

Eat the best ceviche  
you'll ever know – *in Peru*  
by Stephanie Ortenzi

**Ceviche Peruano** Serves 6

*An appetizer or late-night snack eaten with Pisco, the Peruvian brandy*

600 gr halibut  
3 large Scallops  
1 small red onion, thinly julienned  
Juice of 12 limes, or enough to cover  
the fish  
1 aji amarillo pepper finely diced  
Salt to taste

2 cobs of corn, boiled and cut in thirds  
2 large sweet potatoes, boiled and  
into thirds

**Directions:**

1. Cut the halibut and scallops equally into one-inch pieces.
2. Season with salt, cover with lime juice, and set the red onions on top.
3. Cover and refrigerate for about 2 hours or until the fish has firmed up and becomes opaque.
4. When ready, drain and serve in cold bowls with corn and sweet potato to garnish.



The soul of authentic Peruvian cuisine can be found in a humble place called **Soñia's**. This popular Lima eatery specializes in *ceviche* – fresh, raw fish dressed with lime juice and little else. The flavour of the ocean on the fish is pure and simple. As a foil for the lime's bright flavour, *ceviche* is traditionally served with sweet potato and corn.

In this neighbourhood, where there are *cevicherías* at every turn, Soñia's has endured because, for the last 30 years, she has been cooking the fish that her husband pulls from the Pacific that morning. You don't dine at Soñia's. You eat what is likely to be the best *ceviche* you've ever had and you'll try other fish and seafood too, like the fried calamari.

Gourmet advisory: not all Peruvian eating is like this – a little out of the way, very casual and relatively unchanged over three decades. In fact, Lima is now the gastronomic capital of South America. The world has been there to eat, and the reviews are glowing. There are 12 cooking schools in Lima, and for good reason. There are more visitors to please.

If Peru's culinary tale begins with *ceviche*, it owes its success at least partly to the Spaniards who brought citrus during the conquests, which made *ceviche* possible. They also brought African slaves, whose culinary stamp appears on *tacu tacu*, a fried patty of beans and rice with onions, chile paste and pork; and *picarones*, pumpkin donuts formed into rings by hand, serviced with raw sugar syrup flavoured with orange, anise seed, cinnamon and cloves.

After the slaves were emancipated in the middle of the 19th century, the Chinese immigrants arrived. They worked in factories, on farms, in homes and on the national railway. They introduced fresh ginger and soy sauce to Peru's *aji chile* pastes. Stir-frying became popular and *lomo saltado* was born: marinated strips of beef, stir-fried with red onion, tomatoes, bell

peppers, *aji amarillo* (yellow aji) and soy sauces, served with fried potatoes. Inland, the Chinese influence can be quickly spotted in *tacachos*, plantain dumplings with bacon.

Fifty years later, the Japanese followed. They worked on cotton and sugar plantations. *Tiradito* is said to be the most cherished imprint the Japanese left on Peruvian cuisine. It's often compared to sashimi for that reason, but it's actually more like carpaccio. *Tiradito* is very thinly sliced, raw fish, drizzled very lightly with a dressing. Substitute the fish with beef tenderloin and add shaved parmesan, and there's the Italian classic.

In the early 1990s, newspaper publisher Bernardo Roca Rey began noticing a "movement" in Peruvian cuisine: a new generation of chefs bringing sophisticated techniques to traditional dishes. Roca Rey loved to cook, particularly with obscure ingredients. He was captivated by *quinoa*, which has a delicate nutty flavour, and its tiny opaque kernels become translucent when cooked. *Quinoa* pre-dates the Incas by 4200 years and almost disappeared entirely from the national diet. Today, *quinoa* is very popular internationally, thanks in part to chefs who like digging in their own culinary backyards and sharing their findings with the world.

Cucho La Rosa's backyard is in the countryside south of Lima, where he established his restaurant, **La Casa De Don Cucho** and does some of his cooking outdoors. In this rustic getaway, he cooks *la cocina criolla*, the creole cooking inherently Peruvian, with dishes like *arroz con pato*, duck with rice, and *cuy*, guinea pig that is roasted or deep-fried. There's plenty of *chicha negra*, the fermented drink made from purple corn.

A typical dessert might be made with *lúcama*, the Andean fruit with bright yellow pulp. Don Cucho also has an admirable collection of *batanes*, the ancient technique of mashing aji chiles between rock and rock vessels.

Gastón Acurio is Don Cucho's cosmopolitan counterpart and Peru's super-star chef, with a modest countenance and an impressive restaurant empire. Acurio's numerous videos, shot mostly in his beloved Lima, are all over the web and in them he tells the story of a cuisine he was born to promote. His training is classical French, via the prestigious Cordon Bleu school, and he also cooked in Madrid. But he soon made his way back to Lima and opened **Astrid y Gastón**, so that he could prepare Peruvian food with some worldly culinary polish. It was so smart and so hip that the restaurant became a valuable export. He opened one in Quito, Bogotá, Salvador, Caracas, Panama and Madrid. Acurio also has **La Mar**, a high-end *cevichería* that can stand as the best Peru has to offer. This restaurant proved to be an excellent export, too, and in September, Acurio made an American debut with **La Mar** in San Francisco.



Soñia's ©Stuart Starrs

Acurio also generously shares credit with his contemporaries, where it's due. When travelogue chef Anthony Bourdain planned his episode on Peru, he chose Acurio to explain *ceviche* to the uninitiated. Acurio explained how there are 2,000 *cevicherías* in Lima, and when Bourdain asked him what was special about the one they were standing in, Acurio's answer was seamless. "She cooks the fish that her husband fishes that morning. That's his boat, here's the restaurant." It's back to Soñia's again. ▣