

Can ideas about food inspire real social change?

The case of Peruvian gastronomy

Peru, meet Perú.

THE GLEAMING TOUR BUS cuts the silhouette of a fire engine as it pulls to a halt, kicking up a few of the drowsy pebbles that line what looks to be the main thoroughfare in town. Into the street quickly pours forth its telegenic crew, who emerge with megaphones held high, exotic gifts toted underarm. They have come a long way, crossing the Equator and the Mason-Dixon line both to carry out the cultural education of their gringo compatriots, who—as the voiceover explains—“despite being residents of Peru, have little clue what it means to be one.”

“Ustedes son del Perú! Tienen el derecho a comer rico!” [“You are Peruvian! You have the right to delicious food!”] one delegate declares to the handful of puzzled passersby, startled into awareness of these glamorous visitors in their midst. This announcement is promptly subtitled “...Anticuchos! Ceviche! Papa rellena!” The locals shrug, evidently unable to understand the language of their gastronomical patrimony. Then the wheel carts arrive. The “natives” take timid sips of fluorescent Inca Kola, noting the likeness of its cloying flavor to that of bubble gum. *Chicha morada* is generously decanted next for side-by-side sampling. When served in frosty pitchers alongside heaped plates of *jalea de mariscos* or *ceviche*, this impossibly violet infusion of purple corn is a universal summer favorite in Lima, Perú. Fruity and smooth, owing to the maceration of pineapple cores and whole quince, and spiked with a bouquet of cloves, sticks of mellow Peruvian cinnamon, and a final twist of lime, *chicha morada* is exquisitely refreshing when freshly brewed and uncommonly crave-worthy even in mass-bottled form. Snack plates stacked with tender white potato smothered in a puree of *ají* chiles, fresh cheese, and *huacatay* (a common Andean mint) are next passed around, and chased by layered portions of *causa limeña*, a fragrant and unfussy terrine of

mashed yellow potato, avocado, and creamy pulled chicken. Capping a montage of nodding and busy mouths, a young girl leans toward the camera, smacking smiling lips as she gushes, “*Kayyy reekol!*”

So begins “*Perú visita a Perú...Nebraska*,” a fifteen-minute short film commissioned by Perú’s tourism and commerce bureau, PromPerú, as one prong of its ambitious television, radio, and print media campaign to revamp the nation’s cultural brand image in the minds of—not tourists, nor investors—but its own citizens. The video tracks the journey of a dozen of Perú’s most recognizable personalities—among them an opera singer, a professional surfer, a television actor, a folkloric music performer, and four celebrity chefs—to Peru, Nebraska, to invite the inhabitants of this humble Midwestern hamlet of five hundred-something to share in a reinvigorated Peruvian national cultural consciousness. Poignant and provocative is creative director Flavio Pantigoso’s description of the encounter, staged and scripted for a Peruvian viewership: “This is an historic moment... Perú colonizing Peru.”

Surfing simulations, *cajón* drumming, and gifting of alpaca wool ponchos follow, but the primacy of food in this adventure in cultural “colonization” is made abundantly clear. Chef Gastón Acurio, a name synonymous with the recent surge of activity in the Peruvian culinary sector, occupies the bus driver’s seat. One third of the delegation dons kitchen whites. In the companion Facebook game, there are three roles among which users can choose to specialize as a cultural ambassador: gastronomy (i.e., dishes) is one of them; foodstuffs (i.e., agricultural products) is another; all other traditions and attractions form the last role. If Perú is aiming to present itself as a gastronomic superpower, it has chosen perhaps the ideal foil in the United States. Contemplating the comparison of US food culture to French culinary traditions, Priscilla Ferguson has suggested, “There is no

American cuisine, that is, no culinary configuration identified with the country as a whole.”¹ As proud as the newest generation of American foodies may be of an enlarging culinary consciousness among Americans, the product is arguably not a *national gastronomy*. A tiny town in a country apparently stitched together by drive-thru’s provides perhaps the ideal straw man against which to contrast anyone’s culinary envoy. In one scene of the film, actor Carlos Alcántara coaxes the sheriff of Peru, Nebraska, into swapping his box of a dozen glazed doughnuts for a shimmering plate of four sweet potato *picarones*, the toroidal fry bread of choice in Lima. The proposition represents a playful display of what Perú envisions as their potential exchange value, if not an outright inversion of US cultural hegemony. By charting the symbolic colonization of the United States writ small, the filmmakers affirm that Perú is becoming a world cultural capital in itself, capable of making its own conquests, armed not with guns or germs, but gastronomy.

The seductively contentious vision of an alternative global, cultural, political order this video offers did not emerge overnight. These images comprise a much broader narrative of self-discovery rooted centuries deep in the history of social fractures that have long divided the peoples of Perú—intertwined into a larger story of how ideas about food can play an instrumental role in generating new questions and innovative answers to issues of urgent societal significance.

Mise en place for a gastronomical revolution

Today in Lima, Perú, chefs are the chief protagonists in what has been termed no less than a “gastronomical revolution.”²



ABOVE: Exchange of Peruvian picarones for American doughnuts in a scene from “Perú visita a...Peru,” a short film produced by PromPerú, 2011.

Cooks are mythologized as national heroes and decorated with medals of honor that recognize their achievements at the stove.³ The most celebrated among them may even be found endorsing savings accounts in major bank advertisements. Not unrelatedly, the number of young culinary students has skyrocketed over the last decade, to an estimated 80,000 across eighty-four officially recognized programs in 2010.⁴ It is boasted, “In Peru, kids dream of becoming chefs, not soccer players.”⁵ The prestige (and apparent ubiquity) of the chef’s jacket is such that many of these teenage students do not bother to shed their uniforms after the day’s classes, and non-slip Crocs and knife-laden toolkits are now common sights in the streets of Lima.

However, it is worth remembering, especially in this age of Top and Iron Chefs, that the gastronomic field⁶ encompasses the works of more than just the heads of restaurant kitchens. Accordingly, the word *gastronomía* has acquired a richness of meaning never achieved by the original French cognate. Everything from the range of raw, primary products to their culinary applications, in restaurants or at home; to the scholarly summation of five centuries (or millennia, the time-scale preferred by the Ministry of Culture) of culinary continuity; to the ideal image of the family communing over a plentiful and tasty repast after Sunday Mass is semantically conjoined in the term. In fact, it has all but displaced the generic *cocina* in all manners of contemporary Peruvian food-related discourse, which itself can be taken to mean “cuisine”



or “kitchen.” The set of actors who together constitute the nation of gastronomical Perú, therefore, naturally includes fisherman and farmers, grandmothers, culinary students, line cooks, celebrity chefs, caterers, street food vendors, service professionals, a small band of journalists and dedicated academics, and even encompasses the rest of us eaters when the lunch hour strikes.

Moreover, this supposedly “spontaneous revolution”⁷ exhibits a remarkable degree of self-awareness. The national daily *El Comercio* has embraced the project of national gastronomical advocacy head-on, regularly running columns that pose to its readers: “What challenges currently face Peruvian Gastronomy?”⁸ The academic (Peruvian) food book genre received its greatest impulse in 1996 with the founding of the Gastronomy faculty within the Department of Communication, Tourism, and Psychology at the Universidad de San Martín de Porres, under whose aegis over sixty titles have been published. Already anecdotally credited with excellent *sazón*⁹ and a strong food culture, even by other South American countries with proud culinary traditions,¹⁰ a paper trail is quickly spooling to demonstrate just how vibrant and fruitful a topic food is in contemporary Perú, at registers both populist and intellectual.

This essay synthesizes observations and data accumulated over the course of eleven months of fieldwork based in Lima,

ABOVE: Culinary students in Lima, Perú.

PHOTO TAKEN BY AUTHOR, SEPTEMBER 2010

Perú, in 2010 and 2011. My inferences draw upon in-depth interviews of twenty leading culinary professionals based in Lima (except one, located in Arequipa), including current or former restaurant chefs, proprietors of informal eateries known as *huariques*, street food specialists, and teaching chefs. In addition, topics highlighted at press-related events, major culinary conferences, public lectures, university seminars, and cooking demonstration modules at Le Cordon Bleu–Perú have shaped the intellectual trajectory of this investigation, which began simply enough with a pair of kitchen apprenticeships in the salad stations at Lima restaurants La Preferida and Costanera 700. In the course of these dozens of conversations, with individuals operating both within and outside the Peruvian gastronomical field, I noticed a remarkable degree of consensus regarding the basic features of Peruvian cuisine and what makes it special.

Above all, its core trait is that it is *rica*, which is to say “delicious.” But by which road? Sara Beatriz Guardia, an expert on the cultural significance of the potato among Andean cultures, conjectures that “to know how to cook [in Perú] is more closely related to the Latin word *sapio*, “to feel,” than with intellectual knowledge. It is to know with the senses

and the sensuality of flavors.”¹¹ Raw deliciousness, not necessarily tethered to the formalized ethics and codified aesthetics of modern culinary art, is understood to provide the source material. But because that is supposed to be obvious, most people focused on pointing out Perú’s ecoclimatic diversity, painted in primary colors—“*Perú tiene de todo: la costa, sierra, y selva*” [“Peru has a bit of everything: coast, highlands, and jungle.”]—as the key precondition supporting its excellence. Quickly noticing my East Asian features, a number of these interlocutors also eagerly reported the pervasiveness of *chifas*, or Chinese-Peruvian restaurants, not only in Lima but throughout the country.¹² The implication is that Perú’s already uncommon autochthonous diversity has been enriched further by *mestizaje* and the assimilation of European, Asian, and African immigrants into the population—with felicitous consequences for the young republic’s taste buds. “This sensation of knowing that we eat well has always been present, felt by probably all Peruvians,” food and culture journalist Gonzalo Pájares observed, “in reality it didn’t matter whether you were rich or poor to eat tasty food, even if all you had were cheap ingredients, like rice or potatoes with some gravy or bits of pork; we [Peruvians] could depend on our good *sazón*.¹³ This putative longstanding intimacy with food is touted as among the precious few institutions that can uniquely cut across otherwise yawning gaps between social classes.

Most striking is that these casual exchanges tended to unfold nearly identically, that “taxicab small talk” about Peruvian gastronomy had acquired a certain structural regularity in the claims and evidential standards by which the superiority of Peruvian food is demonstrated. These quotidian pleasantries, in their very mundanity, reveal how thoroughly the basic truths of Peruvian gastronomy have penetrated common understanding. At the same time, it is widely agreed that such pride in the national cuisine was not so verbalized or televised or celebrated only ten years ago, in spite of the commonsense knowledge that Peruvian cookery itself has “always” been among the greats.¹⁴ Of course, attributing timelessness to the quality of a particular cuisine is by no means novel in food discourse. Today few diners are aware that in the early eighteenth century, Paris’s public dining offerings were all but disappointing.¹⁵ Yet casual chauvinism remains a core feature of modern French culinary sensibility,¹⁶ and the essentialized supremacy of French tastes is an institutionalized “fact” in gastronomical discussions of even global scope.¹⁷

These universal working truths of cuisine, therefore, tend to obscure their historical construction, the dynamics and contingencies that crucially participate in the genesis of those beliefs. In Perú, although we can already see partial

crystallization of a national gastronomical identity, it is very much an emerging entity whose constituent values and priorities are in the process of being negotiated and defended.¹⁸ The numbers look good: Perú can lay claim to 84 of the 117 documented types of ecosystems; 28 distinct climate zones from sea level to 6,768 meters above; 10 percent of the planet’s total plant diversity; as well as 2,500 varieties of potatoes; and some 2,000 fish and 3,000 butterfly species.¹⁹ In terms of human and cultural diversity, 12 linguistic families, 50 ethnicities, and 45 existing languages are officially recognized, leading the first Minister of the Environment, Antonio Brack Egg, to conclude that Perú is a “crucible of races of all origins and a source of millennial forms of knowledge that serve as a reservoir of wisdom for the nation and the whole world.”²⁰ Moreover, it is estimated that the full chain of production, linking agriculture, extraction, industry, distribution, and service in the gastronomical sector employs some five million Peruvians, or 20 percent of the economically active population. It is also widely reported that the total value of culinary production exceeded \$14 billion, or 11.2 percent of Perú’s GDP in 2009.²¹ As Theodore Bestor has observed, however, “Food culture is neither foreordained by nature nor an immutable aspect of a society’s life.”²² As hard as such biological, demographic, and macroeconomic data ever are, what makes these facts meaningful are the contingent social factors that motivate people to treat these as markers of gastronomical production; and others to listen and be convinced.

Indeed, gastronomical discourse in Perú is doing just this, drawing together bits of known information and driving the discovery of new knowledge about the importance of food in Perú, plotted as a function of the biological and cultural diversity upon which the richness of Peruvian gastronomy crucially depends. As the multiplicity of biological diversities is better documented, they become better positioned to serve as a substrate for policymakers and citizens to reexamine the value of cultural plurality in a nation that has long sought the resolution of intercultural differences and greater social inclusion.²³

Potentially, the most unique feature of this food-inspired revalorization of cultural differences is the bold claim that the advancement of Peruvian gastronomy can be causally related to human and economic development outcomes and inspire positive social change. “Taking place in Perú is one of the most important culinary movements in the world,”²⁴ says Catalán chef Ferran Adriá, who elected to highlight Peruvian gastronomy in his 2012 documentary, *Perú Sabe: La cocina como arma social* [Peru knows/Savor Peru: Cuisine as a social instrument], to make a passionate case for this possibility.²⁵ Gastón Acurio, who served as Adriá’s guide through culinary

Perú, echoed this optimism: “What [Peruvians] have achieved almost no other country has achieved with their cuisine, which is a feeling of cohesion where there are no differences, barriers crumble, and it is a bridge of unity, tolerance, and opportunities.”²⁶

“[Perú’s] gastronomy . . . is capable of generating enormous changes . . . in the very way in which we Peruvians must face our personal futures and that of Peru,” Acurio foretold to a packed auditorium of university students in Lima in 2006. “The key is in understanding that we are a great nation, with a great living culture borne of centuries of *mestizaje*, and that it is precisely that *mestizaje* that has made of our cuisine this varied and diverse offering . . .”²⁷ *Mestizaje*, once a pejorative descriptor of racial impurity, here is reimagined as a veritable fount of culinary capital. This is not a small shift. The revalorization of cultural plurality as a resource—rather than a barrier to—achieving a sense of shared destiny among Peruvians challenges the pessimism of an abiding introspective dialectic haunted by the question of whether the formal political independence achieved in 1821 belied a persistent colonialism in matters of culture and identity. Echoing cultural critic Sebastián Salazar Bondy’s 1964 writings on the subject,²⁸ Acurio lamented in our interview, “They [the elites] wished to be European or to be North American. What was our own belonged to a second category. Because they had taught you that you were a second class citizen from the Third World.”²⁹ For Acurio at least, and perhaps some fraction of his 642,000 fans on Facebook, Peruvian food culture, as well as embodying a set of cooking and eating principles and practices, might also catalyze a long awaited expression of cultural autonomy from colonial value hierarchies.

Before an international assembly of the Organization of American States in March 2011, Vice Minister of Culture Bernardo Roca Rey offered gastronomy as “the paradigmatic case” of a cultural industry densely connected to opportunities in human development. “Strong economic growth in the last decade has been accompanied by a feeling of pride and optimism for the country and its future,”—Roca Rey averred, reporting that “95 percent of Peruvians sampled [in a 2009 survey] . . . reported gastronomy as one of the principal reasons for this pride.” He describes the effect of the “gastronomical boom” on the public image of food as “qualitative: once an activity at times festive, but principally concerned with nourishment. Peruvian cuisine has come to provide a cultural emblem, a veritable economic driver, and primary factor in matters of social cohesion and inclusion.”³⁰

Only a few years ago, such sanguine statistical reporting was not so common. In a 2004 survey run by APOYO (a leading public opinion polling agency), 74 percent polled

reported a desire to leave the country, and 53 percent actually had concrete plans to do so.³¹ On top of violent political unrest that assailed the nation from within through much of the 1980s and devastating hyperinflation in the early 1990s, these figures additionally reflect public resignation toward stubbornly high underemployment and low wages.³² The question Zavalita asks in Mario Vargas Llosa’s 1969 novel *Conversation in the Cathedral* “¿Cuándo se jodió el Perú?” [“At what point did Perú f–k itself?”] emblematized a pervasive, nearly essentialized fatalism concerning the nation’s prospects.³³

“It [gastronomy] is one of the few expressions of our nationhood that does not generate arguments or antagonism,” writes president of Apega (Peruvian Society for Gastronomy) Mariano Valderrama.³⁴ So widely recognized is the primacy of food in Perú that one should hardly be surprised by the results of a recent opinion poll in which respondents asked to report which of four aspects of Peruvian culture they felt most proud of ranked the national cuisine far above Machu Picchu, other archaeological sites, and the nation’s history as a whole. Moreover, the consensus view held that food represented Peruvian culture best—more so than music, textiles, folkloric dance, or soccer (all significant cultural identifiers in themselves).³⁵

The identification of Perú’s culinary patrimony with Perú itself, therefore, comprises a broader effort to relocate national solidarity in the interstices between communities—to rediscover intrinsic value in intercultural difference. The potency of this gastronomical ideology has derived from its ability to mediate between national identity and cultural patrimony discourses on the one hand, and the pragmatics of economic and human development imperatives on the other. In this way, Peruvian gastronomical discourse has not remained inert, hovering in the realm of ideas alone. Directly manipulating those forces that govern the value of cultural products, the Peruvian gastronomical field has leveraged its increasing clout toward creating new channels for mobilizing human and natural resources to achieve what could be the beginning of real social change.

The making of value and social change

One illustrative case concerns the consolidation and elevation of the identity of the Peruvian chef as a “soldier of culture.”³⁶ To a nation historically beset with intercultural and class tensions, and complex conflicts of interest between the coastal capital and the interior, the accessibility of a professional career in cooking appears to suggest a new mode of

political enfranchisement and social mobility. One site where the ideal of democratized culinary participation meets the social valorization of gastronomy is the Instituto Pachacútec, a cooking school in a poor outlying district of Lima, which enrolls students from the lowest-income brackets with the aim of providing them with vocational training to access higher paying jobs in the burgeoning food industry. Present day Pachacútec graduates, who might otherwise have joined the majority ranks of Lima's informal employment sector,³⁷ cross a qualitative employment barrier with their degrees, becoming certified practitioners able to circulate in the same professional community with Lima's current leading chefs, most of whom enjoyed training in prestigious culinary institutions abroad before returning to open restaurants in Lima. With a competitive application process that whittles the field of five hundred applicants annually to only twenty students, the numerical reach of the program is severely limited. Nevertheless, the project still represents to cultural observers a model case of how the culinary industry might facilitate socioeconomic mobility in Peru.³⁸

Increasingly, urban space is being carved out for small-scale agricultural producers to represent themselves through their craft to an increasingly cosmopolitan market. These individuals tend to hail from the Andean or Amazonian interior, where their livelihoods have not only been threatened by

the heavy industrialization of food production in recent decades, but who have also faced perennial exclusion from mainstream national political discourse. Here the artisanal and millennial traditions encoded into these products furnish the base upon which a value-added agricultural marketing platform is defended, albeit still by a gastronomical authority based in Lima. In some cases, this commodification strategy entails assigning *terroir* to primary products such as potatoes, salt, coffee, and fruit, transforming them into premium commodities *papas huayro*, *sal de Maras*, *café Tunki*, and *chirimoya de Cumbe*. By helping to develop these markets, Apega and other organizations are making the case that the redress of societal inequalities might well begin through the flow of consumer capital. The hope is that the discursive transmutation of the "cholified" Andean peoples into "venerated stewards of our agricultural patrimony" may seed changes in how coastal elites and rural peoples living in the interior perceive one another—wrought not through armed violence and political conflict, as in the past, but through cooperative market building. The growers' acquisition of power to negotiate premium prices for their "artisanal" products, the argument goes,



ABOVE: *Gastronomical map of Perú populated with major agricultural products by region.*

PHOTO TAKEN BY AUTHOR AT THE FESTIVAL DE LA BIODIVERSIDAD IN LIMA, PERU, JUNE 2011.

represents a key first step in the realization of an alternative Peruvian political geography that locates the path to national progress precisely in the crosslinks that bind the various regions of Perú, rather than the antagonism between center and periphery.

As destructive transformations to the land and seascape associated with commercial agriculture accrue, however, the very biodiversity upon which Perú's gastronomical identity draws its inspiration has become increasingly threatened. At the same time, the growing cultural cachet of artisanal products such as *papas nativas* and the farmers who grow them points to a rare alignment of political, economic, and environmental interests. Marine biologist Patricia Majluf recognized this early on and has since devoted a great portion of her energies to parlay the growing prestige of gastronomy toward protecting the Peruvian anchovy, upon whose survival the whole of the Humboldt marine ecosystem depends.³⁹ Presently, virtually all anchovies harvested from the waters off the coast of southern Perú—some nine million metric tons per annum—are processed into fishmeal for export to industrial fish farms around the globe. This is some four to six million metric tons in excess of the maximum sustainable yield. It may seem odd that a conservation biologist would advocate increased human consumption of an overharvested species. Her case is this: anchovies sold for direct human consumption yield a profit margin twice that of fishmeal, which would mitigate the pressure to extract beyond what the seas can support. Owing to their humble position in the food chain, anchovies are an especially efficient source of food energy from the perspective of the ecosystem as a whole. Finally, they are cheap and nutrient-dense enough that they could play a key role in the struggle to feed the estimated eleven million Peruvians (38 percent of the total population) who are undernourished.⁴⁰

However, these material motivations, long in place, acquire real bite only when paired with convincing social marketing that gives rise to appreciable consumer demand, against industry prejudice that these small, oily fish are “not attractive for human consumption.”⁴¹ In partnership with the leading lights of Lima’s elite restaurant scene, Majluf has been working to restyle the anchovy as a *pez de bandera*, or a “national fish,” in recognition of its ready adaptability as much to haute culinary interpretations as to matters of social welfare and ecological responsibility. As part of a weeklong awareness raising campaign in November 2009, twenty-three of the most visible restaurants in Lima demonstrated their support by composing special menus that explored the untapped culinary potential of the anchovy in ambitious and modern preparations. That first Week of the Anchovy

culminated in a high-profile banquet (attended by then-resident Alan García and other top state officials) that centered on showcasing the gastronomical and ecological significance of this little fish. This ongoing communications-based strategy to invest culinary value in the anchovy has already begun to reap substantive rewards: domestic human consumption has increased by a factor of ten in the last decade, and according to national surveys, the very word *anchovy* is increasingly associated with *nutrition*, where before alimentary connotations were nonexistent.

These myriad ongoing efforts acquire a towering profile at Apega’s crown jewel project: Mistura, an annual gastronomical festival first held in Lima in 2008. Much more than a food fair, Mistura is an idealized culinary landscape that materializes for one week in the sprawling city center each September. The event explicitly strives to create, in microcosm, a Perú unified at last in the celebration of difference and to cultivate awareness of interdependence where inequality and hierarchy have long stood. As one participant put it, “This is Peru in its people, in its food. It isn’t defined by race or whether you have money or you don’t—everybody stands in line just the same.” Drawing more than a half million attendees over ten days in 2012, the young tradition has inspired its own memorialization in a documentary entitled “Mistura: The Power of Food,” which pays homage to six gastronomical archetypes: the visionary leader, the huarique⁴² cook, the baker, the street food vendor, the elite chef who champions unconventional Amazonian ingredients, and the Andean heirloom potato farmer. It is this list-like organization that typifies the new gastronomical discourse, which seeks to nullify historically reinforced inequities by merging them in comma-separated fashion into a common cultural lexicon. Within the ambit of Peruvian gastronomy, then, once humble tubers and grains become prized tokens of identity, as does the fare served at fast-food Peruvian hamburger restaurant chain Bembos. Homey colonial-era *criollo* potages are touted alongside indigenized ethnic cuisines like *chifa*—the ubiquitous Peruvian-Cantonese fusion generally associated with quick, cheap meals—and provocative Amazonian fruits like the tart, grape-sized *camu camu*, or the creamy custard-like *chirimoya*.

As part of the emerging value-generating apparatus of the Peruvian gastronomical field, new awards and prize categories are even born. Street foods with a long history, such as the *tamal* or the *anticucho*,⁴³ acquire prestige never achieved in the traditional marketplace of vendors and clients; in many quarters of Lima, these vendors have been driven off the streets entirely. However, as of 2009,⁴⁴ outstanding *tamaleras* and *anticucheras* have been garlanded with the

Ají de Plata Award, an honor yielding not only nationwide publicity and a sales boost, but also—it is hoped—the beginning of a wholesale revalorization of neglected traditional preparations. A suspicion nevertheless may lurk that the generation of cultural value by simply creating new awards risks prestige inflation, and worse—that the unreflexive deployment of prizes risks annihilating local cultures through assimilation into a single, metropolitan “currency” of cultural value.

Perhaps the pessimists are right to point out that the *Ají de Plata* is just the latest gadget in the hegemony-preserving toolkit. Any new story about the redistribution of cultural value to a first approximation remains vulnerable to this criticism, however, and we are barely a few pages deep into this narrative about Perú.

On balance, the value-added commodification practiced by Peruvian gastronomy at least represents an earnest initial effort to challenge old value hierarchies. Moreover, the consolidation of culinary meaning in prizes of clear intelligibility furnishes the possibility of its translatability to wider cultural and political discourses, both internally and abroad.

A national culinary awakening in the global ecumene

Indeed, a key mechanism mediating the interaction between local and global culinary systems has been the flow of symbolic capital from agents representing international gastronomy in the form of prestige. In April 2011, *Astrid y Gastón*, Chef Acurio's flagship restaurant in Lima, became the first restaurant in Perú to be recognized as among the Fifty Best Restaurants in the world according to an annual ranking monitored closely by industry professionals and lay enthusiasts alike. Acurio marked the distinction not as a personal professional victory, but a national one: “This is a triumph for Perú and its cuisine....” He indicated that the award principally represented “an enormous responsibility,” given that “this is a list composed by voters, by people who live in Europe and Asia... and now the presence of Perú in those markets....[Upon] discovering Peruvian ingredients, they will go running back to their countries and say that they have discovered *ají amarillo*, *huacatay*, *papas nativas*, *choclo*, and they will look for ways to bring them to their countries.”⁴⁵

Acurio immediately translates the award into the language of economic opportunity and cultural pride and identification—in the process borrowing the authority of these foreign adjudicators to rhetorically reinforce his vision of Peruvian solidarity, insisting that this distinction, though

explicitly conferred to individual restaurants, “demonstrates that in reality awards to people or restaurants are irrelevant. Prizes like this are opportunities for [our] producers, for [our] cooks, for our country brand, and for the presence of Perú in the world...” In turn, the editors of *Restaurant Magazine*, responsible for compiling the ranking, applauded themselves for taking a step toward ecumenism, having gathered a “list of restaurants that span an even greater geographical spread than previous years and recognizes the influence of fledgling culinary nations such as Perú and Russia.”⁴⁶

Food, as it is discursively and materially engaged today, resists reducibility to a single level of analysis. It is not just produced by professional chefs in restaurants; nor is a food item equivalent to the micronutrients or flavanoids that may comprise it; nor a meal wholly decomposable into semantic and syntactical primitives.⁴⁷ It directs our attention to strained fields and emptying seas, shifting human physiologies amidst postindustrial plenty, as well as contemporary crises of hunger and malnutrition, but is not coextensive with these issues. Meanwhile, scientists are linking our daily eating habits with a frightening suite of chronic ailments; global climate change with industrial modes of food production; shrinking biodiversity with human population growth; and further back, the primal drive to cook what we want to eat with the core changes that led to the divergence of modern humans from our evolutionary ancestors.⁴⁸ Caught in the crosswinds of globalization as we are, food provides an expanding space in which to contemplate these transformations, which naturally span traditional disciplinary boundaries. In doing so, we feed food’s ecumenical ambitions, and construct as much as discover its broadening significance.

How then do the dynamics of global food politics interact with our understanding of ostensibly local or national food narratives? Although this essay centers on some remarkable features of an emerging and ambitious gastronomical narrative in Perú, my hope is that this work might also yield comparative insights into the rising profile of food—and a growing food-driven political consciousness in my local context, the United States. The significant public outreach activities of Alice Waters, Mark Bittman, Dan Barber, and colleagues are emblematic of this trend—as is the blockbuster appeal of documentary films such as *Food Inc.* and *Supersize Me*; and the popularity of food literacy and gastronomy-inspired pedagogical initiatives at the university level.⁴⁹ These efforts are all the more notable for the manner in which they invite public participation in addressing major global policy challenges, including environmental sustainability goals (e.g., reduction in fossil fuel consumption and proper handling of GMOs) and public health concerns (e.g.,



obesity and malnutrition), by linking their resolution to the revalorization of individual, everyday food choices. Has the popularization of concepts such as “organic” and “local” in labeling everything from comestibles to lifestyles, paired with admonitions to abstain from red meat—not for health reasons, but in order to reduce one’s carbon footprint—made daunting environmental sustainability imperatives more palatable and more individually actionable? Analogous to the questions we have asked of the phenomenon of Peruvian gastronomy, we might ask what new angle contemporary American food narratives are bringing to bear on the relationship between personal responsibility and higher-order social outcomes. If a “gastronomical frame,” such as the one in operation in Perú, provides a cognitive expedient for digesting complex political narratives, how might couching a topic as formidably complex as global warming in the language of food provide the kind of substrate from which individual action and cultural change can more easily spring? These questions are open frontiers for future investigation. A deeper understanding of just how ideas about food have begun to meaningfully engage a wider political discourse will almost certainly derive from identifying those causes, mechanisms, and implications that are shared across individual case studies.

ABOVE: Street food vendors peddling fried pork chicharrón with potatoes and choclo smothered in ají chile sauce, and cups of chicha morada in the district of La Victoria in Lima, Perú.

PHOTO TAKEN BY AUTHOR, JUNE 2011.

Indeed, the broader intelligibility of Perú’s gastronomical revolution should be sought via the channels that connect the Peruvian gastronomical field with a global ecumene,⁵⁰ itself an emerging space with dominant ideologies that are not fixed, but rather are subject to evolution over historical time. Therefore, the intertwining themes that constitute Perú’s gastronomical identity (the responsible stewardship of biological diversity, celebration of cultural plurality, and a commitment to social inclusion) are not just politicized priorities of material and ideological significance within Perú, but values that pervade the international cultural and political zeitgeist.

It is all too true that the view from Lima does not show us all of, or even most of, Perú—as anyone familiar with the Andean and Amazonian interior can easily attest. Enthusiastic journalistic coverage of Peruvian celebrity chefs’ latest triumphs, staggering attendance figures at Mistura, and the saturation of Twitter and Facebook forums provides one diagnostic, but sharply limited, indicator of the reach and



LEFT: Last minute adjustments to display at press conference announcing launch of official campaign to lobby for Peruvian gastronomy's inclusion on the UNESCO World Intangible Heritage List.

PHOTO TAKEN BY AUTHOR AT THE MUSEO DE LA NACIÓN, IN THE DISTRICT OF SAN BORJA, LIMA, PERÚ, MARCH 2011.



ABOVE: Woman in colonial-era costume serving samples of traditional Peruvian desserts at the inauguration of the Casa de la Gastronomía, a museum dedicated to Peruvian culinary history.

PHOTO TAKEN BY AUTHOR, MARCH 2011

resonance of this and any other publically shared narrative—particularly in a nation where the topography of mass mediated information networks mirrors other dimensions of socioeconomic inequality. The possibilities for enduring societal impact hinge on the substantive realization of Peruvian gastronomy's promises. Just as we exercise caution in overestimating the transformative potential of farmers' markets that have proliferated in the more fashionable parks of North America, we will do well to closely monitor its limits.

Inspired by biological diversity and a history of cultural heterogeneity, Peruvian gastronomy is a thoroughly modern project to forge solidarity from the shards of cultural difference, rediscover value and pride in the historically neglected, and, most contagiously, assert that food itself can become a vehicle for real social change. Here we have considered the discursive and material factors that supported the swift ascent of gastronomy to the fore of the Peruvian national imagination: its resonance with contemporary political priorities, a proactive role in addressing economic and human development imperatives, links with global systems that govern the flow of prestige and symbolic capital. The challenges and contradictions that inhere in any great effort to produce deep, systemic change notwithstanding, Peruvian gastronomy presents an optimistic glimpse into a future that celebrates what this growing interconnectedness—between producers and consumers, between ideas in food and social realities—might achieve. 

NOTES

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