

PERU PASSION

Between Pacific and Andes, between roaring ocean and rugged rocks, a perfect blend of indigenous and immigrant cultures has created a compelling cuisine.

WORDS SUSAN LOW

This colourful ceviche at Astrid y Gastón restaurant in Lima, a Peruvian take on raw fish, shimmers with chilli, coriander, citrus and onion.

Photo: Liz Tasa



The famous Inca citadel of Machu Picchu in southern Peru. Inset: An indigenous Peruvian with a heart-warming smile.



In Peru, culinary worlds collide with spectacular effect. The country's landscape encompasses wild Pacific coastline, high Andean peaks and Amazonian jungle. Its varied climates and altitudes support an extravagant and unusual range of fruits, vegetables, nuts, grains and tubers. To this natural abundance, add several centuries of cross-cultural influence and exchange. After the Spanish conquest of Latin America in the 16th-century came the colonial era, bringing waves of immigration from Europe (mostly Spain and Italy), Japan, China and Africa. Indigenous people still make up more than a quarter of the population – and all these influences can be seen and tasted.

TO THIS NATURAL ABUNDANCE, ADD SEVERAL CENTURIES OF CROSS-CULTURAL INFLUENCE AND EXCHANGE.

PERUVIAN FOOD: FUSION CUISINE?

Peruvian food is often referred to as fusion cuisine, but the reality is more nuanced than that. The Spanish conquest initiated two-way traffic between the old and new world, a process called the Columbian Exchange. The European colonisers brought citrus fruits, bananas, grapes, sugar cane, rice, onions and brassicas, along with domesticated animals like cows, pigs, sheep and chickens for milk and meat; from Latin America to Europe went potatoes (which are native to Peru), maize, peanuts, tomatoes, beans, peppers, squashes and avocados. The dinner plates of both worlds were changed forever, with far-reaching consequences. In Peru, as in other South

Photos: Getty Images, Adrian Dascal/Unsplash, Lima London, Brian Dandridge, Richard Haughton

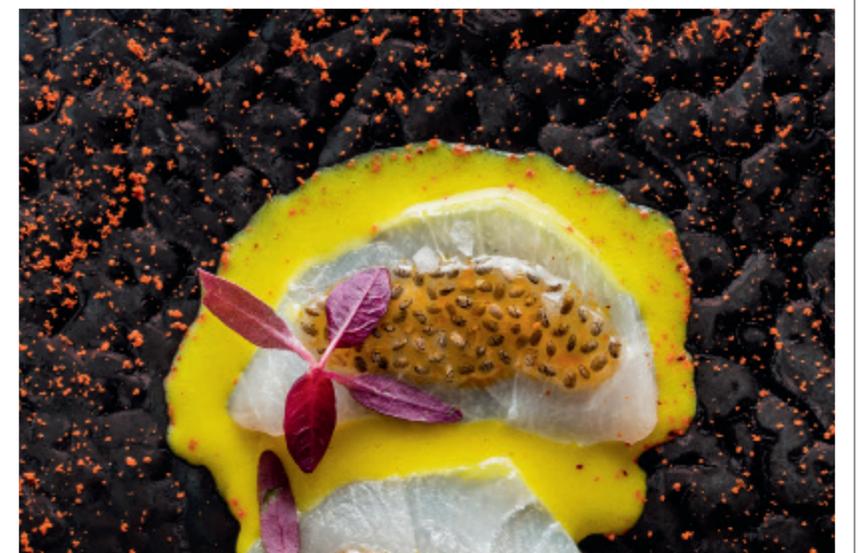


American countries, the colonial era also brought waves of immigration from Africa, Japan and China, as agricultural labourers arrived to work on plantations and estates during the 19th century. Culinary, their influence persists in Afro-Peruvian, *nikkei* and *chifa* cooking styles, respectively, as does the cooking of Peru's indigenous people.

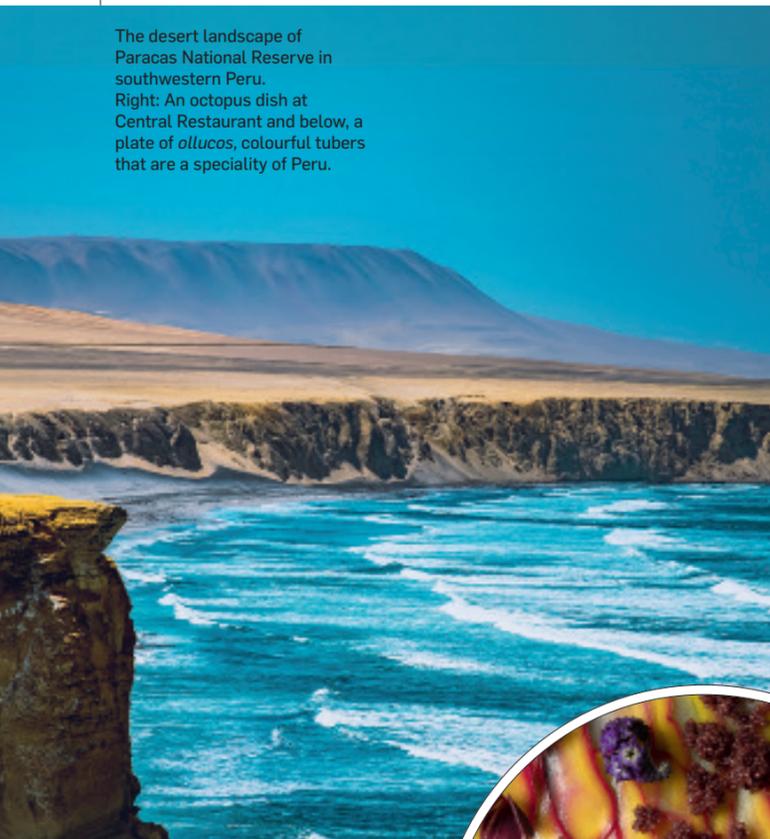
The coming-together of this rich mix of cultures and cooking styles is called *criollo* in Peru. Adrián Sánchez, executive chef of Lima and Lima Floral, two Peruvian restaurants in London, describes *criollo* cooking as, "the real roots of Peruvian food, bringing in all the cultural influences from the Incas onwards". Jake Cousins, *commis chef* at Lima Floral, has travelled widely and lived in Peru, his mother's birthplace. He says, "Peru is one of the luckiest countries in terms of cuisine because we have the influence of the sea, the Andes, the Amazon – each part brings its own things. If you go to the markets, you will see things you never see elsewhere." The combination of terrain, natural abundance and cross-cultural influence make Peruvian cooking a cuisine like no other. >



Above left: Lima restaurant is a Peruvian hotspot in London. Above and below: The enticing creations of Adrián Sánchez.



The desert landscape of Paracas National Reserve in southwestern Peru. Right: An octopus dish at Central Restaurant and below, a plate of *ollucos*, colourful tubers that are a speciality of Peru.



> **THE JAPANESE INFLUENCE: NIKKEI**
 Arguably, the strongest of Peru's many culinary influences has been that of Japanese immigrants, resulting in a cuisine called *nikkei*. Luiz Hara, chef and author of *Nikkei Cuisine: Japanese Food the South American Way*, who grew up in a *nikkei* family in São Paulo, Brazil, says: "Japan had been isolated for 200 years. When Emperor Meiji took power during the Meiji Restoration of 1868, there was a huge push to modernise Japan. At that time, a lot of people in the countryside went hungry. This coincided with Brazil abolishing slavery in 1888, so the Latin American plantation owners needed people to work on their estates. They encouraged Europeans to come, then they opened up immigration from Asia. There was a huge influx of Japanese people coming to Brazil and Peru."

THOUGH IT SEEMS (AND TASTES) UTTERLY UP-TO-DATE, CEVICHE'S ROOTS GO ALL THE WAY BACK TO THE INCAS.

The new immigrants created their own style of cooking, using local ingredients and Japanese techniques – including sophisticated knife skills – and Japanese flavour sensibilities. *Nikkei* cuisine encompasses dishes such as *tiradito*, a Peruvian cousin to Japan's sashimi, and the contemporary incarnation of *ceviche*.

HISTORY IN A DISH: CEVICHE
 Though it seems (and tastes) utterly up-to-date, *ceviche's* roots go all the way back to the Incas. Citrus from Europe didn't arrive in Peru until the 16th century, of course, but Latin American food authority Elisabeth Luard surmises that a version of the dish existed with chilli as a souring agent since some types of chilli are acidic. By the time the Japanese arrived, *ceviche* was an established dish which was further refined by Japanese cooks. Luiz Hara says: "When the Japanese went to Peru, they saw that cooks worked with



quality fish but didn't know how to make the best of it. They marinated the fish in citrus for too long, ruining the texture. The Japanese decided they could do better and marinated for less time and used fresher, even better fish. They also created *tiradito*." The name possibly originates from the Spanish word for 'stretched', a reference to the thinness of the lightly marinated slices.

A century later, *nikkei* food rose to world fame with chef Nobuyuki 'Nobu' Matsuhisa. Born in Japan, he moved to Lima in 1973, immersing himself in Nippo-Peruvian cooking. He rose to fame in Los Angeles with his Matsuhita restaurant, then opened Nobu in New York City in 1994. Nobu restaurants proliferated, making *nikkei* food a global phenomenon: there are now 50 Nobu restaurants on five continents.

However, while Nobu made *nikkei* famous, Hara credits Toshiro Konishi for creating it. "Nobu made *nikkei* cuisine glitzy," says Hara. "He put the cuisine on the map. But he worked with chef Toshiro



Chef Nobu Matsuhisa, the man who made *nikkei* cuisine famous around the globe.

Konishi who had come to Peru from Japan in the 1970s. When Nobu went to the US, Konishi stayed in Peru, ran several restaurants and taught at university. He's regarded as the father of *nikkei* in Peru."

NIKKEI CUISINE ENCOMPASSES DISHES SUCH AS TIRADITO AND THE CONTEMPORARY INCARNATION OF CEVICHE.

CHEFS BRINGING PERUVIAN FLAVOURS TO THE WORLD
 Nobu paved the way for a later wave of Peruvian chefs. Today Peru is the only country thus far to have two establishments listed among the *World's 50 Best Restaurants*: Central and Maido, both in Lima, hold places four and seven, respectively. At Central, the cooking of husband-and-wife team Virgilio Martínez and Pia >



A subtle but striking, citrus-scented starter at Astrid y Gastón.

Photos: Getty Images, Central Restaurant, Antony Jones / PA / picturedesk.com, Liz Tasa



A most exquisite, caviar-topped dumpling at Maido restaurant and, above right, the interior of the restaurant in Lima, Peru.



PERU ON A PLATE

Ingredients and dishes

CEVICHE

This dish of cubed raw fish lightly marinated in citrus, drizzled with olive oil and served with onion, avocado and chillies, is the one most closely identified with Peruvian cuisine. The word is believed to derive from the Quechua (an indigenous language) word *siwichi*, which means fresh fish. *Ceviche* dates back to the Incas, but the ingredients and techniques have changed with each successive wave of cultural change and exchange, from the Spanish conquest onwards. The dish helped make Peruvian food famous around the world, and is still evolving today.

PACHAMANCA

Not so much an ingredient or dish, but a way of cooking. Chef Adrián Sánchez says, "*Pachamanca* means 'earth oven'. You dig a hole, make a fire and line it with volcanic stones, then wrap the food in banana leaves and layer it in the earth oven, then cook it for hours. In a single dish, you can find all the roots of Peruvian cooking." Ingredients might include marinated pork, alpaca, *cuy* (guinea pig) and lamb, along with potatoes, sweet potatoes and corn. It's similar to a New England clambake, a Maori *hangi* and a Hawaiian *luau*. The dish had ritualistic importance for the Incas because cooking food in the ground was believed to pay homage to Pachamama, the Inca earth goddess. It remains a feast dish today.

PEANUTS

Native to Peru and cultivated by the Incas, peanuts were brought to Europe, Africa, Asia and the Pacific Islands during the European colonial expansion. Peanuts, now a major food crop around the world, are an integral part of West

African stews, Indonesian *satay* sauces and the all-American lunchbox staple, the peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Peanuts are also the main ingredient in *Plumpy'Nut*, a high-nutrition food administered by UNICEF and others to alleviate severe malnutrition in children.

POTATOES

Possibly the most popular tuber in the world, this native of Peru has altered the course of human history. There are an estimated 3,800 types of potato in Peru alone. Luard says: "You see thousands of varieties piled up in the marketplaces in their land of origin, and there is an enormous range of colours and textures and uses." Luard recommends *Papa a la Huancaína* – potatoes with fresh cheese and chillies in a bright yellow sauce. Potatoes are also the basis of another iconic Peruvian dish, *causa* – potatoes mashed with chillies and lime, which dates back to the Incas and is still popular today.

QUINOA

Centuries before this nutritious seed became revered as a superfood among health-conscious Westerners, it was grown in the Andean highlands, where the Incas called it *chisaya mama*, the mother seed, the source of life. Spanish colonisers tried to suppress its cultivation because they believed its ceremonial importance undermined the spread of Catholicism. Quinoa and its cousin amaranth nonetheless survived, and they continue to sustain Andean populations and to give pleasure to cooks the world over. The seeds, in shades of pink, black, brown, orange and red, are appreciated for their beauty as well as their nutritional value.

> León is the result of detailed research into Peru's multitude of climates and the resulting diversity of Peruvian produce. At the launch of *Central* cookbook at Lima restaurant in London in 2016, Virgilio Martínez described their cooking: "We cook ecosystems," he said before introducing a staggering array of native grains, seeds, vegetables, fungi and edible algae. You will struggle to find cooking like this anywhere else.

At Maido, Peru-born chef Mitsuharu Tsumura honed his skills in Japan and the US. He takes *nikkei* cooking to new heights with his tasting menus based on Peruvian ingredients and Japanese techniques. Mention must also be made of chef Gastón Acurio, whose Astrid y Gastón restaurant in Lima is currently ranked number 13 on the *World's 50 Best Latin American Restaurants* list. The editors describe this trailblazing chef who has inspired acolytes including Virgilio Martínez, as "chef-patron saint of modern Peruvian cuisine."

Chefs such as these have made Peru a must-visit destination for food lovers. In 2017, 2018 and 2021, Peru was deemed to be the World's Leading Culinary Destination in the *World Travel Awards*. Peruvian chefs have brought the flavours of their nation to the world through their talent and creativity. Now food lovers are heading to Peru, where the rich mix of ingredients and culture awaits discovery. <