

An aerial photograph of a vast, terraced landscape in the Andes. The terraces are carved into the hillsides, creating a series of concentric, curved steps. The fields are a mix of green and brown, suggesting different crops or stages of cultivation. In the background, jagged mountain peaks rise against a clear blue sky. The overall scene is one of natural beauty and human ingenuity.

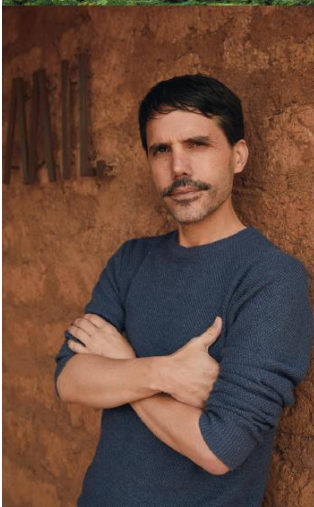
EDIBLE EXPLORER

ALTITUDE ATTITUDE

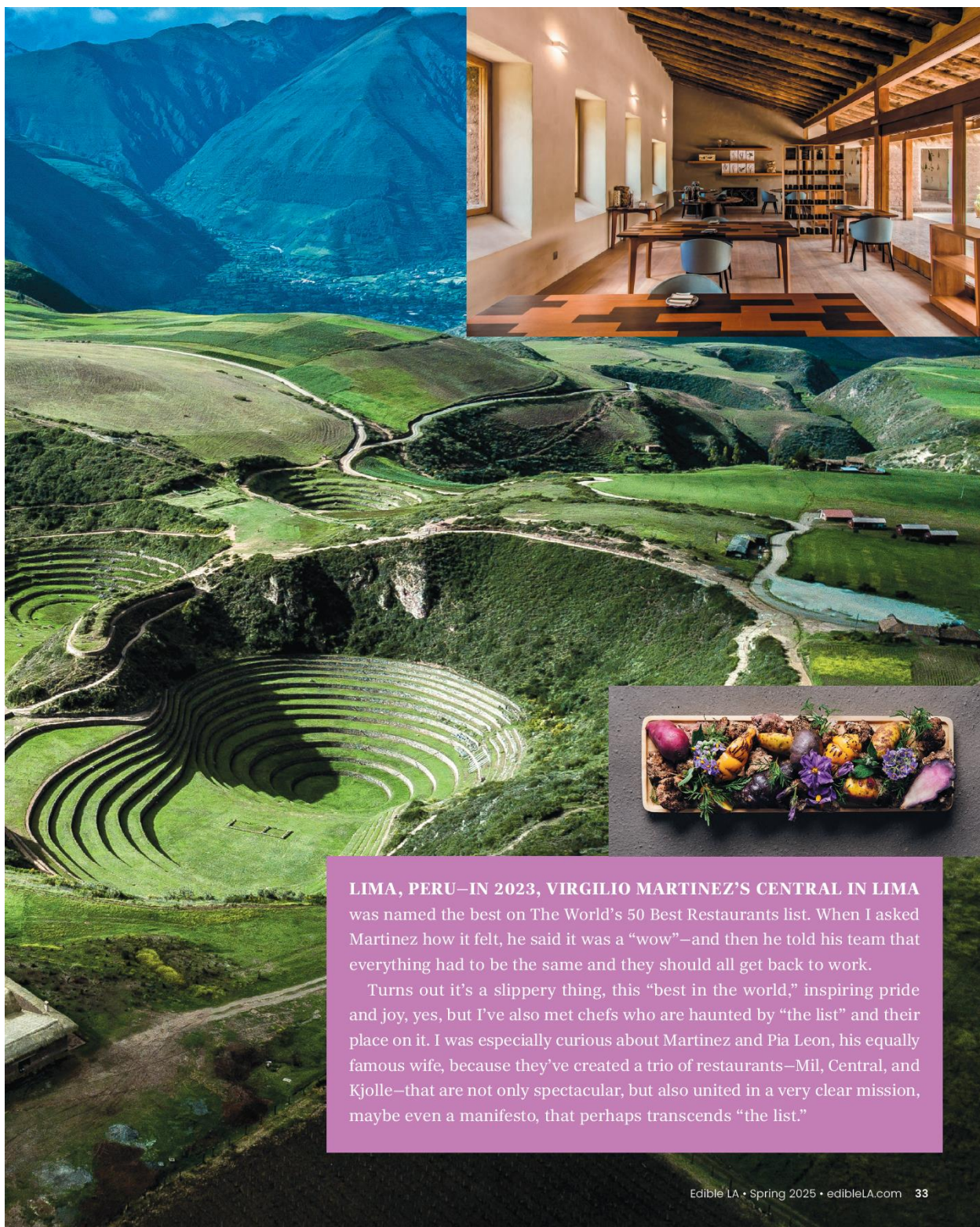
VIRGILIO MARTINEZ'S VERTICAL MENU
TELLS THE STORY OF PERU



By Lisa Alexander



Left: Virgilio Martinez. Photo by Carlos Salazar. Top right: The dining room at Mil. Photo by Gustavo Vivanco. Small inset: Central Andes has potatoes, stems, chaco clay, and Markhu leaves. Photo by Camila Novoa. Spread: Martinez's restaurant next to the Moray archaeological site. Photo by Gustavo Vivanco.



LIMA, PERU—IN 2023, VIRGILIO MARTINEZ’S CENTRAL IN LIMA

was named the best on The World’s 50 Best Restaurants list. When I asked Martinez how it felt, he said it was a “wow”—and then he told his team that everything had to be the same and they should all get back to work.

Turns out it’s a slippery thing, this “best in the world,” inspiring pride and joy, yes, but I’ve also met chefs who are haunted by “the list” and their place on it. I was especially curious about Martinez and Pia Leon, his equally famous wife, because they’ve created a trio of restaurants—Mil, Central, and Kjolle—that are not only spectacular, but also united in a very clear mission, maybe even a manifesto, that perhaps transcends “the list.”



Lima is vibrant, perched high on dramatic cliffs and overlooking a long and perfect surf break. I stayed at Fausto, a lovely house in the Miraflores neighborhood, and at *Àtemporal*, its sister hotel. Both were private houses that had been renovated into boutique hotels full of character and eccentricity just steps from the famous boardwalk, or El Malecón. *Àtemporal* was a Tudor mansion, its gracious staircase leading to common spaces filled with art, and antique furnishings boldly re-covered in modern textiles. Both Fausto and *Àtemporal* felt like staying at the house of a quirky aunt with fabulous taste. The breakfast was a tower of dragon fruit and Peruvian cheese, ginger-y green juice, perfect coffee, all served in a little garden area with Scussian foliage, a lovely home base from which to explore Lima's pre-Incan ruins and fabulous food.

The site of Central is lushly landscaped, a former museum complex that occupies a block in Barranco, a bohemian neighborhood packed with galleries and cafés. If you've seen *Virgilio*, the Netflix documentary, you know that Martinez grew up on these streets, skateboarding in the parks on the cliffs with his friends—he's a poster boy here.

I was seated in front of the kitchen—my favorite view—and got to watch the orchestral way his team wordlessly made room for each other and worked in what seemed like perfect synchrony.

I first saw Martinez in earnest conversation (I just missed Leon). Then he was speaking to a couple to my right. He looked concentrated, again, leaning forward, as he said something to them and disappeared back into the kitchen. I had been

hoping to speak with him, but then I thought how, night after night, he must feel on display. I'd resigned myself to an epic solo meal when he appeared, like smoke, at my elbow.

I asked him how he came up with the idea for Central because, more than anything, the place is a concept, a very modern idea from his signature demonstration tables (marble at Central, wood at his Andes restaurant) that showcase all the products he uses; to the room filled with rough, color-spattered, sometimes gilded bowls; to the servers, who are justly proud of their work; to the chef's garden; to the shed with its rows of tinctures and herbs.

"I went to those kitchens in Europe," he said. "The famous ones, and then I came back here and thought 'What am I





going to do?’ I can’t cook like that over here. I wanted to transcend gastronomy.”

The concept at Central is deeply intellectual as well as intuitive.

“Every day is different,” he said, “because the seasons are always changing, and every day we get new products from all over Peru. Every day is a surprise.”

Imagine a succession of dishes and courses, each one centered on the products themselves:

A plate of what looked like rocks turned out to be edible clay in which tiny, twisted potatoes from high altitudes were cooked. Another rough slab of a plate held four piranha

Above, from left: Corn at Mil includes Chullipi corn, Urubamba corn, and fresh cheese. Photo by Gustavo Vivanco. The sleek dining room at Mil. Photo by Camila Novoa. Pia, Malena and Virgilio in Casa Tupac 2025. Photo by Camila Novoa. Below, from left: A colorful Inkatererra room, Inkatererra Urubamba, nestled in Sacred Valley.

heads, mouths open and tiny perfectly straight teeth visible. Corn, in all its colors and shapes, was arrayed on another tray—the ears grow smaller and rounder and sweeter higher up.

he pairings were equally spectacular, particular Apu, a wine only served at Central and Mil, a heady Syrah, liquors made of honey and herbs, and the juices of Amazonian fruits. The only way to identify

so many flavors I’d never had before was to compare—that tastes like vanilla, this is dulce de leche, this is almost like beef, no, like lamb.

By the end of the evening, I staggered into the dark garden feeling overwhelmed by the intricacy of Martinez’s vision, and its determination to showcase the diversity of Peru.

In Cusco, I stayed at the Peruvian-owned Inkatererra La Casona, a 16th century Spanish Colonial mansion built on the site of an elite Incan warrior training ground. The walls were thick, the rugs subtly colored. On opening the front door, the fragrant smoke of palo santo wafted out. General Simón Bolívar himself hung up his spurs in this courtyard. I had an early meal at the restaurant that included a tender salad of delicate lettuces, and a spicy-sweet zucchini ice cream.

The following day I was driven down (from 12,000 to 8,000 feet above sea level) to the Sacred Valley. We went through villages with dirt roads, dogs lounging by the side of the road, children playing, and women in bowler hats and bright circular skirts.





My home in the Sacred Valley was Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba, a sprawling ranch with lovely casitas (crisp sheets, chimenas, bright textiles). Many of the guests were backpackers or excited travelers leaving to catch Belmond's Hiram Bingham luxury train to Machu Picchu. I had expected to be surrounded by green but, visiting as I did at the tail end of their winter, everything was apricot colored. The next morning, I headed up again to Mil, Martinez's "gastronomical laboratory."

The minimalist restaurant is quiet and quietly bustling, its staff working amidst drying herbs, and racks of neatly labeled bottles containing a rainbow of ferments and tinctures. It overlooks the Moray archaeological site, three ancient sets of terraces built into the ground. Functioning as a kind of agricultural test kitchen, the carefully varied altitudes within the circles told the Incans what grew best at what height. Scientists have discovered 15 different microclimates here, as well as a giant sundial and fallen stones said to be huge statues before the Spaniards blew them up, looking for gold. It's a perfect setting for Mil, Martinez's mirror gastronomical laboratory of food.

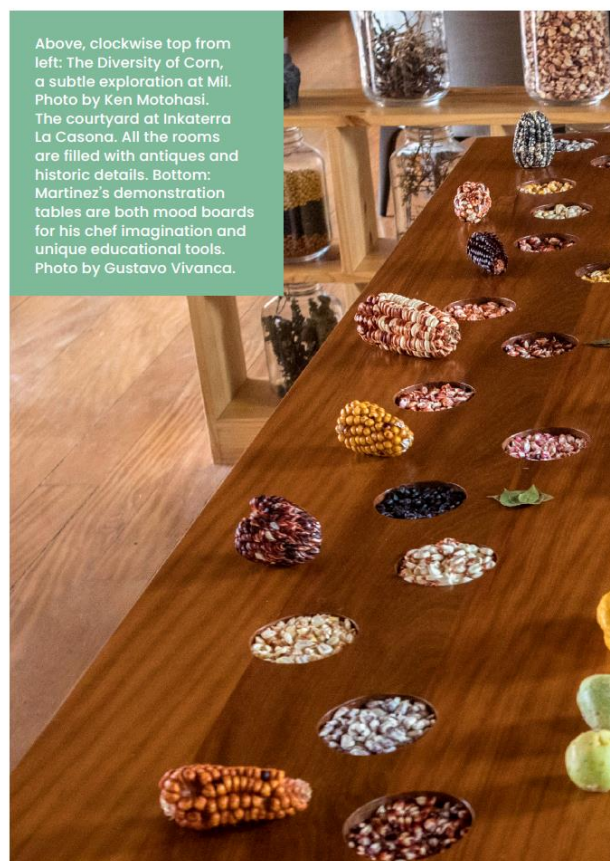
The eight-course menu here is vertical, as at Central: ingredients explored according to altitude. Fine botanical drawings of everything are used by the servers and staff to explain the meal, and also given as gifts to take home.

Martinez was determined not to set Mil down like a UFO on the site, but to involve the communities all around. Working at such a high level involves cooks who come from all over the world learning to deal with the environment, but also the neighboring people learning what he is doing and why.



My primary server was the pastry chef, a young woman from Uruguay who was justly thrilled to be living every chef's dream. There was a heavenly corn pudding, studded with an array of bright kernels; light-as-air potato crisps with a heady green sauce; and a tiny bowl of succulent and intensely spiced alpaca covered with edible flowers. Her dessert blew

Above, clockwise top from left: The Diversity of Corn, a subtle exploration at Mil. Photo by Ken Motohasi. The courtyard at Inkaterra La Casona. All the rooms are filled with antiques and historic details. Bottom: Martinez's demonstration tables are both mood boards for his chef imagination and unique educational tools. Photo by Gustavo Vivanca.





me away, every single part of a cacao re-imagined into foams, macerations, and a twisty ribbon of ganache. The finale was an almost floral array of dark chocolate beautifully shaped into delicate leaves.

Martinez, Leon, and Malena Martinez—Martinez's scientist sister—have created an incredibly emotional story in these

restaurants and at Mater, their interdisciplinary research and interpretation center. It's a portrait of a country with an astonishing wealth of biodiversity (the very same we're losing at a rapid clip—between 1970 and 2020 we lost over 70%, according to the Living Planet Index).

It's also a portrait of an indigenous people who've long used food to sustain and also to heal, especially as they've often lived in rural remote communities and lacked access to medicine.

Conceptual cooking can be a tricky thing—it's easy to get carried away and let the food be overshadowed by the idea—but course after course was not only delicious, but startling and adventurous.

Virgilio Martinez, Malena Martinez, and Pia Leon's passion for their country also inspires them to tell their story intersectionally with illustrators, weavers, ceramicists, and other artisans. Everything at Central, Kjolle and Mil is a dialogue; go there and experience three unusual minds.



IF YOU GO, WHERE TO STAY

LIMA

Âtemporal

Serene and intimate with a timeless aesthetic, this six-room Casa in Miraflores is walking distance from El Malecón. Santa María 190. Miraflores, Lima, Peru 15074

Fausto

Nestled on a tree-lined street, this boutique hotel is also in the heart of Miraflores. Av. de la Aviación 316. Miraflores, Lima - Peru

CUSCO

Inkaterra La Casona

Located in the traditional Plaza de las Nazarenas, this 16th century manor house is surrounded by a vibrant, cobblestoned neighborhood. Next to the Museum of Pre-Columbian Art, Plaza, Nazarenas 211, Cusco 08002, Peru

SACRED VALLEY

Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba

A 5-star contemporary hacienda in the Sacred Valley of the Incas, it sits between Cusco and Machu Picchu. Sacred Valley of the Incas, Km 63 of the Cusco-Urubamba-Pisac-Calca Highway, 08670, Peru