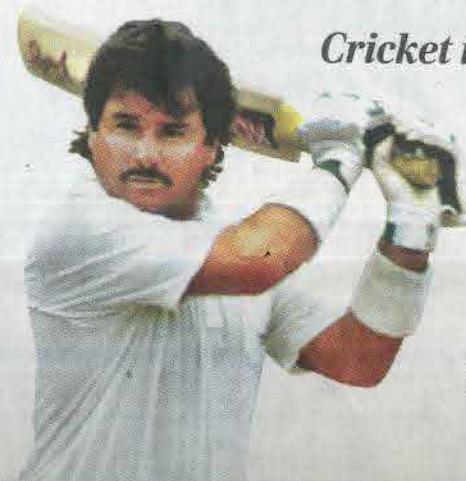




# travel

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# Experience the height of good taste

A new lodge set in the Peruvian Andes celebrates local produce and culinary inventiveness. **Paul Richardson** tucks in

I am so not hungry, I said to myself, having just arrived in Cuzco where the high altitude (3,400m) was playing havoc with my appetite. Even the smell of someone eating a sandwich by the 17th-century cathedral almost made me cause an indecorous scene in what the Incas called the “bellybutton of the world”.

Not to be hungry in Peru is, to put it mildly, a shame. As every foodie knows, this Latin American country is, along with Denmark, leading the world in culinary inventiveness – and its cuisine is madly fashionable. What is less widely known is that Peruvian food is not just about the Lima restaurant scene with its fabulous fusions and experiments, but also the richly varied traditions of the Pacific coastal strip, the Amazon jungle and the Andes.

My first dinner in Cuzco was a cup of tea – coca tea, a time-honoured local remedy for altitude sickness – so next morning I was ravenous. At a roadside stall in Copao they were selling freshly simmered *choclo*, a kind of maize with a big white waxy grain, and the corn cob I nibbled with a lump of salty cheese made for a deliciously restorative Andean breakfast.

I would be following the classic traveller route towards Ollantaytambo and eventually Machu Picchu along the fast-flowing river Vilcanota – but I’d be staying at the 12-room Hacienda Urubamba, which opened last month and is set to become the benchmark hotel in the area. The latest addition to the Inkaterra stable of high-end properties (see Essentials), it is located in Huayocari at the heart of the Sacred Valley, known for its Inca sites, fine weather and adventure sports from hiking to river rafting.

This whole valley had a spiritual significance for the Incas, and I could see why. Its towering crags, covered with a light green fuzz like the baize on a snooker table, are hung with the white skeins of waterfalls and the valley floor is thick with maize plantations. There are fruit trees in abundance and, racked up on terraces, the purplish

**Of the 2,000 varieties of potato in Peru, around 600 are found in the Andes**

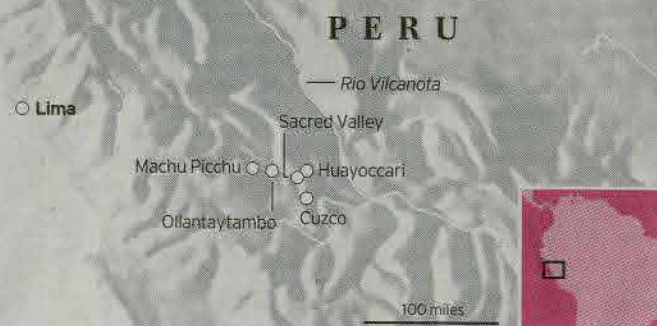
sprays of another fashionable Andean export: quinoa.

At Awanakancha, a conservation centre and llama ranch, I learnt about the three pillars of local agriculture – maize, quinoa and potatoes (*papa*). Of the 2,000 varieties of *papa* in Peru, around 600 are found in the Peruvian Andes and a good few are on show at Awanakancha. They include not just the standard yellow, violet and

white varieties, the popular *peruanita* and the yolk-coloured *papa yema*, but also the scrunched-up *qachuhuacachi* (literally “the one that makes the daughter-in-law cry”, because it is so troublesome to peel) and the *chuño*, a small potato freeze-dried into chalky hardness by the sun and frosts of the high Andes.

Hacienda Urubamba stands on a slight elevation at the side of the valley. With its pitched, tiled roof and proud dimensions, it mimics the aspect of a colonial hacienda – but there the similarity ends. Its airy public spaces have floor-to-ceiling windows, making the most of some incredible mountain views. My room had high, beamed ceilings and terracotta floor tiles warmed by underfloor heating. I was the first guest ever to have stayed there, and the hacienda still smelt of dust and paint.

To a soundtrack of offstage hammer-blows, I sat at a hastily laid table before a huge stone fireplace while manager Joaquín Escudero told me about local produce used in the kitchen: alpaca steaks, river trout, lamb,



Inkaterra's Hacienda Urubamba in the Sacred Valley

and *cuy* (guinea pig) bred at Inkaterra's organic homestead near Machu Picchu – one of six supplying this and the group's other hotels. Guests are welcomed with a *chicha morada* – a non-alcoholic drink made from purple corn, served refreshingly cold – while the bar makes much of pisco sour (the famous brandy cocktail) and artisan Peruvian beers made from quinoa, wheat and maize.

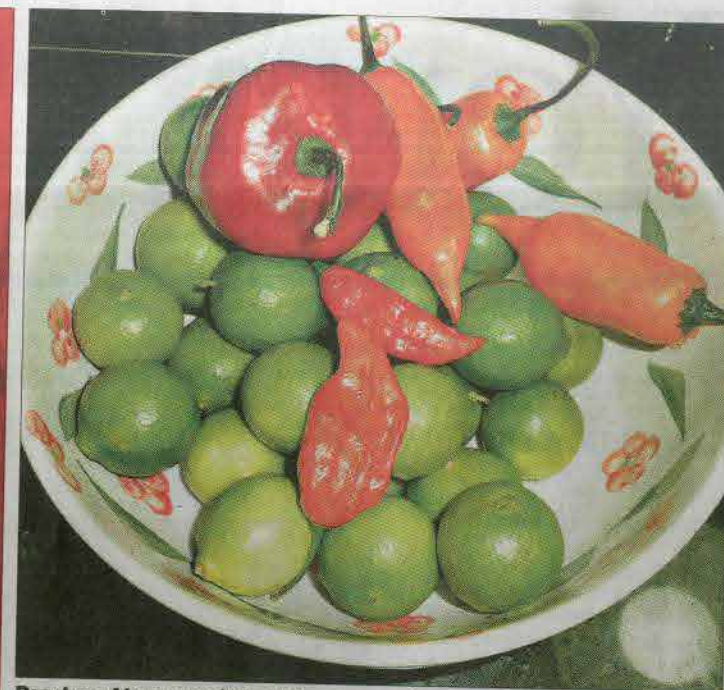
The beating heart of the hacienda is its *chacra*, or vegetable garden. On tours, visitors are initiated into agricultural practices with millennia of history behind them, such as the Inca “foot plough” or *chakitaqlla*, still widely used in the Sacred Valley.

In the company of José Luis Lavilla, one of Inkaterra's full-

time ecological guides, I roamed the 14-acre grounds. Two llamas grazed on the lawns, idle now but potentially to be used for rides along the valley. The extensive *chacra* is a rich sampler of local crops. There are fields of potatoes in white and violet flower, and waving fronds of quinoa. Among the vegetables are *sachatomate* (the elongated “tree tomato”) and *rocoto* (a hot red pepper, stuffed with meat in one of Cuzco's signature dishes).

“*Aquí crece to do* [everything grows here],” said José Luis. From him I learnt about the archaic ritual dishes still eaten on high days and holidays, such as *chiriuchu* (a mighty stew of maize, guinea pig and mixed meats) and *watia*, in which potatoes, beans and meat are cooked in an earth pit. Reverence





Penelope Alzamora gives a Peruvian cookery masterclass in her own kitchen, left; the fresh limes and chilies essential for great ceviche

## Fresh flavours of Lima on a gastronomic tour like no other

*The best way to learn about a country's food is to cook it, says Adrian Bridge*

Of the many excellent meals I enjoyed in Lima, the most memorable was in the spectacular apartment of Penelope Alzamora – complete with panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean. That may have been because I had quite a large hand in it myself. Before taking my place at the table, I had been assisting in Penelope's kitchen, cutting, chopping and tasting the array of ingredients in Peru's signature dish: ceviche.

I had learnt a lot along the way: that ceviche can be made with a number of fish (we used flounder, but it could have been cod, tuna or salmon). The pieces need to be cut into bite-sized chunks but do not need to be cooked – something the Japanese pointed out when they came to Peru in the late 1800s and found the succulence of the fish to be of sushi standard.

It does, however, benefit from some accompaniment: red onions, finely sliced and soaked in water to tone down their pungent taste; limes, squeezed by hand to remove any bitterness; salt, black pepper,

garlic, a pinch of coriander and, for that added kick, *aji* (red chilli) paste. The ceviche is served on a plate, garnished with Peruvian corn, lettuce and sweet potato.

My labours had been aided by a drink that goes particularly well with ceviche: pisco sour. Penelope had talked me through the process of that, too (oh, the agony of the wait), beginning with the importance of selecting the right pisco, a brandy distilled from the quebranta grape variety (the bottle she used bore the label *Demonio de los Andes*). To that we added the juice of several limes, egg white, sugar-based syrup and crushed ice, stirred then topped with a few drops of Angostura bitters. "It must be neither too strong, nor too sour, nor too sweet," she said in her flawless English. And it wasn't.

My kitchen session came as part of a half-day tour giving visitors a genuine taste of Peru – in particular, the globally acclaimed gastronomy of Lima. It started with a wander around Barranco, the deliciously bohemian district in which Penelope lives. Here you find elegant buildings dating back to when Lima's great and good decided to build summer homes by the sea to the south of the city. There are wide, tree-lined streets and colourful boutique-style shops serving artisan bread, exquisite chocolate and thick molasses treacle. With the personable Penelope by your side, within an

hour you feel you too are part of the Barranco neighbourhood.

Those taking the full-day tour also join Penelope at a local market where she selects fish and vegetables for the feast to come. In both cases, tours wind up in Penelope's own flat. But before enjoying that spectacular ocean view, guests have to sing – or rather chop – for their supper.

In addition to ceviche, a typical meal involves the scallop-based starter *conchitas a la Parmesana* and a main course of *sudado de pescado* (a fish stew with a fusion of flavours perfected by Penelope's grandmother). There may also be a desert involving cherimoya fruits and meringues.

In the course of the meal you may meet Penelope's two children, possibly her husband too. You will undoubtedly hear about her time at a cooking school in San Francisco and her return to Lima to work with South America's most acclaimed chef, Gaston Acurio. The air is friendly, relaxed; the food and wine – after all that hard work – delicious. Memorable indeed.

● A half-day culinary adventure in Lima with Penelope Alzamora can be booked through Sunvil Traveller (020 8758 4774; sunvil.co.uk). It costs from £45 per person. Sunvil Traveller also offers a range of tours of Peru: a nine-night trip costs from £2,698 per person, including flights from London, accommodation, private excursions and transfers and some meals.

for the natural world permeates the traditions of the Andes: for example, it is still common in this sierra to blow steam off your food in the direction of the peaks where the *apus* (mountain spirits) live.

Next morning we set off on a trek along the valley, gazing down from a high ridge towards the new hotel in its glorious setting. This otherwise timeless landscape is about to change, however. Investors from Chile, Europe and the United States are beginning to snap up land – and they are not just here for the clear air and the bucolic views. For over the crest of the valley lies Chinchero, which will shortly have its own international airport. Be sure to see this extraordinary region now, before the developers move in.

### Essentials

#### Getting there

● There are no direct flights from Britain to Peru. Iberia (020 3684 3774; iberia.com) flies daily to Lima from London via Madrid. KLM (020 7660 0293; klm.com) flies daily to Lima via Amsterdam from London and a range of other UK regional airports.

#### Packages

● Miraviva (020 7186 1111; miravivatravel.com) offers a 10-day

Andean Discovery luxury package to Lima, the Sacred Valley, Machu Picchu and Cuzco. It costs from £3,695 per person, based on two sharing. The price includes international and domestic flights, accommodation, Hiram Bingham train, private transfers and tours.

#### Where to stay

● Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba (0800 458

7506; inkaterra.com) is the latest boutique hotel owned by Inkaterra. A three-day, two-night stay in a superior double costs \$540 (£360). Other properties include Machu Picchu Pueblo eco-lodge (doubles from £215) and La Casona in Cuzco (doubles from £325).

Peruvian girls in national dress overlook Machu Picchu; the local delicacies served at Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba