


NEXT STOP LIMA

With Peruvians returning home after years of eating and cooking abroad, the country's cuisine is more cosmopolitan than ever. And you thought Paris was the culinary center of the world
By Laura Fraser Photographs by Jason Lowe





Considering the many options at Lima's sprawling Surquillo market. Opposite: Off the coast of the tony Miraflores neighborhood.



Guillermo Payet is visiting Peru for only the third time since fleeing 15 years ago at the height of the Shining Path insurgency. Sitting in Lima's crowded Astrid y Gastón restaurant next to chef-owner Gastón Acurio, Payet's close friend from the old days, he bites into a delicately lacquered shrimp and closes his eyes. "That taste ..." he murmurs, searching. Then the eyes flash open: "*Melcocha!* Those candies from school."

Acurio shakes his dark curls *yes*, and both men smile at the memory of the old man who sold homemade molasses taffy from a wooden box at their elementary school. The dish, *infancia*, is Acurio's story of his childhood: peanuts from the ball game, molasses candies from school, and *camarones* and tamarind from Sunday Chinese dinners. It's his playful take on *chifa*, Lima's widespread, peppery, 150-year-old version of Cantonese cuisine.

Here at Astrid y Gastón, with its tiled floors, contemporary Peruvian art, and walls the color of *sachatomates*, or tree tomatoes, the stories keep coming. The next plated tale, in the form of a classic ceviche of wild sea bass with lime and red onions, is about people who have long caught fish in the morning and had a taboo against eating it later than lunch, celebrating the catch at midday in one of the city's thousands of noisy, thatch-roofed *cevicherias*. "A *cevicheria* is more than food—it's an ambiance, a happy mood, a whole world," says Acurio, offering me a tangy bite from his own fork.

Each of Acurio's dishes is an homage to and a reinvention of one of this country's many traditional worlds of cooking. A *tiradito*, sliced raw bonito, is Acurio's interpretation of Peru's *nikkei*, or second-generation Japanese, cuisine. His bright-orange *erizos*—sea urchins on tender ribbons of raw calamari—recall one of the *nikkei* pioneers, Nobu Matsuhisa, who in the '70s blended Peruvian spices with Japanese sushi and popularized ingredients *limeños* had never considered, prying sea urchins away from confused fishermen by explaining they were for his dog. Tuna skewers are Acurio's nod to Lima's street vendors, who sell *anticuchos*—usually beef-heart kebabs—from streetside carts. A stuffed pepper recalls Arequipa's *picanteria* cuisine, while risotto with black scallops speaks of the African-inflected *criollo* food still served in most homes. "In Peru, we have twelve different cultural and regional cuisines," explains Acurio. "Depending on what I want to talk about in a dish, I can use any of those dozen stories."

For Payet, the flavors of these dishes heighten his sense of everything in Peru being familiar but entirely new. Fifteen years ago, when he left, no one dared to mix the various distinct cuisines in Peru. There was no such thing as *novoandino* cooking, much less 12 cooking schools in Lima with classes by that name. The country was politically and geographically isolated, so that little of its astonishing variety of foods—tropical fruits from the Amazon, wild mushrooms from the Sacred Valley, black scallops from northern lakes, 3,000 varieties of potatoes—showed up in the markets here. Even when they did, *limeños* disdained ingredients from the Andes, considering them peasant food. "When I grew up, if you ate guinea pig you were a savage," Payet says, biting into a leg of

roasted organic guinea pig nestled in its bed of *oca* ravioli in a pecan sauce with Pisco (Peru's brandy).

When Acurio, 38, and Payet, 42, were kids, people who ate out at restaurants—almost exclusively the white upper class—were only interested in fine French or Italian fare. When Acurio opened Astrid y Gastón, in 1994, he was fresh from Paris (Le Cordon Bleu) and had every intention of serving French haute cuisine. As the son of a former prime minister (who thought Acurio was spending all that time overseas learning to be a lawyer), he was aiming at the Eurocentric upper class. "I wanted to teach Peruvians to eat foie gras and truffles." He ignored traditional Peruvian cuisines and ingredients. "I was fighting to get dried porcini mushrooms and didn't see the fifty varieties of fruit we have right here."

But things had changed in Peru while Acurio was gone. The publisher of the daily newspaper *El Comercio*, Bernardo Roca Rey, an avid amateur cook, had experimented with underused, undervalued native ingredients and created new dishes with them, like a *quinotto*, a risotto made of Andean quinoa. A chef named Cucho La Rosa opened El Comensal, the first *novoandino* restaurant, and then Roca Rey's daughter Hirka Roca Rey followed suit with Pantagruel. (Both restaurants, "ahead of their time," Acurio says, have closed.) Serious cooks with European training began taking a look at Peru's native fruits, tubers, grains, and animals and using them to create sophisticated new recipes. Roca Rey proclaimed it a movement, and as the head of an empire that brought daily food columns and inexpensive new cookbooks to newspaper subscribers every few weeks, he made it so. He and others recognized Acurio's creativity, and tried to steer him into the fold. "I told Gastón not to imitate the French," says Cucho La Rosa, "but to make a cuisine that is Peruvian."

Acurio and other cooks of his generation took the advice to heart. "We were doing French cuisine, but we were Peruvians, and you have to follow your Peruvian personality." That personality is bold; whether *nikkei*, *chifa*, or *criollo*, what all the imported Peruvian cuisines have in common (besides *aji* peppers) is flavors that are stronger than the original. It's also more willing to experiment. "Because we're a poor country, we've been inventive. We have more than three hundred soups and four hundred ceviches," Acurio says. "We're a mix of cultures, and we don't close our culinary frontiers." It was a relief for Acurio to acknowledge his roots. "In France, they told me my minestrone wasn't any good, because it wasn't French," he says. "But believe me, it was good."

Acurio spent a year traveling all over Peru in search of ingredients and flavors, and was amazed at what he found. "We're only eating five percent of our produce." He began the slow work of sourcing the best ingredients and training producers to bring him what he wanted. "At first, the farmer, dumping everything from one big sack, thought I was crazy when I asked him to put potatoes in one bag and herbs in the other, so they wouldn't get crushed." Back in Lima—starting off with creative cocktails featuring Pisco and Amazonian fruits—Astrid y Gastón's nouvelle Peruvian cuisine quickly took off. Now Acurio is a celebrity; he stars in a weekly cooking show, has written 12 cookbooks, and has opened ten restaurants throughout South America—and he's planning new *cevicherias* in Ft. Lauderdale and, he says, all over the world.

For all the movement's influence, Acurio doesn't consider himself a *novoandino* cook, because he doesn't stick too close to Peruvian roots. "It's good to value ethnic Peruvian



Clockwise from top left: The tubers known as *allucos*; the day's offerings at a Chinatown newsstand; crabs aplenty; a shrine in a local restaurant.



Waiting to make a sale at the Surquillo market, near Miraflores, where, in addition to avocados, you'll find potatoes in every color, shape, and size.

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Artichokes on offer at the Surquillo market; chef Gastón Acurio at his atelier; a big bowl of oca; the décor at the lively La Isla Escondida.



Local olives; market souvenirs; *conchas negras* fresh from the water; Toshiro Konishi; the centuries-old view from La Huaca Pucllana.

products, but it's a prison to only use things native to Peru. I don't care if asparagus wasn't born here, it's good grown here." As for alpaca, which *novoandino* cooking champions but which can taste tough and nasty, Acurio shakes his head emphatically. "I'm a Peruvian," he says, "but first I'm a chef."

At the Surquillo market, near Miraflores, the tony neighborhood where Payet and Acurio grew up, Payet makes a wide gesture at the produce. "You can see why I was horrified when I first went to the grocery stores in the States," he says. Here are countless baskets of potatoes—red, fat, black, and bright orange with pink spots. There's purple corn and yellow cobs with kernels as big as horse's teeth. At another stand are colorful piles of tropical fruits, most of which I don't recognize. "This is why I started LocalHarvest," Payet says, referring to his website, which is the largest database of family farmers in the U.S., where people can log on to find local farmers markets and products. He likes his food so local he keeps chickens in his backyard in Santa Cruz, California.

Before I met Payet, I didn't know anything about Peruvian food. I assumed it was like Mexican food, but with more potatoes. He turned me on to dishes I'd never heard of—a peppery chicken stew called *ají de gallina*, a beef and tomato dish with french fries stirred in called *lomo saltado*—and ones he made better than anyone else, like green tamales with *chich-*

arrones. We share a passion for food, and a birthday, and each year we cook our hearts out to celebrate. Over the years, tasting his Peruvian dishes, I've nudged him to go back—and to take me with him—on a culinary tour.

It was difficult for Payet to return to Peru, partly because the circumstances of his leaving had been traumatic. Terrorists had bombed his office, and only quick talking had saved him from death in the Andes when he encountered the Shining Path. He went to the States; others of his generation went to Europe, where many of them learned the culinary techniques that they are now incorporating into the Peruvian cooking revolution back home.

After our dinner at Astrid y Gastón—a comprehensive introduction to new Peruvian cuisine in one meal—we decide to take apart the menu, in a sense, trying out several of the components. We start with a classic street-vendor breakfast, but in a spiffed-up location: Santa Ana, a small café in posh San Isidro. With coffee and glasses of fresh papaya juice, we eat typical breakfast sandwiches: *lomo de cerdo ahumado* (pork sirloin sausage cured with hot peppers and paprika) and *chicharrones* with yam. Over corn cakes (*pasteles de choclo*) and tamales, the chef, Pablo Secada, tells us that he cooks from old family recipes, and he compares notes with Payet on how to cook tamale masa in broth. They discover they both have a favorite old Peruvian cookbook, one with a recipe that begins, "The day before, you kill the animals and wash them well."

THE DETAILS

STAYING THERE

For elegance in the colonial style, check into the **Country Club Lima Hotel** (*Los Eucaliptos 590, San Isidro; 011-51-1-611-9000; hotelcountry.com; from \$295*).

Hotel Antigua Miraflores (*Grau 350; 011-51-1-241-6116; antiguamiraflores.com; from \$74*), in a turn-of-the-century mansion, offers a cozy ambience and 39 rooms. The five-star **Miraflores Park Hotel** (*Malecón de la Reserva 1035; 011-51-1-610-4000; mira-park.com; from \$365*) is a high-rise overlooking the ocean and is furnished with antiques and contemporary art.

EATING THERE

At about \$60 a person (including wine), **Astrid y Gastón** (*Calle Cantuarias 175, Miraflores; 01-444-1496; astridygaston.com*), Lima's most celebrated nouvelle Peruvian restaurant, is perhaps the best fine-dining deal in the world. **La Huaca Pucllana** (*General Borgoño cdra. 8, Miraflores; 01-445-4042*) serves sophisticated Peruvian cuisine in the shadow of Lima's sixth-century pyramid. Gastón Acurio's casual **T'anta** (*at Pancho Fierro 117 in San Isidro and Prolongación Primavera 692 in Surco; 01-372-3528*) offers Peruvian-inspired tapas, salads, and

homemade tamales and pastries. **Malabár** (*Camino Real 101, San Isidro; 01-440-5200; malabar.com.pe*) is known for refined Peruvian dishes built around tropical fruits and fish from the Amazon. The two branches of the lively cevichería known as **La Isla Escondida** (*Leonardo Da Vinci 505 and Marie Curie 108, Surquillo; 01-271-6455; laislaescondidaperu.com*) draw crowds for potato *causas*, *tacu tacu*, and many varieties of raw fish. Diners at Gastón Acurio's upscale **La Mar** (*Avenida La Mar 770, Miraflores; 01-421-3365*) can choose among classic and nouvelle ceviches, *tiraditos*, *causas*, *anticuchos*, and whole fish. Seeking a *chifa* restaurant in Chinatown? Look no further than the very popular **Salon Capon** (*Jr. Paruro 819; 01-426-9286*). The **Santa Ana Cafetería** (*Mamaoclo 2170, Lince; 01-471-6460*) serves a traditional breakfast of tamales, corn cakes, *chicharrones*, and yam sandwiches. With its serene hanging garden, **Toshiro's** (*Avenida Conquistadores 450, San Isidro; 01-221-7243*) is the place for refined Japanese-Peruvian cuisine.

BEING THERE

The mansion known as **Casa Aliaga**, inhabited by the same family since 1535

(when one of Pizarro's men moved in), features a Spanish-style courtyard and room after room of colonial art. Book tours and lunch in the formal dining room through Lima Tours (*01-619-6900; limatours.com.pe*). While in the neighborhood, check out the lovely antique post office, the **Correo Central**, right next door, and, in the town center, the **Plaza de Armas** and its main cathedral. For a comprehensive tour of Peru's complex history of cultures in a manageable-size museum of paintings, furniture, and artifacts, hop in a cab and head for the **Museo Nacional de Antropología, Arqueología e Historia** (*Plaza Bolívar, Pueblo Libre; 01-463-5070*). Lima's **Chinatown** is not to be missed: Stroll the central market, grab lunch at a lively *chifa* restaurant, and wander among the Asian temples, shops, street vendors, and huge indoor market. (Keep hold of your wallet and leave your watch at home.) At night, the arty seaside **Barranco** neighborhood (a 20-minute cab ride from the city center) comes alive with bars and clubs playing live criollo music. Located in an 18th-century mansion in charming Pueblo Libro, **Museo Larco** (*Avenida Bolívar 1515; 01-461-1312*) is home to an extensive collection of gold, textiles, and erotic pottery. —L.F.

We make our way through foggy, dirty-faced Lima to a tropical bright spot for lunch: a typical cevicheria, La Isla Escondida. There we are greeted with plastic cups of Pisco Sour at the door, and by eight of Payet's childhood friends, who've eaten here or at another cevicheria every Friday since high school. Under thatched roofs, with bright plastic fish decorating the walls, we devour plate after plate of ceviches—there are 31 on the menu—along with varieties of *tacu tacu*, rice-and-bean dishes, and *causas*, which are various fish, olive, and sauce concoctions on top of a base of cold mashed potatoes. One of Payet's friends, on his fifth or sixth beer, nudges me during the ever more boisterous meal. "This," he says, poking a fish on the plate, "was alive this morning."

At dinnertime, we settle in at Toshiro's, a Japanese restaurant in San Isidro. Improbably located next to a cheesy casino, it is spare and serene, with windows facing an outdoor garden of hanging bromeliads. A photo inside places chef Toshiro Konishi alongside Nobu and Australia's Tetsuya Wakuda, and the meal, though simple, turns out to be the best Japanese meal I've had since I dined at Tetsuya's. Tender, flavorful raw fish is mixed with Peruvian ingredients in dishes like salmon with flying-fish roe and *maca* root from the Andes. Dessert is an ice cream of my new favorite fruit, the subtle, caramel-flavored, divine *lúcuma*. "Bestial," says Payet, his highest compliment.

The next morning, we meet up (Continued on page 116)

QUINOTTO DE HONGOS Y CAMARONES

SHRIMP AND MUSHROOM QUINOA RISOTTO

Adapted from Hirka Roca Rey

SERVES 8 (MAIN COURSE)

ACTIVE TIME: 2½ HR START TO FINISH: 2½ HR

This dish—quinoa prepared risotto-style—is so good, you'll forget it's good for you. Quinoa, whose name means "mother grain," is indigenous to Peru and dates from the time of the Inca civilization. Compared with other grains, quinoa is very high in protein and relatively low in carbohydrates. If you're pressed for time, we found a great substitute for fresh clam broth (see cooks' note, below). For sources for these ingredients, see Shopping List, page 116.

FOR CLAM BROTH

- 8 cups cold water
- 2 lb small hard-shell clams (2 to 2½ inches in diameter)
- 1 celery rib, coarsely chopped
- 1 large carrot, coarsely chopped
- ½ large red onion, coarsely chopped
- 1 Turkish or ½ California bay leaf
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper

FOR QUINOA

- 2 cups quinoa (12 oz)
- 2 lb medium shrimp in shell (31 to 35 per lb), peeled and deveined
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- ⅓ cup vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon achiote (annatto) seeds
- ½ stick (¼ cup) unsalted butter
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- ½ lb cremini or button mushrooms, trimmed and sliced (⅓ inch thick; 3 cups)

½ lb oyster mushrooms, trimmed and large caps halved lengthwise (2¾ cups)

1 (5- to 6-oz) portabella mushroom cap, sliced (¼ inch thick)

2 tablespoons olive oil

½ large red onion, thinly sliced

2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced

2 tablespoons bottled *ají amarillo* purée

1 cup dry white wine

⅛ teaspoon crumbled saffron threads

½ cup heavy cream

¼ lb finely grated Parmigiano-Reggiano (2 cups; see Tips, page 123)

3 tablespoons chopped fresh basil

MAKE CLAM BROTH: Combine all broth ingredients in a 4- to 6-quart heavy pot and simmer, partially covered, 30 minutes. Pour through a fine-mesh sieve, then discard solids. Transfer broth to a 3-quart heavy saucepan and cover.

PREPARE QUINOA: Wash quinoa in 3 changes of cold water in a bowl, draining in fine-mesh sieve between changes of water. Return quinoa to bowl.

►Pat shrimp dry and sprinkle with ½ teaspoon salt.

►Heat vegetable oil and achiote seeds in a 1½- to 2-quart heavy saucepan over low heat until oil is bright yellow, about 10 minutes. Pour oil through sieve into cleaned 4- to 6-quart heavy pot, discarding seeds. ►Add 1 tablespoon butter to oil in pot and heat over moderately high heat until foam subsides, then cook shrimp and ¼ teaspoon pepper, stirring, until shrimp are almost cooked through, 3 to 5 minutes. Transfer to a large bowl using a slotted spoon. (Do not clean pot.) ►Heat 2 tablespoons butter in pot over moderate heat until foam subsides, then cook mushrooms with ½ teaspoon salt and remaining ¼ teaspoon pepper, stirring and scraping up any brown bits from bottom of pot, until mushrooms are softened and exude liquid, about 5 minutes. (If mushrooms do not exude liquid, add ½ cup water to help scrape up any brown bits.) Add mushrooms with liquid to shrimp. (Do not clean pot.) ►Heat olive oil and remaining tablespoon butter in pot over moderate heat until foam subsides, then cook onion, garlic, and remaining ½ teaspoon salt, stirring occasionally, until onion is softened, about 5 minutes. Add quinoa and *ají amarillo* and cook, stirring, 5 minutes. Add wine and saffron, then simmer briskly, stirring constantly, until wine is absorbed, about 5 minutes. ►Meanwhile, bring clam broth to a simmer and stir, then keep at a bare simmer. ►Add ½ cup broth to quinoa and simmer briskly, stirring constantly, until broth is absorbed. Continue simmering and adding hot broth, about ½ cup at a time, stirring quinoa frequently and letting each addition be absorbed before adding the next, until quinoa is tender and its germs separate from grains, about 30 minutes total. (There will be some broth left over.)

►Stir cream into risotto and bring to a simmer over moderate heat, then add shrimp mixture with any juices and cook, stirring, until shrimp are just cooked through, 1 to 2 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in cheese and 2 tablespoons basil, then season with salt and pepper. Serve sprinkled with remaining tablespoon basil.

COOKS' NOTES: In place of the homemade clam broth, you can use 3 (8-ounce) bottles of clam juice mixed with 4 cups water. • Clam broth can be made 1 day ahead and cooled completely, uncovered, then chilled, covered.

For ANOTHER RECIPE, visit gourmet.com.

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