

NEWS

14 Foods (and Drinks) You Must Try on a Trip to Peru

by Eric Rosen

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The worldwide diaspora of Peruvian cuisine has officially become one of the great global culinary trends of the past few years. The country's traditional foods and contemporary dining scene have gained a worldwide following thanks to the energetic efforts and rapidly expanding restaurant empires of chefs like Gastón Acurio and Virgilio Martínez. These days, you can sample Peruvian food in restaurants across the planet, but the best opportunity to try some South American staples is on a trip to Peru itself. Although there are literally hundreds of edible specialties to sample, here are 14 of my favorite foods (and drinks) you should try on your next trip to this fabulously foodie-friendly country.

1. Aji de Gallina

You'll encounter this rich chicken stew more often in the winter, south of the equator since it tends to be rather hearty and is a fine example of rustic cooking at its best. Cuts of chicken are stewed with yellow chilis (hence the color), onions, garlic, bread and what usually amounts to a secret recipe of spices that varies from restaurant to restaurant — and from Peruvian grandmother to Peruvian grandmother.

Where to try it: The restaurant at the Huaca Pucllana ruins in Lima has a very good version that's simple but delicious.



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2. Anticuchos

I tend to think of these as Peruvian Yakitori, or, skewers of grilled meat that look like little shish kebabs. While you can get just your average cuts of meat, the real specialty is organ meat, specifically cow's heart, which is rich and meaty but lean, and alternated with slices of potato or onion, then drizzled with lemon or lime juice. Hey, don't knock it till you try it!

Where to try it: This is Peruvian street food, so you can find it at a local food market or usually at food stalls within smaller towns. However, Tia Grimanese used to run a street charcoal grill in Lima that became so popular she had to open an actual restaurant — nowadays, you can head there to try what are universally acknowledged to be among the best anticuchos in all of Peru.



Image courtesy of MirceaDobre via Getty Images.

3. Arroz Con Pato

To oversimplify, this filling dish is essentially duck with rice, only that's just the beginning. You see, the rice tends to be green because it's cooking with a mix of beer and herbs — notably cilantro — which gives it its verdant tinge and provides the main flavor profile for the dish. Meanwhile, the duck tends to include a few cuts, from crispy, seared breast meat to luscious confit of leg and thigh.

Where to try it: Though this is a family-style dish, the best arroz con pato I've had was a gourmet version at Chef Mitsuharu Tsumura's much-lauded Lima restaurant, Maido.



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4. Causas

There are conflicting accounts of how this potato-based dish got its name. Some historians claim that it's a corruption of a Quechua word for potato, while others claim that Peruvian wives sending their husbands off to war had to make due with rations of potatoes for "the cause," or "la causa," in Spanish. What's not disputed is how central potatoes have been not only to Peruvian cooking but to Peruvian history in general. Their cultivation helped fuel the Inca Empire and all that came before it, so the importance of potatoes cannot be overstated. Causas are basically like mashed potatoes with lime and salt for flavor, topped with any number of ingredients, including mayonnaise with eggs and shrimp or avocado with chicken and chili.

Where to try it: If you're spending some time in [Lima](#), visit the archaeological exhibits at the Larco Museum and stay for lunch at its beautiful café, where you can try shrimp-avocado causas drizzled with tangy salsa golf, which is kind of like thousand island dressing.



Image by the author.

5. Ceviche

This delicacy of citrus-cured fish and seafood has become the de facto national dish of Peru. The name is actually derived from a Quechua word meaning "fresh fish," and there are so many varieties to try, you could order it with every meal and still not have the same thing twice. In Lima and other coastal towns, try it with a mild ocean fish like sea bass or sole and a curing liquid of Leche de Tigre (which you can also order on its own) that has salt and lime but also a hearty dose of aji amarillo yellow chilis. Up in the Andes, if you're staying in Cusco or Puno (on Lake Titicaca), try it with pink-fleshed lake trout, red onion and orange camote sweet potato.

Where to try it: Though you can have ceviche at pretty much any decent Peruvian restaurant in the country, make a reservation at Chef Gastón Acurio's cebicheria, La Mar, in Lima's Miraflores neighborhood. The seafood is as fresh as can be and the ambiance is convivial without being overwhelming. I also really enjoyed the version I had at Isolina in Lima's Barranco neighborhood.





Image by the author.

6. Chicha

Corn has been one of the staples of Peruvian agriculture and food for thousands of years... so of course, the indigenous peoples figured out ways to ferment it ages ago and used it in religious rituals as well as for everyday imbibing. Chicha is a slightly alcoholic beverage sort of like corn ale that tends to be flavored with extras like cinnamon, clove, lemon and a dash of sugar. It tastes like a mild fruit punch, just be careful how much you drink when you're at higher altitudes!

Where to try it: Once you spend a little time in Peru, you'll start seeing houses with red flowers (or plastic bags) hung from their doorways all over the place, signifying that the people inside make and sell chicha. If you're passing through a village and you see one of these signs, knock on the door (though it will probably already be open) and see if you can buy a drink. Try the darker chicha morada as well, which is made from purple corn and is also delicious.



Image courtesy of Education Images/UIG via Getty Images.

7. Choclo

Corn and potatoes were staples of the Inca diet, with literally thousands of varieties grown throughout Peru's highlands. One of the most widespread types, however, is choclo, with its enormous, bulbous kernels. These aren't particularly flavorsome, but that's why you slather them with sour cream or cheese and chili powder.

Where to try it: If you're feeling adventurous, buy a cob from the ladies selling it from huge, boiling pots in Ollantaytambo, the town where you can catch the train to [Machu Picchu](#). It makes the perfect snack before or after a train ride through the jungle.





Image courtesy of Ernesto Benavides via Getty Images.

8. Coca Tea

Though coca has gotten a bad rap thanks to the fact that you can process it into cocaine, the leaves of this plant have been used by Peruvians and their ancestors for millennia to counteract the effects of their high-altitude environment. While many Peruvians simply chew the leaves, you can take yours boiled into a tea — I found the flavor to be a cross between mint, spinach and green tea. It's a stimulant, though, so don't drink it too close to bedtime.

Where to try it: Coca tea is on the menu at pretty much every restaurant and hotel above 7,000 feet, so if you head to Cusco and [Machu Picchu](#), just ask for a pot of it.



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9. Cuy

The other national dish of Peru? Cuy, or guinea pig. Sure, we might just keep these cuddly critters as pets here in the US, but they're an important traditional food source for the indigenous communities of the Andes. The people here tend to spit-roast it whole, so there's no mistaking what it is, and serve it with a sauce of mountain herbs, roasted potatoes and other vegetables. I'll be honest and say that it's not my favorite because the meat is dark and a bit greasy, but it is worth tasting once or twice.

Where to try it: It depends. If you want to ease into a feast of guinea pig, consider trying an upscale iteration like the flavorful Peking-style version at Astrid y Gastón in Lima. Or, as I had it on my recent trip, as a juicy confit with potato cakes and beets at the restaurant at the Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba in the Sacred Valley. However, if you want to go whole hog, or guinea pig in this case, consider a stop through the Sacred Valley town of Lamay, which is on one of the roads between Cusco and Ollantaytambo (where you catch the train to Machu Picchu). It's dubbed the capital of cuy, and you'll recognize it by the multiple guinea pig statues lined up along its main drag, in addition to the dozens of

stalls on either side of the road selling it.



Image courtesy of Cris Bouroncle via Getty Images.

10. Jungle Fruit

One of my most frequent conversations in Peru goes a little like this:

Peruvian friend: “Eric, try this. It’s called lúcuma.”

Me: “It’s delicious, what is it?”

Peruvian friend: “It’s a fruit.”

Me: “Yes, but what kind of fruit?”

Peruvian friend: “Oh, you know, like a jungle fruit.”

And we’d have to leave it like that. I’ve tried over a dozen “jungle fruits” that Peruvians just don’t have another name for. So I’m grouping them all together here because you’re going to be offered all kinds of delicious fruits that there’s simply no other way to describe than. Lúcuma is kind of custardy and soft with a mild taste. Maracuya is a type of passion fruit. Camu camu berries look like little jungle cherries and are very high in Vitamin C and other minerals. Chirimoya is like a custard apple with a thick skin and a crispy, creamy interior. Aguaymanto are Andean gooseberries that are tart and juicy. I could go on and on, but you’ll see when you get there.

Where to try them: See them in their natural form at a food market like Surquillo in Lima, but enjoy these fruits in any number of desserts, or even as mixers in a pisco sour.



Image of Surquillo Market by the author.

11. Lomo Saltado

Although we speak about Peruvian cuisine as a singular entity, there are actually many culinary traditions within the country, including those brought by immigrants from Japan and China. One of the most typical Peruvian dishes is the perfect example of this. Lomo saltado literally means sautéed loin, but it's actually more like a stir-fry of beef (or alpaca meat), peppers, tomato, onion and soy sauce and was created by Chinese immigrants. It's become such a typical Peruvian dish, though, you can find it on most menus these days.

Where to try it: You'll see lomo saltado almost everywhere in Peru, but the version at La Casa de Don Cucho is a pretty tasty example.



Image by the author.

12. Pisco Sour

Peru's national spirit is pisco, a brandy distilled from any of eight varieties of grape in the country's Ica region. To me, it tastes like a mix of rum and tequila, though there are countless versions and varieties that depend on the specific mix of grapes, distillation techniques and aging. Try a bunch and see which ones you like. A pisco sour is a cocktail made with the brandy as well as egg white, simple syrup, lemon juice and a spritz of Angostura bitters. It's refreshing but also deceptively delicious, so pace yourself!

Where to try it: As the national cocktail, you can try a pisco sour in most bars here. I had an especially punchy one at the bar at the Hotel B in Lima's bohemian Barranco district.



Image courtesy of Peffan via Getty Images.

13. Quinoa

Long before it was a superfood in the US, quinoa was one of the staple seeds of the pre-Columbian peoples in Peru. It's extremely nutritious and packed with a ton of vitamins and minerals. But did you know there are actually three main varieties of it: white, black and red? Try each, or a mixture of all three, while you're in the Andes, especially if you make it to the area around Lake Titicaca, where you can still see it growing on the farms lining the lake's shores.

Where to try it: Plan a visit to Lake Titicaca and sample quinoa in various dishes in the restaurants of Puno, or even on a day trip to one of the lake islands like Taquile.



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14. Tiraditos

Japan has sashimi. Italy has crudo. Peru has tiraditos. Perhaps the best way to sample the country's fabulous fish and seafood is in the simplest form possible, so its quality truly shines. Tiraditos are delicate cuts of raw fish and seafood quickly drizzled with citrus juice and sea salt (and sometimes chili) that likely originated with Japanese immigrants who brought their traditions and techniques to Peru beginning late in the 19th century.

Where to try it: Thanks to how commonplace tiraditos have become, you're spoiled for choice. But if you're in Lima, head to one of the six locations of seafood restaurant Punto Azul for some of the best-rated tiraditos in town. Mi Barrunto is another local favorite with a festive atmosphere.



Image courtesy of Gary Friedman/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images.

What are your favorite things to eat (and drink) in Peru? Sound off, below.