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Peruvian cuisine is building a following

By Joan Cirillo
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When "Mama Doris" opened a sophisticated New Andean Peruvian restaurant in Portland, Ore.'s fashionable Pearl District three years ago, she never imagined the enthusiastic response.

Her family restaurant, Andina, quickly generated a buzz on the national and local scenes. The year after it opened, Gourmet magazine wrote: "A rare Peruvian gem filled with folk art and weavings, this is unique on the West Coast." Last year, The Oregonian, the state's largest newspaper, named it restaurant of the year.

What had mouths watering were the distinctive flavors of dishes like the clean-tasting white fish ceviche (raw fish "cooked" in Key lime juice), made from sea bass or ono; the fish and meat anticuchos (brochettes marinated and seasoned with Peruvian peppers such as aji panca, a dry red hot pepper, or rocoto, red hot pepper); and the brilliantly colored causa (mashed potatoes with lime and chili pepper), made from Peruvian purple potatoes and filled with pink salmon or shrimp.

The delicate alfajores, classic Peruvian cookies filled with manjar blanco (caramelized milk) and scented with lime that reflect the Moorish and Spanish influence on Peruvian cuisine, became an instant hit.

All Doris Rodriguez de Platt had hoped for was to successfully share her Peruvian culture. The welcoming and gentle 61-year-old matriarch, whose staff affectionately call her Mama Doris, recalled how her son had urged her to open the eatery. He had worked for Mercy Corps in Peru and convinced the family they could help his mother's native land with their venture.

Their family's success reflects the burgeoning interest in the food ways of the third largest South American country.

Peruvian cuisine, with its mix of immigrant influences and characteristic native ingredients including colorful corn, chilies and potatoes, is exploding onto the culinary scene here and abroad, particularly in Japan, Spain and other parts of Europe and Canada.

New restaurants are opening. Fresh produce, such as tasty Peruvian peppers, is showing up in markets, and exports such as chocolate and organic coffee are finding a following here for their taste, competitive pricing and variety.

Consider that Latin importer Goya Foods doubled its Peruvian product line this spring and plans more growth. An expanded line of Peru's distinctive chili pastes and peppers is among the newest items in Goya's 34-product Peruvian line (www.goya.com).

Search the Internet and you'll find these and other products for sale along with blogs (www.perufood.blogspot.com) and Web sites created by Peruvian food enthusiasts.

"Americans are always hungry for something different and new," said Joseph Perez from Goya headquarters in Secaucus, N.J. A vice president specializing in Latin markets, he attributes the escalating interest to "the realization that Peruvian cuisine is one of the most highly versatile and sophisticated cuisines in the world."

Peruvian cuisine is characterized by its use of hot peppers and aromatic herbs and the interweaving of other ethnic traditions and techniques with indigenous foods. Less spicy than Mexican, the cuisine uses the range of native chilies from red to purple to add color to a dish and a piquant, underlying flavor accent rather than heat. For instance, at the restaurant Andina, the red thin-skinned piquillo pepper comes stripped of the veins bearing heat and is stuffed with a mixture of cheese, quinoa and serrano ham.

Like the Mediterranean with its fresh flavors, the cuisine varies regionally but is always influenced by aromatic herbs, including some native herbs such as huacatay (black mint) along with cilantro, oregano and basil, to showcase the ingredients particular to the region.

Top food professionals got a taste of it at the International Association of Culinary Professionals' annual conference in Seattle this year. As they dined on ceviche, papa (potato) a la Huancaína, and giant Peruvian corn, television host David Jesson showed products and slides of the countryside and its bounty.

"It is a very diverse nation with diverse flavors," Jesson explained.

An American who has been a chef since 1980, he was ordained a pastor a decade ago and moved to Peru in 2001 to work in hunger relief. For the past three years, Jesson has been covering Peruvian culture and cuisine as producer and host of the nonprofit Christian show Abundante. (www.abundantetv.com)

"There are cevicherías all over Peru," he told his audience. These restaurants serve ceviche, which originated in Peru and is made from the many varieties of fish living in the plankton-rich coastal waters bordering western Peru.

"The potato was born in Peru. ...Potatoes were one of the staples of the Incas," said Jesson, adding there are some 3,000 varieties.

Other homegrown specialties he highlighted included cinnamon, coffee, chocolate, squash, tropical fruits, corn (with some 3,500 varieties), chilies, purple olives, chicha morada (a spiced purple corn drink), and pisco (a grape brandy popularized in the mixed drink, pisco sour.)

What makes Peruvian cuisine so distinctive?

It owes much to the combination of its rich natural resources with the traditions of immigrant ethnic groups. Peru enjoys the bounty of three clearly different regions: the coast and its desert; the Andean Mountains; and the Amazon jungle.

The indigenous foods of the Incas, including quinoa, corn, fish and potatoes, were embellished by the Spanish and their inheritance of Moorish cooking styles. When Chinese immigrants went to Peru to work the railroads in the mid-19th century, they left their mark by introducing stir-fry, soy sauce and ginger. Today, there are some 3,000 "chifas" (Peruvian style Chinese restaurants) in Lima.

The Italians brought their Mediterranean flavors and noodles, and the Japanese and Africans, too, added the customs and flavors of their countries to what they found. Their techniques and ingredients resulted in distinct cooking styles layered over existing Peruvian foods.

Over the last two decades, Peruvian cuisine has continued to evolve with the Novo Andina or New Andean movement, generated by chefs from Lima, the nation's capital. Chefs are rediscovering and reinventing traditional foods by applying sophisticated culinary techniques from other countries, and taking those ideas to other countries, too.

"Novo Andina tries to bring color and presentation to our traditional foods," explained Rodriguez de Platt, Andina's owner (www.andinarestaurant.com). All her staff must be able to converse in Spanish.

Take the ancient grain, quinoa, for example. Her chefs cook the grain in the Italian style of risotto for a "quinoto." Her menu also offers the grain cooked in Spanish-style dessert milk custard. Quinoa replaces the traditional rice, and port and orange peel are added for flavor.

Expect to learn more about Peruvian cuisine in the future. Peru's 13-year-old tourism and marketing board, PromPeru, last fall hired the firm Edelman as its global public relations agency.

"We are doing a lot to grow because we have to make the world know that Peru has this exquisite cuisine," tourism coordinator Ricardo Baraybar said in an interview from Lima, the country's capital.

PromPeru will spend \$4 million, a quarter of its global budget, to promote Peruvian food and culture in the U.S. with culinary and cultural festivals and other such events. Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the U.K. are among other countries Peru is targeting for promotions. (www.peru.info)

"Year by year, you can see how it has grown," Baraybar said of the Peruvian restaurant scene in the U.S., noting that high-end restaurants like Andina are easily found in New York and Miami. Nearly a million Peruvians live in the U.S., with the majority in Los Angeles and New York, followed by Washington, D.C., and Miami, he said.

As for what Peruvians themselves eat, restaurateur Mama Doris described a typical Peruvian meal at home as starting with soup, such as a pureed squash soup, or one made with quinoa or chicken. A second course often consists of a stew or pan-fried meat, like steak, and is accompanied by rice and lentils, rice and beans, potatoes or yuca. Favorite Peruvian beverages include chicha morada (a non-fermented drink made from Peruvian purple corn), Inka Kola (a Peruvian soft drink), beer and pisco.

"Our exportation of different products is increasing, especially in the last two years," Baraybar said. And he sees further growth following Peru's recent signing of a Fair Trade Agreement with the United States.

Meanwhile, the acclaimed Peruvian chef Gaston Acurio is popularizing Peruvian foods at his restaurants in Lima, as well as in Chile, Ecuador and Colombia, and by way of media and public appearances. He was among the Peruvian chefs who were invited, for the third year in a row, to participate in the major gastronomical festival, Madrid Fusion, in that city.

Television host Jesson predicts that Peruvian cuisine will see a surge in popularity over the next five years. And Mama Doris foresees more regional dishes coming out of Peru.

She welcomes the New Andean influences but hopes chefs won't lose sight of their Peruvian roots. Said the restaurant owner: "I firmly believe that we should keep the traditional flavors because they are unique."