

Fusion dining in Lima: Machu Picchu can wait

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LIMA, Peru (AP) -- The tour buses don't line up outside Javier Wong's place.

His 10-table Sankuay restaurant, steps away from a wide avenue lined with tire and rim vendors in Lima's industrial La Victoria district, is sort of a speakeasy for ceviche, raw fish soaked in lime juice and pepper that is Peru's best-known dish.

Wong prepares a ceviche so striking it is bound to make even the crankiest traveler forget his jet lag and the rows of soot-encrusted buildings around the corner.

Known as Chez Wong by locals, the restaurant is in his three-story home, so don't bother to look for a sign outside. Just say the chef's name when the door cracks open and you get a suspicious look.

There are no menus at Sankuay. Wong, who was born of Chinese ancestry, will determine your first and second courses with a quick glance at your party.

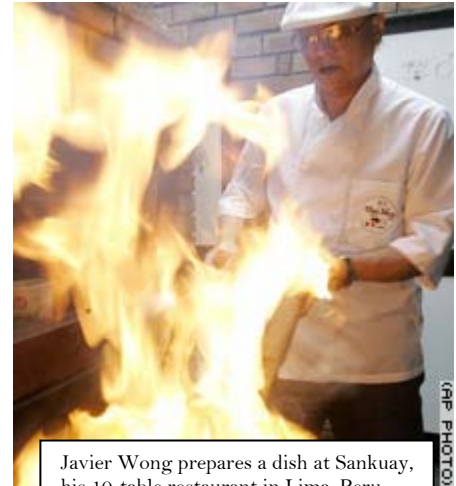
Peru's sprawling, chaotic capital is for most travelers little more than a launching pad to other destinations like Cuzco, the main stopover en route to Peru's top tourist attraction, Machu Picchu. But it's worth spending more than the 24 requisite hours in Lima just to sample the restaurants.

This city of 8 million people is a focal point for a cuisine that has exploded in the United States, where Peruvian dishes have appeared in some of the most prestigious food magazines.

Lima chefs like Wong take particular advantage of the high quality and variety of fish that thrive in cold Humbolt Current waters that run northward past the coastal capital.

Behind a spotless white counter, wearing his signature woven golf cap, Wong vigorously chops an onion with his \$900-Victorinox knife. In a metal bowl he stirs it with cubes of fresh raw flounder, juice from acidic Peruvian limes, aji (Peruvian chilies), salt and ground pepper.

He dumps the fragrant mix unceremoniously onto an oval plate. Absent are the traditional ceviche additions of camote (sweet potato) and choclo (corn with huge white kernels). Wong's ceviche is salty and



Javier Wong prepares a dish at Sankuay, his 10-table restaurant in Lima, Peru.

(AP PHOTO)

the unorthodox use of ground pepper gives the dish a crunch. The fish's texture is not lost but enhanced by the juicy mix's strong flavor.

A blue and orange flame encircles his deep paella dish as he shakes a stir-fry of green onions, soy beans, flounder chunks, red peppers and four tablespoons of beer.

"Every day you're in the kitchen, you discover something new," Wong says above the sizzle.

Asian ingredients

The secret to this fusion of Asian and Peruvian cuisine found in fine restaurants throughout Lima is the country's intricately woven ethnic tapestry. Chinese and Japanese immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought with them Asian ingredients, cooking techniques and a new take on traditional dishes, especially on the capital's beloved seafood plates.

One of Peru's best-known chefs is Humberto Sato. A primary school classmate of ex-President Alberto Fujimori, Sato later ended up catering Fujimori's wedding years before the authoritarian leader was elected president in 1990.

Sato -- like Fujimori -- was born in Peru to Japanese parents. He incorporates many Japanese techniques and dishes into the menu at his restaurant, Costanera 700. Sato catered a 1996 lunch between Fujimori and then-Ecuadorian President Abdala Bucaram on the heels of a border war that gave way to peace negotiations.

"Fujimori loved the fish heads, I remember," Sato says. The lunch Sato served, his famed "ceviche de la paz" or "ceviche of peace," is still on the menu.

But the real treat at Costanera is chita a la sal, a white ocean fish baked in a thick coat of salt. Winter (June-August in the Southern Hemisphere) is the best time to eat chita because the water is colder and the fish build up more fat, Sato says.

The salt-encrusted fish is dabbled with rum and served flaming. The waiter taps a knife with a spoon to break open the shell of salt and serves generous portions of the buttery fish into deep bowls. Small dishes of hot butter, garlic, olive oil and parsley, and ginger and green onion are also served, each presenting a strong and delightful enhancement to the fish, which smacks against your molars when chewed.

Reasonable pricing

Historically, Peruvians have avoided eating fish at night, especially ceviche. Before the advent of refrigeration, the morning's catch would have spoiled by dinnertime.

Many Peruvians still believe eating fish and seafood at night will make one ill, says Peru's foremost celebrity chef Gaston Acurio. He's battled against that perception.

His 12-year-old flagship restaurant Astrid y Gaston serves a nighttime ceviche guaranteed to wake you up. Raw corvina (sea bass) and octopus sits in a spicy tiradito sauce of yellow aji with small pieces of sweet potato and corn kernels.

Gaston plans to open branches of one of his other restaurants, the always-crowded lunchtime "cevicheria," La Mar, in Washington, San Diego and San Francisco next year. All will serve ceviche for dinner. For a

hot second course, try shrimp and squid in a sweet sauce of condensed milk, tamarind and peanuts, served with crispy rice noodles.

Prices in the city's restaurants vary widely, but all are reasonable, if not cheap by North American and European standards.

And while travelers shouldn't drink the local tap water, the fish is so fresh that anybody who would eat sushi in New York or Miami should feel comfortable eating ceviche in Lima's restaurants.

Another culinary must is the chic restaurant, Rafael. Off the bustling Larco Avenue, in the upscale Miraflores district, you can smell the olive oil sizzling from down the block. The stylish decor of the eight-table lounge, with plush couches, and the warm, dim light of large maroon fabric-covered ceiling lamps, make it a delightful place to escape Lima's humid evening chill.

The spiky haired, 36-year-old chef, Rafael Osterling, stammers when he tries to describe his style. The menu includes sashimi, pizza, grilled octopus and gnocchi. Though he trained in London and at the Codon Bleu culinary school, Osterling says dishes come from his own experiments in the kitchen.

Any trip to Rafael should include the crunchy shrimp tempura appetizer in a sweet and spicy sauce over a salad of cucumber, mango, avocado and Cajun-spiced nuts.

Try Osterling's spaghetti with marinated lobster in a garlic confit, served with lemon and basil.

"Before, tourists would just pass through Lima ... and immediately go to Cuzco," says Osterling. "Now they stay one, two, three days."

Finally, have lunch or dinner at Toshiro's. A traditional Japanese restaurant with a Peruvian twist, Toshiro Konishi's tranquil, five-year-old restaurant is perched above a casino in the wealthy San Isidro district. Toshiro, who was born in Japan, serves up a flounder tiradito sliced so expertly thin that the plate's design shows through. It's served with a sauce of soy, green onion and rocoto, a spicy Peruvian pepper.

"No one can make these dishes," he said. "Not even in Tokyo could you eat this."

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