ANDEAN "LUAU"

Along the shore of Lake Piuray, about 20 miles northwest of Cusco on the way to the Sacred Valley, Chef Pio Vasquez, owner of El Huacatay restaurant in Urubamba, created a traditional *pachamanca* or Andean-style "luau" for our Culture Xplorers group. They dug a metre-wide pit, put softball-size stones in it, built a fire on top, added a metal grate over that and placed more stones on the grate. A couple of hours later they removed the hot rocks from the grate, cleared out the ashes and filled the pit with five kinds of potatoes plus sweet potatoes, shallots, large beans in pods, a pineapple, chicken in a tomato sauce, trout in a cilantro sauce, and bundles of fresh herbs. They covered it all in more hot rocks, completely sealed the earthen oven with wet towels, added dirt for insulation, covered that in grasses and placed a bouquet offering of red gladiolas, yellow marigolds and white calla lilies on top. A Quechua shaman blessed the *pachamanca*. A couple hours



LASAGNA LOVE

Right: At world-renowned chef Gastón Acurio's Instituto Culinario Pachacútec (ICP) near Lima, Peru, student-chef Nora Paucar is pleased with how her vegetarian lasagna turned out. (photo by Jim Kane / Culture Xplorers)



later Chef Pio opened the oven and spread out a buffet feast. Flavours from the smoky herbs and sauces permeated the food, creating a delicious and traditional meal.

EATING WELL AND DOING GOOD

Another day, travelling farther north into the Sacred Valley – called “sacred” because its rich soil is rare among the steep 4,200-metre ridges – I stopped for an inexpensive lunch at Panza Verde or “Green Belly,” in the village of Calca. Specials included “red-belly” chicken brochettes with rice and two sauces and “green-belly” chaufa, a Chinese-fusion rice with red bell peppers, carrots, tomatoes, cilantro, sesame seeds and a savoury sauce. The potato salad and cream-of-vegetable soup were also delicious. But there’s more to this café than great prices on excellent food. The café’s an outgrowth of Simone Heemskerck and Jolanda Buets’ foundation, *Por Eso!* (Because!), which helps poor, subsistence-farming families growing only potatoes and a few grains at high altitudes in the Andes. By earning materials *Por Eso!* supplies to build simple greenhouses, these Quechuans are learning not only to grow vegetables like tomatoes, peppers, chard, broccoli, cabbage, squash, spinach, soybeans, kale, celery, onions, cilantro and to improve their families’ nutrition, but also to sell extra vegetables to Panza Verde so they can make some money.

12 COURSES TO TASTE

“Hawa” means “heaven” in Quechua, and it’s the name of the restaurant at the Tambo del Inka resort in Urubamba in the Sacred Valley. Although the tasting menu listed seven courses, I counted 12, including *amuse-bouches* and tea. The dishes emphasised Sacred-Valley ingredients, especially local meats (cuy [guinea pig], alpaca and lamb) and vegetables from the hotel’s sizable garden. The second *amuse-bouche* was almost too pretty to eat: three colours of quinoa, heart of palm, local smoked trout, apple, passion-fruit sauce and an edible purple flower served on a beveled clear-glass plate. The grilled trout course included purple *mactillo* potatoes, chard from the resort’s garden and sauce made from local molle peppers. The alpaca rack came with native potatoes, *muña*-mint sauce and lavender flowers. My favourite course was dessert: purple-corn pannacotta, quinoa cheesecake and pink cactus-fruit sorbet decorated with small purple and yellow flowers from the garden. What a lovely way to end a foodie tour in the truly Sacred Valley of Peru. •

Photography by April Orcutt

travel facts

GETTING THERE

Qantas and LAN fly to Santiago with connections to Lima.

- Qantas Airways; qantas.com
- LAN; lan.com

GETTING AROUND

Culture Xplorers, based in Kansas City, Missouri, USA, specializes in customized epicurean tours, including pachamancas, Panza Verde and the Pachacútec Institute of Culinary Arts. +1/215-870-3585; cultureexplorers.com

WHEN TO GO

June to August is the dry season.

WHERE TO STAY

- Lima: Hotel B, a boutique art hotel in a former Belle Époque mansion, is in a peaceful neighborhood near many galleries. +51-1/206-0800; hotelb.pe
- Cusco: El Mercado Tunqui is a boutique hotel in a former market with arty influences and a central location. +51-84/582-640; elmercadotunqui.com
- Cusco: Palacio Nazarenas, a former palace and convent, has rooms facing an inner courtyard or pool. Centrally located. +51-84/582-222; belmond.com/palacio-nazarenas-cusco

WHERE TO EAT

- Central Restaurant, Ca. Santa Isabel 376, Miraflores, Lima; +51-1/242-8515 or +51-1/242-8575; centralrestaurante.com.pe/en/
- El AlmaZen, Recavarren 298, Miraflores, 18 Lima; +51-1/243-0474; facebook.com/pages/El-AlmaZen/70090654695?sk=info
- Inti Raymi, Palacio del Inka, Plazoleta Santo Domingo 259, Cusco; +51-84/231-961; starwoodhotels.com
- Panza Verde café, Calle Ucayali, Calca; +51-974/790-688; poreso.org
- Hawa restaurant, Tambo del Inka, Avenida Ferrocarril S/N, Urubamba; +51-84/581-777; starwoodhotels.com

FURTHER INFORMATION

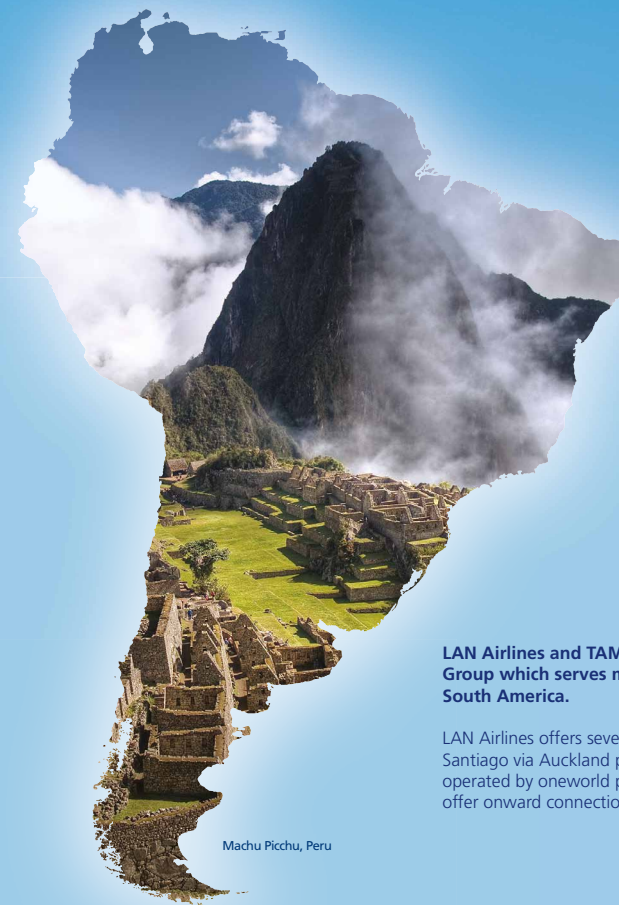
Official Peru travel website; peru.travel/?internacional

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