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IT is now four decades since exiles from Castro's Cuba first arrived in Miami, and were soon followed by a small army of family restaurants that served up heaping mounds of steaming black beans and rice and other Cuban staples like fried plantains and mojo, the fragrant sour-orange marinade.

It didn't take long for Little Havana to spread far beyond its downtown roots and absorb Spanish-speaking immigrants from all over the hemisphere. These newer arrivals, in turn, were comforted by small mom and pop restaurants offering their own national dishes.

The result is a city where diners can sample the fare of a different Latin nation every day for a fortnight. And a few years ago, it made Miami the birthplace of nuevo Latino -- the fusion cuisine that is built on the zesty tropical tastes of the New World.

In the place where North America gets its first taste of the cuisines of the Southern Hemisphere, Peruvian food has become wildly popular with those bored with the relatively conservative Cuban food, and other now-familiar cuisines. Peruvian food here is built around piquant but not fiery chilies used as condiments for an endless variety of dishes and, unlike most other Latin cuisines, an emphasis on seafood over meat. It also tends to use less grease or oils.

There are an estimated 65,000 Peruvian nationals living in South Florida (some 750,000 nationwide), the Peruvian Consulate here said. They are faithful patrons of the 22 Peruvian restaurants in Miami and surrounding towns in Dade County. But they are often outnumbered by diners of other ethnic backgrounds.

"I'm Cuban and I love Peruvian food," said Christina Beauvoir, a Miami resident for 35 of her 44 years. Mrs. Beauvoir, an embodiment of local multiculturalism, is married to a Haitian and learned about Peruvian cooking through Peruvians on her husband's soccer team. She had just finished lunch at El Chalan, a small restaurant in a curb-side shopping strip next door to a Colombian bakery and a few yards from a Venezuelan restaurant. On weekends, the line to get into El Chalan winds out the front door and down the block.

"It's spicier than Cuban food, and the seafood is awesome," Mrs. Beauvoir said.

But Peruvian cooking in Miami and elsewhere in this country also suffers from a supply problem. Some purists argue that the acclaimed quality of cuisine prepared in Lima, which is widely regarded as the gastronomic capital of the Americas, is not exportable

because many of the fresh fruits and vegetables used in its preparation are not available in the United States.

Imported frozen and packaged ingredients, they say, do not adequately substitute for the taste of the real thing. Miami's Palacio de Jugos (Juice Palace) is a bustling market crammed with stalls groaning under tropical fruits and vegetables that will fill the larders of some of the city's best fusion kitchens.

But potatoes and sweet corn from Peru, immensely more varied in taste, texture and complexity than their American cousins, are generally restricted as imports unless frozen or processed. The raw products may carry disease or pests like the fruit fly, which can threaten American crops.

There are some 4,000 varieties of potato in Peru, and they may be purple, black or as golden as egg yolks. Peruvian potatoes are starchier, more fibrous and have a richness of taste unknown in American potatoes.

Tino's Place, a fine-dining restaurant in Coral Gables, a Miami suburb, has found the challenge daunting. After struggling to establish a following for Peruvian dishes, the restaurant has reverted to an Italian menu. "We keep a Peruvian menu for those Peruvians who come here to celebrate special occasions when they demand the best," Tino Pareto, the owner and chef, said.

Regular patrons also know they can ask to see a Peruvian menu, and Mr. Pareto will have no problem coming up with several dishes like corvina al ajillo con camarones (Pacific sea bass with shrimp in a creamy garlic sauce) or several ceviches, made with fish quickly marinated in lime juice, hot peppers and herbs.

"You cannot do Peruvian dishes as fast food," said Mr. Pareto's wife, Lucy, whose mother and grandmother both operated restaurants in Lima. "We will not offer the Peruvian menu unless we have the authentic ingredients."

Other Peruvian restaurants are not as choosy and simply substitute fresh domestic produce for Peruvian varieties. "The secret is to adopt ingredients available in this country and use them to create a taste that is distinctly Peruvian," said Mario Abieno, who owns El Chalan and recently opened a second restaurant in Miami Beach, Chalan on the Beach.

He uses Idaho potatoes, not as good as Peruvian ones, but still tempting when blended with his sauces and condiments.

## **LOMO SALTADO**

Adapted from Tino Pareto, Tino's Place, Coral Gables, Fla.

Time: 40 minutes

Vegetable oil

4 all-purpose potatoes, peeled, halved lengthwise and thinly sliced  
2 pounds beef loin, sliced into thin strips  
3 yellow peppers, sliced into thin strips  
3 red onions, peeled and cut into eighths  
2 tablespoons soy sauce  
1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar  
6 cups hot cooked rice.

1. In a large nonstick skillet over medium heat, heat 2-1/2 tablespoons vegetable oil. Add the potatoes, and saute until browned and tender, about 15 minutes. Drain on paper towels, and set aside.

2. In a large skillet over high heat, heat 2 tablespoons of oil. Add the beef, and quickly saute until the beef is seared and browned on all sides. Remove the pan from the heat, and use a slotted spoon to transfer the beef to a plate.

3. Return the pan to medium-high heat. Add the onions and saute until the edges are seared and they begin to soften, about 2 minutes. Add the tomatoes, and stir to combine. Sprinkle the soy sauce and balsamic vinegar over the mixture, and saute until the tomatoes have softened, about 2 minutes.

4. Add the beef and sauteed potatoes, and toss gently to mix well. Cover and simmer just until reheated, 2-3 minutes. Serve with rice.

Yield: 6 to 8 portions.