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STORY



THE PERFECT MOMENTO? DISCOVERING TREASURES IN THE FOREST

In the heart of Peru's Amazon, discovering the future of food with scientists, linguists, designers and actors: the most weird and special food festival ever.

BY **SORREL MOSELEY-WILLIAMS** ON **DECEMBER 12, 2018**

Why finding monkey poo is like winning the biology lottery; how to rescue an almost-extinct indigenous Amazonian language; why bats are vital to the tequila industry's survival according to the National Geographic Society; and food's role in developing memory were some of the subjects discussed by a cast of guest speakers as diverse as the Amazon, host destination for Momento, chef Virgilio Martínez's alternative four-day food festival.

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Organized in conjunction with Mater Iniciativa research center spearheaded by Martínez's sister Malena, the second edition of *Momento* was based out of Inkatererra in the heart of Peru's Amazon, bringing together botanists, biologists, a neurosurgeon, and a linguist among others to lead talks. *Fine Dining Lovers* navigated fast-flowing rivers, bridges suspended across the rainforest canopy, lakes home to anaconda and caiman in Tambopata nature reserve and plenty of Gin'ca gin made from rainforest-sourced botanicals to get the lowdown on *Momento Amazonia*.



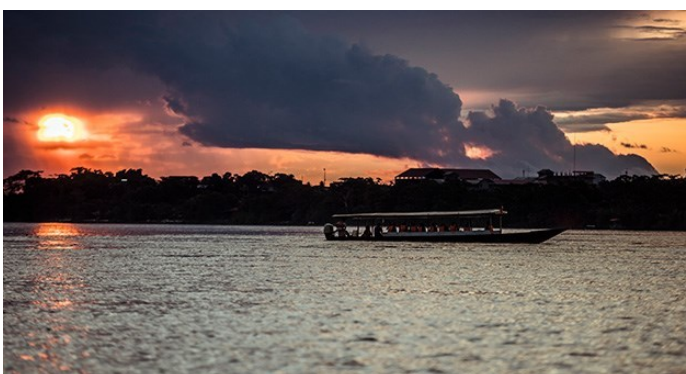
THE IMPORTANCE OF MONKEY POOP

"Finding monkey poop is like discovering gold," says India-born **Varun Swamy**, a Peru-based tropical forest ecologist. "For the past 10 years, I've been working on understanding the effect of losing large unprotected native animals such as spider monkeys and large birds through overhunting. We mustn't let a forest of trees trick us into believing that everything is well. If these animals take one step in the wrong direction, they could end up as dinner or lunch. How does that affect diversity? Certain animal species are critically important in terms of the rainforest's ecological road and need to be monitored. Seed dispersal is critical for regeneration but how do we know they have dispersed? The most obvious way is in monkey poop, which I tell my field assistants is like gold and it's really important to document."

HOW TO RESCUE A LANGUAGE SPOKEN BY JUST FIVE PEOPLE

"I usually work with living languages so I had to question whether it made sense to pursue rescuing an almost-extinct language; it sounded absurd," says Peruvian linguist **Roberto Zariquiey**. "But, now that we have, it's been irreplaceable to see *Iskonawa* brought back to life for the five people who grew up speaking this indigenous Amazonian language." One of just 10 Peruvian languages with fewer than 10 speakers (and nine of those are spoken in the Amazon region), Zariquiey worked alongside **Nelita Campos** and **Juanita Rodríguez**, two women from this community to rescue their mother tongue. "There were so few people left to inherit it," he says. But, tireless research and energy has paid off. "*Iskonawa* has now been classified as an official Peruvian language by the Ministry of Education, Zariquiey has published a Spanish-Iskonawa dictionary and the enthusiasm of younger generations to learn this almost-extinct language means Peru now has 108 *Iskonawa* speakers."

HOW FOOD HELPED TO BUILD UP MEMORY



"I think memory was an evolutionary construct for understanding what's safe and what's poisonous," says neurosurgeon **Atom Sarkar**. "Ten thousand years ago, we were nomadic: we didn't have an address so you didn't have to remember where you lived. I don't know if monogamy existed so you



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didn't have to remember if you were coming back to the right partner. But what you had to remember was food. There was food insecurity at every moment and you had no idea where it was coming from, so you had to remember where there was safe food and where there was unsafe food. Over time, we've selectively looked for less bitter almonds and that's true for all products."

BATS WILL SAVE THE TEQUILA INDUSTRY



"The lesser long-nosed bat is vital to the tequila industry's survival," says Mexican biologist **Gael Almeida**, senior director for Latin America at National Geographic Society, "because it's the only species to pollinate blue agave. A misunderstood mammal, farmers cut off agave flowers, so this bat is under threat while people also try to hurt or kill it: they need to be integrated. One of our Explorers, who was awarded a National Geographic Society grant, has helped to create a bat-friendly stamp for tequila. Mexican ecologist **Rodrigo Medellín** is of the world's most leading researchers into bats and besides this special label, his collaboration includes inviting chefs and bartenders to see the whole process, seeing bats, explaining pollination and how tequila is produced."

ORCHIDS HAVE SUPERPOWERS

Camilo Díaz Santibañez mapped out botanical Peru in *Plantas Tintóreas Peruanas*, the country's first such catalog. The Peruvian botanist, who lived with the Arawuna indigenous community for four years, says: "Peru has hundreds of ecosystems and one of its strongest plants is the orchid. It's so strong, it looks like it going to overtake all other plant families thanks to its super capacity to adapt to ecosystems and ways of pollinating and dispersing that no other plant is able to do. One of my students said it's one of the most deceptive plants in the world, deceiving insects, reptiles, even bats, using hormones and their sexual powers: they are incredible. And they adapt to any ecosystem; from sea level, they rise across the Andes and back down again to the Atlantic."

THE BEST MOMENTOS



Other *Momento* speakers included Argentine chef **Narda Lepes**, who opened debate on the controversial Monsanto law in Argentina and how high-profile cooks can touch certain pressure points in order to modify public opinion, and chemical biologist **Yolanda Huang**, who proved how diverse microbes can be, even showcasing some bacterial art. A presentation of shorts from the *Filming in Peru* with **Werner Herzog** series, introduced by **Gabriel Meseth** of *Inkaterra*, included the delightful *Qué habita en la selva* (What Lives In The Jungle) directed by **Lucía Valdemoros** and **Agustín Barrutia**, where children from Palma Real's Ese'ejá indigenous community reveal some of the Amazon's other residents (spoiler: they include Hulk, dinosaurs, and anacondas) that are currently doing the international film festival circuit; while Italian textile designer **Giulia Pompilj** shared her experience collaborating with **Ceferina Atau** from the Kacllaraccay indigenous community on a *Mater Conexo* project in Moray, in Peru's Sacred Valley. Together they've created a vegetable and mineral dye palette that allows them to tell the Andes' story via vibrant woollen hues.

As for *Momento*'s eclectic guests, the Martínez siblings invited *Chefs Table* producer **Brian McGinn**, Chilean sommelier **Rosario Onetto** of *Ambrosia*, Mexican actor **Andrés Almeida** who can currently be seen in *Narcos Mexico*, London-based Argentine chef and semi-professional bird-caller **Martín Milesi** as well as fine dining-aholic **Flip the Belgian** among others.

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