

Meals in high places

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Flavour surprises ... markets and street stalls at a Sunday morning produce market. *Photo: Getty Images*

Ancient landmarks have long been a drawcard, now groundbreaking cuisine is putting Peru in the spotlight, writes Natalie O'Brien.

Tourists learn fast not to order the popular ceviche (raw fish) after 2pm in the afternoon – Peruvians won't eat anything that has been out of the sea for more than 12 hours.

Inside, the place is jumping with well-dressed Limeans.

If you're hankering after the delicious grilled-meat sticks known as anticuchos, this traditional street food is only eaten in the latter part of the day.



A dish made of 'cuy' (Guinea pig) meat. *Photo: AFP*

For those lucky enough to be attending a celebration in a family home, the dish most likely to be gracing the table will be roasted "cuy" – or guinea pig.

In a world obsessed with television cooking shows, you would think there was not much left to surprise a gourmand. But the cuisine of Peru is proving that is not the case.

I have come with a group to Peru to eat our way across the country. Although we manage to fit in visits to some of the country's most famous sites – including Machu Picchu, the old Incan capital of Cusco and The Sacred Valley – this trip is all about the food.



Not after 2pm ... Ceviche. *Photo: Getty Images*

From the minute we take a spin through downtown Lima, a city of almost 10 million people, I realise it is going to be a very different experience. Apart from the revered grilled rodents, there are so many things I have never heard of, let alone tried, from alpaca steaks to Pisco cocktails, and a zillion different types of corn including purple – and then there is the coca leaf tea.

Fusion food is also huge in Peru, such as the Chinese restaurants that dominate almost every street in the capital. Peruvians have developed such a love affair with this cuisine, our guides tell us there are now more of these so-called “Chifa” restaurants in Lima than those serving traditional South American food.

Chifas are a hybrid of two cultures – dishes are a mix of traditional ingredients that have been cooked up Cantonese-style to produce a Chinese cuisine like no other. Peruvians have been fascinated by Chifas since they opened in the 1920s with the influx of Chinese immigrants.



Worms on the grill. Photo: Getty Images

There are more than 2000 in Lima alone and they have become a cornerstone of the national cuisine, which is starting to draw international attention.

Peru is emerging as the hottest new gourmet spot on the planet, driven in part by the huge success of its own celebrity chefs, including Gaston Acurio.

On the back of the growing food tourism success, hotel operators are also ramping up the options from the popular adventure tourism market for which Peru has long been known, to now offering some of the world’s most luxurious hotels and including five-star restaurants in their establishments. Acurio has achieved rock-star status in Peru after showcasing the country’s cuisine in a string of restaurants in a global empire that stretches from New York to Asia.

It is the promise of a table at Acurio’s fabled Lima restaurant, Astrid y Gaston, one of the top 50 restaurants in the world that prompts us, upon landing, to shrug off our jet lag and head straight there.

It is a Sunday night and the restaurant is booked solid for the coming weeks. The 9pm slot was the only opening they could manage, so we don’t waste time.

Our car glides down a dark side-street to the front of an old Peruvian house with an entrance so low-key you could almost miss it.

Inside, the place is jumping with well-dressed Limeans and we begin our gastronomical adventure sipping on seriously glamorous cocktails made from Pisco, the national spirit of Peru.

Our food begins arriving in a staggering palette of colours. Many of the dishes are topped with one of Peru's current food crazes – expertly arranged foam that looks as though it just washed up from some exotic seashore.

Here, I work up the courage to try my first taste of cuy. Convinced I cannot write a story about Peru's cuisine without having at least tried it, I find the Peking-style cuy, served on purple corn pancakes, fabulously better than expected.

Although I am proud of myself for eating this tasty dish, I lose any desire to try it again after being introduced later in the trip to a cuy family living on a straw-covered kitchen floor in a mountain-top village. I have a rule about eating animals I am on a first-name basis with.

But there are plenty of other unfamiliar and fascinating things to keep me busy, from sampling the national soft drink Inca Kola – a bright yellow-coloured drink that smells like bubble gum and consistently outsells Coca-Cola – to the endless jungle fruits we find in the La Gran Fruta market.

Described as a super-fruit with amazingly high levels of vitamins, among other things, the lucuma is my favourite. Mixed as a smoothie at one of the popular juice shops, it is like drinking a caramel-flavoured liquid-cake mix.

While I am busy perusing the exotic fruits, I am told that the country has more than 3000 varieties of potatoes (some claim 6000), 38 varieties of corn, as well as endless varieties of chilli peppers and the increasingly popular grain quinoa.

These ingredients, apart from being mixed with Chinese recipes, have also been blended together in a fusion of early Incan food types and Spanish cuisine. This is particularly evident in the food found in the World Heritage-listed town of Cusco.

A short flight from Lima, the capital of the former Incan empire is almost 3400 metres above sea level and you can feel the change in altitude the moment you get off the plane. Copious amounts of coca leaf tea are offered in the restaurants and cafes dotting the quaint streets to help visitors suffering from altitude sickness.

Cusco is to be the launching pad for our decadent food journey to Machu Picchu. But there are no hiking boots and swag rolls for us. It is five-star all the way and we start by lunching at the restaurant in the boutique hotel Inkaterra La Casona, a restored 16th-century colonial manor house – the only Relais & Chateaux hotel in Peru.

Mountain food is vastly different to coastal food and ceviche is rarely on a menu. The mountain food reflects the way of life of the people; the staples are local grains, vegetables and meat.

Our first meal in Cusco is a four-course lunch that features a creamy yellow-pepper sauce that appears to be a national favourite, and lots of coca leaf tea.

Our next stop is the Urubamba Valley and the newly opened Tambo del Inka hotel, the only hotel in the valley that has its own private train station on the line to Machu Picchu.

The hotel has a fabulous restaurant but we decide to head to the town's main street for a quick and simple meal in one of the cheap local restaurants – flavoured flame-grilled chicken and salad, washed down with Inca Kola.

After taking the early morning train to the hill-top citadel discovered by the American explorer Hiram Bingham in 1911, we wander through the markets snacking on spicy corn kernels and banana chips, completely ruining me for the long lunch at the upscale Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel.



Potatoes for sale at a market. *Photo: Getty Images*

The hotel has an Amazonian, thatched-roof-style restaurant that serves some very inventive dishes but has a somewhat distracting location straddling the railway line.

The next day we fly back to Lima and visit some of the historic sites, shop in the bohemian district of Barranco and hang out at the city's oldest taverns, which are known as huariques.

These Latin versions of the English boozier have hosted many politicians, intellectuals and writers, and locals boast that they were a favourite among the likes of Ernest Hemingway and Orson Welles.

It is said that Welles and actors Clark Gable and John Wayne all developed a taste for the pisco sour – pisco liquor mixed with lemon juice syrup and bitters.

Sunday mornings the huariques are full of families and a must-try is the purple corn drink, chicha morada. Although the colour is off-putting, it tastes much better than it looks and is great with the Sunday morning snack of spicy sausages.

Although I have spent 10 days trying different drinks, foods and experiences, the one meal that really captures my imagination is served up accompanied by a trip back in time.

We have a lunch date in the family home of Don Jeronimo de Aliaga from Castille, an early Spanish nobleman who was a co-founder of the first university in the Americas.

Taking up a whole city block, this rambling home, which was built in 1535 on the ruins of an Incan temple, is the oldest privately owned household in Peru and has been home to 16 generations of the Aliaga family.

Entering though a little gate from the bustling city street, we step inside the Casa Solariega De Aliaga and are greeted by Don Jeronimo's descendants who invite us to join them for traditional aperitifs and canapés, all served by white-gloved waiters.

While we sip our aperitifs, we are allowed to wander through the rooms of the 500-year-old mansion and view the collection of antiques that has been built up by the family over centuries. Our lunch is served in the formal dining room, on a table dressed with the family's heirloom linen and groaning under the weight of the lunch dishes, which include soft-as-a-cloud asparagus mousse, a pot-roast accompanied by an array of the root vegetables for which Peru is so famous, followed by dessert featuring exotic jungle fruits.

At that moment, I forget all about etiquette and ask for more.



Trip notes

Staying there

- Inkaterra La Casona Cusco, 113 Plaza Las Nazarenas, Cusco. From \$408 with breakfast and mini bar for a patio suite. +511 610 0400, inkaterra.com/cusco.

Eating there

- Café Inkaterra, Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel restaurant, Machu Picchu, +511 610 0400. inkaterra.com/en/machu-picchu.