

Posted on Fri, Sep. 08, 2006

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THE SKINNY ON DINING HELEN SCHWAB

A look at Peru's cuisine should be food for thought

New to Peru?

If today's review of Mily & Lalo is your first glimpse at Peru's cuisine, you can get a little more to look at by going to www.youtube.com and searching for "perunoryouri." You'll find a 10-minute 46-second video done by Prom Peru, the country's official tourism agency that showcases the most famous dishes in an attractive (if not always incredibly explanatory) way.

And lest you think the promotions folks are just getting carried away, you should know that Escoffier, the famous French culinary expert and writer (1846-1935), called Peruvian cooking the world's third-best (after French and Chinese).

You can guess why, without knowing the cooking: With influences from Europe, Africa and Asia, added to South America's, it's a stellar example of worldly fusion. With Peru's phenomenal biodiversity, ingredients are practically boundless.

In the spring, the head of public diplomacy for the Embassy of Peru, Alejandro Riveros, announced big plans for getting the word out on the cuisine in the United States in 2006.

"We want our food to be as well known as Thai is in this country. We want 5,000 -- no, 10,000 (restaurants). We want Peruvian restaurants everywhere," he told the Washington Post. He hopes to get a high-end place in D.C. to help his cause.

In the Seattle area, meanwhile, hotshot chef Emmanuel Piqueras is getting a lot of press with his second high-profile contemporary/Andean restaurant, this one called Mixtura.

The time is ripe for a trendy take on a new ethnic cuisine, and Peru's could be it, say sources like Restaurant Hospitality magazine.

Considering how long it took Charlotte to become a haven for Thai cooking, it's exciting that we have a traditional place with which to start. We're ahead of schedule on this one!