

High on Peru



LOMO SALTADO



THE PISCO SOUR



With Its Mix of Worldly Flavors, the Country's Cuisine Could Be the Next Thai

By [Walter Nicholls](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Take one part Incan and one part Spanish. Mix well. Add influences of African, Chinese, Japanese and Italian. What do you get? Peruvian -- the cuisine that legendary French chef and culinary writer Auguste Escoffier called one of the best in the world -- after only French and Chinese. Considering its status, it's also a cuisine that has been relatively overlooked. Until now.

Alejandro Riveros, head of public diplomacy for the Embassy of Peru, has made it his mission to promote the sophistication, innovation and most importantly, taste, of foods from back home. Last night the embassy invited 1,000 people to sample food and drink at a reception supporting the recent signing of a free trade agreement eliminating import tariffs on goods exchanged between Peru and the United States.

"We want our food to be as well known as Thai is in this country," says Riveros. "We want 5,000 -- no 10,000" -- restaurants in the United States. "We want Peruvian restaurants everywhere." The staples of Peruvian cuisine -- potatoes, yucca, corn and chili peppers -- were provided by the Incas centuries ago. Spanish conquistadors who arrived in the 16th century brought citrus fruit, wheat, rice, cattle and pigs as well as European-style desserts. Africans introduced spicy, vinegar-marinated beef and fish on skewers.

Riveros is working with investors and top Peruvian chefs to open a high-end restaurant in downtown Washington to showcase the country's cooking. (There are a number of Peruvian restaurants in the area, concentrated in Arlington and Gaithersburg.) Riveros believes Peruvian food is unique because "of the more than 100 climate zones in the world, we have 84." Peru has "every different ecosystem, from desert to jungle to snow-capped peaks and down to the sea where the cold currents from the South Pole are great for seafood."

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Then came the Chinese, who came to build railroads. They introduced soy sauce and fresh ginger as well as stir-fry cooking. Japanese arriving in the early 1900s to work on sugar and cotton plantations brought their love of seafood and techniques for preparing it simply and beautifully.

For most Washingtonians, though, Peruvian cuisine is rotisserie chicken. When Victor and Nelly Solano opened the carryout El Pollo Rico in Arlington in 1989, few people in the area had ever heard of Peruvian-style chicken.

Today this Lima favorite is widely popular at lunch and dinner with lines to the door of El Pollo Rico at peak hours. Fans love the crispy skin, succulent, smoke-scented meat and creamy, chili-spiked dipping sauces. Competitors such as Crisp & Juicy, Señor Chicken and Inkas' Empire have followed. Now there are similar chicken operations in just about every suburb in the region, and an aroma of *pollo a la brasa* -- Peruvian rotisserie chicken -- fills the air.

But Peruvian chicken is not served at the Embassy of Peru.

Ambassador Eduardo Ferrero and his wife Veronica recently hosted a dinner party for 70 at the embassy residence in Forest Hills. Moments before guests arrived, executive chef Jose Luis Herrera raced from one end of the large kitchen to the other preparing a dozen main courses for a buffet.

It was best to stand back. Herrera is the size of a linebacker, and the country's fusion cuisine, coming together piece by piece over several centuries, is complicated.

In the embassy kitchen, Herrera pours a creamy, purple, Italian-style olive sauce over thinly sliced octopus. The next minute he's toasting Andean corn for a Japanese-inspired, citrus-marinated fish dish, ceviche. And on to a Chinese stir-fry of beef tenderloin and red onions seasoned with soy sauce and tossed with French fries.

No buffet would be complete without a *causa* -- a layered torte made with cool mashed potato, an Incan favorite, filled (in this version) with tuna salad, festively coated with a colored mayonnaise sauce. For dessert he has made a Spanish, port wine-flavored custard topped with meringue and a touch of cinnamon.

In an adjoining pantry, blenders are churning the national cocktail, pisco sour, first popular in the 1920s. "It's all in the proportions," says Marcelino Lazaro, who has tended bar at the embassy for more than 20 years. Pisco, a clear grape brandy, is combined with Key lime juice, sugar and a dot of bitters. It's sweet, then sour, and strong on the alcohol. Like much of Peruvian cooking, it packs a punch.

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About That Chicken

There are dozens of Peruvian-style rotisserie chicken outlets in the Washington area and almost as many variations on the bird. Some places use "Peruvian" in their menu description; others don't. One will use a dry rub spice and herb

marinade and another a wet marinade that might include oil and wine. The marinade ingredients vary from store to store but many contain salt, black pepper, cumin, garlic powder and Italian seasoning.

From outlet to outlet, there are wood-fired, gas and electric rotisseries that impart an individual flavor to the chicken. Dipping sauces vary as well -- from mild, yellow chili- or mustard-flavored mayonnaise to cilantro-based or more potent jalapeño chili pepper.

But overall, one thing we have noticed is that outlets that are busy at both lunch and dinner don't let their chickens sit around and dry out, and they do not reheat chickens that were cooked earlier in the day.

At El Pollo Rico (in Arlington and Wheaton), for example, the process begins at 6 a.m. every day when the 30 crates of chicken for the following day are trimmed of excess fat, patted with a secret recipe dry rub and allowed to rest for 24 hours. The chickens are then skewered on metal bars and set on the rotisserie for 1 to 1 1/2 hours. El Pollo Rico uses hardwood charcoal imported from Argentina that imparts a smoky, charbroiled flavor to the meat.

-- Walter Nicholls

Do you have a favorite Peruvian-style chicken place? Send us the name, address and phone number of your pick and why you like it to food@washpost.com and we'll publish the results in next Wednesday's online chat.

[Peruvian Recipes](#)

From the pisco sour to ceviche, how to get the flavors of Peru.

Flavors of Peru

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The Pisco Sour

8 servings

Both sweet and sour, Peru's national cocktail is made with pisco -- a clear, grape brandy produced in the country. This recipe was provided by the Embassy of Peru.

2 to 3 cups pisco, depending on desired strength*

1 cup sugar

1 cup Key lime juice

12 ice cubes, slightly crushed

2 egg whites or 4 teaspoons powdered egg whites*

Angostura bitters

In a blender, add the pisco, sugar and Key lime juice and pulse to combine. Add the ice and egg whites or powdered egg whites and blend until the ice is crushed and a thick foam forms. Pour into cocktail glasses and top each with a few drops of angostura bitters.

**NOTES:* Pisco is available at most large liquor stores in Washington and Maryland. In Northern Virginia, it is generally a special-order item that can be ordered from <http://www.abc.virginia.gov/>.

Scientists estimate that 1 in 10,000 fresh eggs may be contaminated with salmonella bacteria. Because of that possibility, the U.S. Department of Agriculture advises that uncooked or undercooked eggs not be consumed by the very young, the elderly or those with compromised immune systems.

Per serving: 256 calories, 6 g protein, 27 g carbohydrates, 0 g fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 0 g saturated fat, 92 mg sodium, 0 g dietary fiber

Recipe tested by Hal Mehlman; e-mail questions to food@washpost.com

Lomo Saltado

(Sautéed Beef Tenderloin)

6 to 8 servings

This admired Chinese/Peruvian dish is a good example of the country's blended cultures. In Peru, it's always served with french fries that can be mixed with the meat as well as rice on the side. The recipe was provided by the embassy.

1/2 cup vegetable oil

2 1/4 pounds whole beef tenderloin, sliced into 2-by- 1/2 -inch strips

3 medium red onions, each cut into 8 to 10 pieces

4 aji amarillo chili peppers, seeded and sliced into thin strips* (may substitute serrano chili peppers)

4 medium tomatoes cut into eighths

4 tablespoons chopped parsley.

1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar

2 tablespoons soy sauce (may substitute low-sodium soy sauce)

Salt

Freshly ground black pepper

1/4 cup pisco*

1/2 teaspoon Key lime juice

In a wok or large skillet over high heat, add the oil. Add half of the beef and sear, about 2 minutes per side. With a slotted spoon, transfer the beef to a plate and cover loosely with aluminum foil. Sear the remaining beef and add it to the plate. Set aside.

Drain all but 1 1/2 tablespoons of oil from the skillet. Reduce the heat to medium-high. Add the onions and cook, stirring, until the edges are seared and the onions begin to soften, 3 to 4 minutes. Add the chili peppers, tomatoes, 2 tablespoons of the parsley, the vinegar, soy sauce and salt and pepper to taste. Cook, stirring, until the tomatoes have softened, about 2 minutes. Add the beef and any juices and toss gently to combine. Add the pisco, ignite and let the alcohol burn off. Sprinkle with the remaining parsley and the Key lime juice. Serve immediately.

**NOTE:* Aji amarillo chili peppers are available frozen at Shoppers Food & Pharmacy and at many Latin American markets. Pisco is available at most large liquor stores in Washington and Maryland. In Northern Virginia, it is generally a special-order item that can be ordered from <http://www.abc.virginia.gov/>

Per serving: 419 calories, 26 g protein, 11 g carbohydrates, 28 g fat, 83 mg cholesterol, 10 g saturated fat, 359 mg sodium, 2 g dietary fiber

Recipe tested by Yuki Noguchi; e-mail questions to food@washpost.com

Ceviche (Marinated Fish)

8 servings

By far, the most popular lunch entree and dinner appetizer in Peru is a simple dish of "cooked" white-fleshed fish that has been marinated in citrus juice, seasoned with chili peppers and garnished with corn and sweet potato. Because the fish is essentially raw, it is of utmost importance that only the freshest, high-quality seafood be used. The large kernels of maize, imported from Peru, add an authentic touch. Also adapted from an embassy recipe.

2 cups maize kernels, such as Goya Choclo Entero* (may substitute fresh corn)

3 small, thin sweet potatoes (1 to 1 1/2 pounds total)

2 1/4 pounds fillet of sole or any tender white-fleshed fish, pinbones removed, cut into 1-by- 1/4 -inch strips

3 to 5 cloves crushed garlic

Sea salt

3 to 5 aji amarillo chili peppers, seeded and minced* (may substitute serrano chili peppers)

Juice of 8 to 10 Key limes (5 to 7 tablespoons)

Freshly ground black pepper

1 1/2 tablespoons chopped cilantro

3 medium red onions, thinly sliced

1 jalapeño chili pepper, seeded and thinly sliced, for garnish

Leaf lettuce, for garnish

Fill a large pan with water and bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Add the maize kernels and cook until tender, 7 to 8 minutes. Drain, transfer to a resealable container and refrigerate until ready to use.

Refill the pan with water and bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Add the sweet potatoes and boil until tender. When cool enough to handle, peel and slice thinly. Transfer to a resealable container and refrigerate until ready to use.

Place the fish strips in a serving dish and season with the crushed garlic and salt to taste. Add the aji amarillo chili peppers to taste, the Key lime juice, black pepper to taste and the chopped cilantro. Allow the mixture to rest for 10 to 15 minutes.

Sprinkle the onions with salt to taste and place over the fish. Decorate the platter with the reserved kernels of corn and sweet potato, the sliced jalapeño chili pepper and lettuce and serve promptly.

**NOTE:* Maize and aji amarillo chili peppers are available frozen at Shoppers Food & Pharmacy and at many Latin American markets.

Per serving: 235 calories, 25 g protein, 32 g carbohydrates, 2 g fat, 58 mg cholesterol, 0 g saturated fat, 263 mg sodium, 4 g dietary fiber

Recipe tested by Tom Wilkinson; e-mail questions to food@washpost.com