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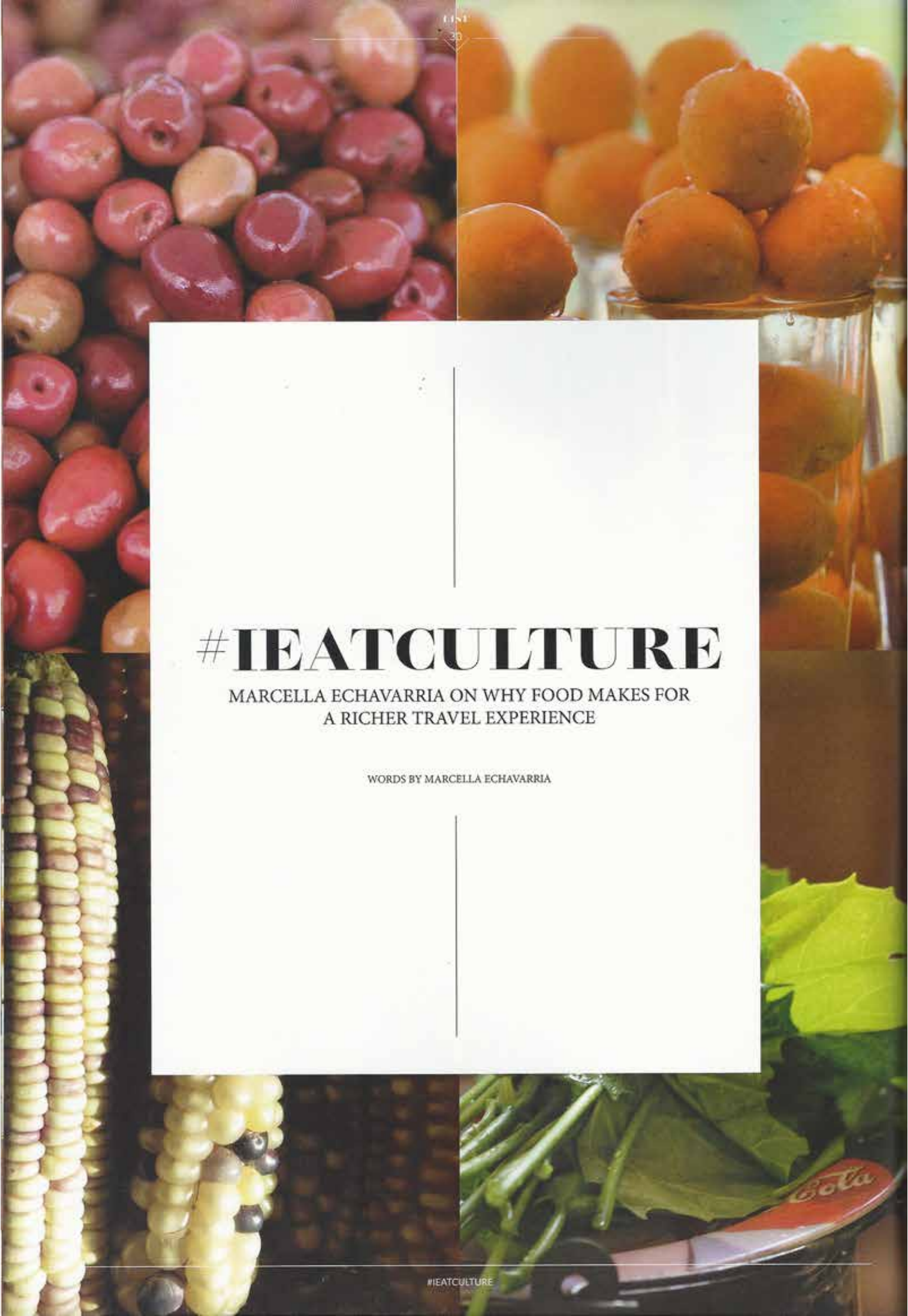
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#IEATCULTURE

MARCELLA ECHAVARRIA ON WHY FOOD MAKES FOR
A RICHER TRAVEL EXPERIENCE

WORDS BY MARCELLA ECHAVARRIA





#ieatculture summarises what today's traveller is looking for: a holistic experience that can be absorbed with the five senses. With the continuing boom in tourism (around one billion people are thought to have travelled last year), the biggest trend continues to be focussed on authentic experiences that reflect the essence of a place. Travellers are looking for products that reflect who they are and the lifestyles and values they pursue at home. In this context, experiencing 'the other' through food not only has implications for the industry, but for the development, cultural preservation and even the revival of cultures. Tourists drive the demand for certain ingredients and preparations, and provide motivation for the host cultures to celebrate their uniqueness. Thus, the dinner table becomes the stage where homogenisation and globalisation are finding a counter-trend. Food welcomes localisation in the midst of a globalised world; it connects people to a place and invites them to embrace their cultural heritage.

The true story of an area is the one worth telling. The story of authentic contributions that previous generations have made to its history and culture is what distinguishes one particular area from every other place on earth. At Norden Camp in the Tibetan Plateau, Chef Andrew Notte describes the successful, and perhaps the most culturally relevant, food story he has created around the yak – a species indigenous to the area. His menu begins with roasted yak bone, whereby the marrow is

spooned out of the bone and eaten atop crostini with a sprinkling of coarse Tibetan lake salt (locally they do eat the bone marrow, though not in that presentation).


The next course is yak momo soup, presented in a hot bowl with hot yak broth poured tableside into the bowl. Then comes a simple salad of cucumber and tomato with cooked walnut flower, which grows on the plateau. And for the main course, a thin marinated yak steak sliced against the grain, served with sautéed vegetables, yak demi glaze and a potato gratin made using yak milk and reconstituted local dried yak cheese. Dessert is a trio of yak milk crème brûlée, yak milk and walnut flower ice cream, and a small round of yak cheesecake.

Before chef Rene Redzepi created Noma, the culinary culture of Denmark was unknown to the rest of the world; now it is a reference point held alongside names such as El Celler de Can Roca in Spain and the incredible phenomenon led by Gastón Acurio in Perú. These individual initiatives have proven that it is possible to dramatically change the economic and tourism landscapes of entire regions and countries through food. Peru's Inkaterro, which has six hotels all based on or part of heritage sites, is a perfect example of the impact food can have in the preservation of cultural identity. Simple ingredients available in every Peruvian kitchen – such as potatoes, quinoa, corn and peppers – are presented in refined ways and



brought to the table with a touch of pride, fusing indigenous cuisine with expressions of Spanish, Japanese, Chinese and Afro fare. As a challenging yet culturally relevant recipe, Chef Rafael Casin chose 'Papa Helada' – made with a special kind of potato that comes 'frosted' from the heights and is brought to the market by high Andean local producers on only Wednesdays and Fridays, this dish is served beautifully with melted local cheese and salad.

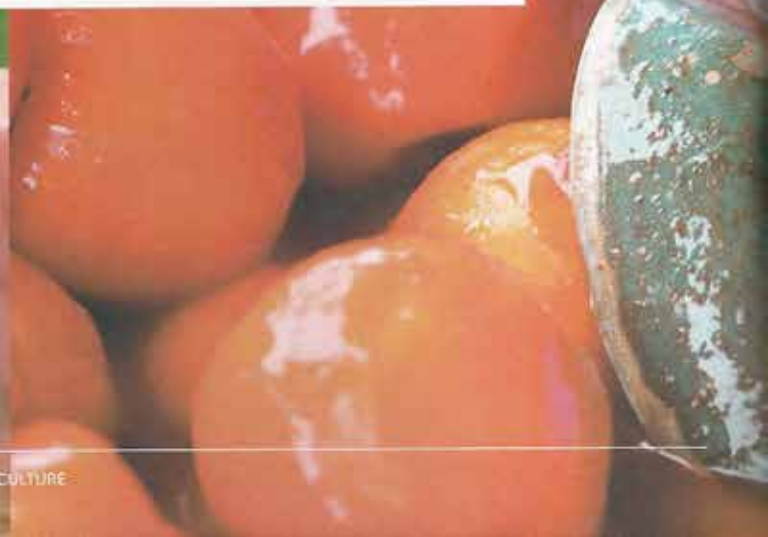

At Aqua Expeditions on the Peruvian Amazon, the aim is to preserve the rich food culture of each ethnic group in Peru. According to food and beverage manager Juan Carlos Marquez, "We learn techniques and preparation methods from the different communities and then we interpret them on a gourmet level in order to incorporate not only the recipes, but also the products. In this way we preserve these cultures and we also teach our guests about the Amazon through the menus created by Pedro Miguel Schiaffino." One of the products that Aqua Expeditions has incorporated into their menu is the 'Aji Negro' (black chili pepper). "We learned from the Lampiyacu community, formed by Boras Indians, how to prepare and use it. The Aji Negro is made by a preparation of "yuca brava" (a poisonous yucca that has high levels of cyanide) and chili peppers, which are fermented and boiled. We use this in different dishes, such as the 'Ninajuane' or our 'Gallina al aji negro,'" affirms Marquez.




At Jnane Tamsna in Marrakech, the Moroccan traditional festive dish of Pastilla is made with fish, spices, herbs and flavours wrapped in a local filo called warka. It may be followed by lamb cooked with apples and figs (instead of the classical prunes), alongside barley couscous with their own blend of ras el hanout, Morocco's famous spice mixture. Whether the couscous is a vegetarian speciality or served with free-range Beldi chicken, these twists we do make it even more culturally relevant.

At Al Aïn Restaurant at the Royal Palm Marrakech, chef Meryam Diane now leads an all-woman team dedicated to preparing old home recipes and introducing the richness of Moroccan food to the world. Her menu showcases spices and condiments that are essential in Moroccan cuisine, with a subtle and delicate blend of Arab, Berber and Moresque traditions, within tagines, various types of breads and couscous dishes from all corners of Morocco.

Food can also be a promoter of responsible tourism: instead of rural areas acting as stop-off points on route to other destinations, this new curiosity about remote food traditions allows for a 'slow tourism' approach that facilitates more lengthy stays, less ecological impact and the opportunity to promote remote areas with valuable cultural heritages. Chef Andrew Notte from Norden Camp in the Tibetan Plateau – an area not widely known for





its cuisine – is focussing on making the food programme relevant to the staff as well as the guests. "Much of their diet, like most people, was and is determined by circumstances: financial, logistical, cultural. Simply not being able to afford or access different types of food; the need for the food and eating style to be portable due to a nomadic lifestyle; or avoiding fish because rivers are sometimes used as funeral sites and it creates a religious conflict. So using the ingredients available locally in a different context with a different presentation has become very central to what I am trying to accomplish."

Food has the potential to change the landscape of a place. Authentic trends in tourism can affect the food security of the place. Culinary tourism also has positive economic impact, especially for rural areas. As tourists become more adventurous, both in their palates and their interests, rural areas have an opportunity to capitalise. Promoting food tourism in rural areas helps local farmers, producers and small business owners, and encourages these rural economies to diversify.

Rafael Casin, Inkaterra's chef, says: "The heritage of any culture is preserved through its people. A proud group of individuals will most likely maintain traditions, stories and also recipes; therefore food will have a very active role in cultural preservation." Chef Andre Notte of Norden Camp observes a real interest from guests in the people preparing the food. Are they local? What's their story? Do they want to be chefs? "My cooks and sous chefs have all been locals and guests seem really excited to hear about the training they are getting and the opportunities that could come with it... If they see at least some of the menu items as being locally accessible, then they can experiment and develop their own menus. It encourages them to rely on solid cooking techniques more than exotic ingredients – and these can be applied anywhere. It will make them stronger cooks and eventually, hopefully, chefs." Moreover, locals may take these learnings to their homes and will eat more nutritious food on a daily basis. Thus, the food trend in tourism has the power of embracing the other in a positive and sustainable way.

Marcella Echavarria is a Medellín-born, New York-based photojournalist who regularly contributes to *Diners*, *Travesías*, along with LAN Airlines' and Avianca's inflight magazines; she has also been featured in *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New York Times*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, *The Washington Post* and *Departures*, among many others.