

Title:

Lima's Gastronomic Boom

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Summary:

While Peruvian cuisine is finally being recognized internationally, Lima's restaurant scene is becoming one of the world's most surprising.

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Article Body:

Although gastronomy has always been deeply rooted in Limeños' idiosyncrasy, the last few years have seen a huge leap in Lima's dining scene. Not only Peru's capital has become tapped with restaurants, both stylish and unpretentious, but many of them seem to be at full capacity all week long.

One possible explanation for the boom, besides obvious food quality, is international recognition. The Economist magazine, for example, reported in 2004 that Peru could "lay claim to one of the world's dozen or so great cuisines". Norman Van Aken, one of Florida's most gifted chefs, acknowledged that Peruvian cuisine was possibly the most enticing of those he had studied. And Patrick Martin, academic director of Le Cordon Blue, said that one of the reasons for having a branch of the school in Lima was the excellent quality of local cuisine.

"Better late than never", believe most Limeños, increasingly proud of the exceptionality of their gastronomic heritage. However, notwithstanding general contentment, they are still demanding and hard-to-please, and expect the best from their favourite restaurants and chefs. This, too, contributes to gastronomic excellence. Indeed Peruvian cuisine, though hardly noticed abroad until most recently, is one of the World's most varied and delicious.

Two aspects converge to give Peruvian cuisine an uniqueness that few other enjoy. The first is Peru's huge biodiversity. The country is home to 80 of the world's 104 different biological zones, which assures a remarkable assortment of fresh ingredients. Potatoes and hot peppers from the Andes, fish and seafood from the Pacific Ocean, mangoes and limes from the coastal valleys, bananas and manioc from the Amazon jungle: a chef's only problem is abundance of choice.

Second, Peruvian cuisine is the quintessence of cultural fusion. Ever since the first blending between Inca and Spanish traditions, local cooks have skilfully incorporated the flavours and techniques of the many immigrants that disembarked in Peru's ports, such as Italian and French. However, the strongest influences didn't arrive from Europe, but from Africa, China, and Japan.

Although the restaurant offer in Lima is most varied and covers a wide range of cuisines, Ceviche -diced raw fish marinated in lime juice and hot peppers- is surely number one on the list of dishes you must taste. There is at least one cevichería in every neighbourhood, so it won't be hard to find one. Our suggestion goes to superb Pescados Capitales, a lunch-only cevicheria in Miraflores.

A second must goes to Asian restaurants in Lima, both Chinese and Japanese, which, predictably, have a strong Peruvian influence. Chinese restaurants -known as Chifas-, can be counted by the hundreds. Usually down-to-earth neighbourhood eateries, these offer a fare rich in seafood and chicken. Japanese restaurants and sushi bars, on the contrary, are less widespread, and more upscale and expensive. Their forte is a year-round supply of the freshest and most variegated seafood, which is delightfully transformed into sushi, sashimi, and rolls. Our favourites are Wa Lok for Chinese, and Matsuei (where Nobuyuki Matsuhisa, Nobu's chef and owner, perfected his skills) for Japanese.

A last word for Lima's Criollo restaurants. Their cuisine is a vivid and tasty demonstration of the rich cultural fusion undergone by Peruvian gastronomy over the centuries. Besides the obvious Spanish and Andean fusion (a.k.a. Criollo), in their menus you'll discover much Africa (tacu-tacu and anticuchos), China (lomo saltado), and Japan (ceviches and tiraditos).

Bon appétit!