



A REVOLUTIONARY FEAST

A gastronomic revolution has swept across the Peruvian landscape transforming Lima into Latin America's hottest foodie city, writes Joe Mortimer



Montadita de pulpo (right) – bites of octopus and Andean potato – from La Gloria

The 16th-century Cathedral of Lima (opposite page) is situated in Plaza Mayor, in the heart of the city

Peruvian cuisine (previous page, clockwise from top left): sushi mar at Maido; ceviche at Maido; estofado Nikkei at Maido; manzana helada delicia at Astrid & Gastón; svinche at Maido; barquillos at Astrid & Gastón

THE ART OF DINING

The first step on any gourmet adventure in Lima begins with a suitable abode. I found mine at Hotel B in the upmarket Barranco neighbourhood, a charming colonial home turned into a boutique, art-filled hotel. The signature dining and bar concept in the 17-suite luxury hideaway was created by restaurateur Oscar Velarde, owner of the fabled Peruvian/Mediterranean restaurant La Gloria, (Calle Atahualpa 201; +51 1 445 5705; www.lagloriarestaurant.com), which has been catering to Lima's affluent citizens, politicians and VIPs since 1994.

The intimate dining room at Hotel B, now under the accomplished gaze of executive chef Rose Forbes, bustles with a mixture of hotel guests and locals; Barranco's increasingly discerning residents are part of a growing middle class in Lima that has fanned the flames of culinary innovation since the mid-1990s. "I wanted this to be a very relaxed place," explains Oscar Velarde, as a bartender pours us a Chilcano cocktail: a mixture of Peruvian pisco (distilled grape brandy), lemon juice, ginger ale and Amargo Chunchu bitters. "Five years ago, Barranco was already a bohemian district, but it was only filled with bars. Now, it is changing."

The Relais & Châteaux flag that flies over the hotel promises great things from the kitchen, but

the concept here is far from snobbish: "I think the arrogant chef mentality is extinct; today it is all about sharing," says Forbes on a break from the busy evening service. "We are all in a pioneer stage. We are realising how rich our country is with all the interesting and varied ingredients, but right now we are barely seeing the tip of the iceberg."

Several hours (and several piscos) later, we move the conversation to Velarde's original restaurant, La Gloria, and feast on glorious bite-sized portions of *montadito de pulpo al carbon* (grilled octopus on a small mountain of smoked Andean potato); a

platter of grilled Pacific scallop on-the-shell bathed in brown butter; avocado with delicately smoked trout; and finally, *cuy confit* – guinea pig, served crisp and tender on the bone.

La Gloria doesn't appear on any "best of" lists, but there can be no doubting the quality of this Miraflores mainstay. The food is exquisite and a quick glance around the dining room reveals a textbook cross-section of the upper echelons of Lima's great and good: groups of men in dark suits, society ladies and mature couples, all of whom are eager to exchange a few words with my host throughout the evening.

"THE RESTAURANT IS KNOWN FOR ITS EPIC MULTI-COURSE TASTING MENUS, WHICH GO ON FOR HOURS"

When I first visited Lima, there was just one standout local dish – ceviche: chunks of fresh fish or seafood bathed in the juice of lemons with liberal sprinklings of sea salt, cilantro and sliced red onion. The dish was ubiquitous throughout coastal South America, but in Peru it had found perfection. That was, however, the extent of the Peruvian culinary repertoire as I saw it.

Today, things couldn't be more different. Lima is now home to a collective of entrepreneurial chefs; pioneers who instigated a culinary revolution in the mid-1990s and helped see it through to its glorious present. Eight Lima restaurants were listed in the Latin America's 50 Best Restaurants awards in 2014, and accolades continue to pour in from all over the world.

While the first wave of what would become Peru's gourmet revolutionaries were learning their craft in the kitchens of Europe, Japan and the US, chefs and restaurateurs in Lima were rediscovering the riches of their own back-garden: native potatoes (of which there are more than 3,000 varieties), Pacific fish and seafood such as

succulent octopus, scallop and mahi mahi, myriad varieties of chilli and an abundance of fruits, fish and other ingredients never before used outside the Amazon Basin.

Instead of passing quickly through the Peruvian capital en route to Machu Picchu, tourists and foodies now flock to Lima to eat at restaurants like Astrid & Gastón, Maido and Central, whose

epic tasting menus have created a paradigm shift in the way people see Peruvian food; or to rub shoulders with Lima's beautiful people in places like Bravo Restobar, El Mercado and Fiesta, where chefs have elevated the fine-casual concept to new heights. Armed with this knowledge, it was with a light head and rumbling stomach that I headed to Lima to join the revolution.



Dishes of colourful, fresh Peruvian fare are a feast for the eyes as well as the taste buds at Bravo Restobar



The mansion housing Hotel B has been meticulously restored and showcases a collection of art



A lengthy menu of both Japanese and Nikkei sushi (right), with ingredients like fresh octopus, is found at Maido

Maido's sleek interior (below) is filled with organic décor

EASTERN FUSION

While Peruvian chefs were discovering the myriad benefits of blending local ingredients and international techniques at the turn of the millennium, Lima's Japanese community was perfecting its own revolutionary fusion cuisine. "We have a saying here that Peru was like a homeless man sleeping on a bench of gold," says Mitsuharu "Micha" Tsumura, chef and owner of Maido, (Calle San Martin 399; +51 1 444 2568; www.maido.pe), one of Lima's most successful restaurants, which specialises in the fusion of Peruvian and Japanese cuisine known as Nikkei. "The golden bench was the biodiversity in this country. We only realised this because the chefs who came from other countries to visit Machu Picchu told us so. They couldn't believe we had these beautiful things here and didn't use them."

Micha earned his stripes sharpening knives and washing pots in one of Tokyo's notoriously hard-working restaurants. He turned down the chance to become one of the world's youngest hotel general managers while working at Sheraton Lima, to pursue his dream of owning a restaurant. Today, Micha is one of the most respected chefs in South America.

Maido was the first restaurant to truly celebrate Nikkei cuisine, embracing the concept in all its guises – from the restaurants that used Peruvian ingredients to adapt Japanese classics, to the Peruvian *cevicherias* that incorporated Japanese products in their cooking. "We took the next step. We blended together these cuisines and said, let's take this to fine dining," says Micha towards the end of a busy lunchtime service. "At first it didn't work, and the initial two years were very hard. People didn't understand because Nikkei was not on the map. People were eating Nikkei food ten years before that but they didn't call it Nikkei. It was a matter of branding."

Inside the elegant, wood-panelled restaurant, chefs busy themselves behind a long sushi bar, where I take a seat and prepare for a condensed version of Maido's signature "Nikkei Experience Tribute": 16 courses of perfectly presented culinary magic.

Flavours and textures blend and contrast in every mouthful: sweet and savoury, sharp and soft, hot and cold. It's a menu that tells a story in its own right, showcasing plates that are at once familiar and foreign: *lapas* ceviche (carpaccio of limpet with frozen yellow chilli mist, crunchy corn and avocado); *cuy san* (triple-cooked guinea pig with yucca cream and sprouts); and *estofado Nikkei* (50-hour braised short rib with fried rice), all of them eliciting gasps, sighs and the occasional moan from my end of the bar.



VIVA LA REVOLUCIÓN

When Gastón Acurio opened Astrid & Gastón with his wife in 1994, he started out serving fine French cuisine. Today, Acurio is globally recognised as the man who set the Peruvian food revolution in motion, and his restaurant is one of the best in the world.

If Acurio was the one who started it all, Diego Muñoz is the man who took it to the next level. The Lima-born chef cut his teeth in the kitchens of La Gran Vefour, Mugaritz and elBulli before returning to Peru to head up the second coming of Astrid & Gastón, which now occupies a spectacular period building in Lima's upmarket San Isidro neighbourhood: Casa Moreyra.

Since Muñoz's arrival in 2012, the restaurant (Av. Paz Soldán 290; +51 1 442 2775; www.astridygaston.com) has been known for its epic multi-course tasting menus, which go on for hours and tell the story of Peruvian cuisine and culture. I'm fortunate to be there in the final weeks of "Memorias de mi Tierra", or "Memories of my Land", a 28-course spectacle dreamed up to evoke memories from childhood and family life in Peru. "We developed it by getting references from chefs like Ferran Adriá and the Roca brothers, as well as Peruvian journalists, actors and even my parents, telling us about the gastronomic memories of their lives," Muñoz explains on the terrace of Casa Moreyra, overlooking the legendary test kitchen, El Taller, where new dishes are dreamed up. "I extracted the concepts that were repeated the most, studied them and developed

them into a sequence of plates that tell the story, which is described by the server."

The dishes that follow are outstanding. The odyssey starts with "Sweets After School", a collection of sweet/savoury treats served in a red and white tin. There's a tiny cone of *lúcuma* (a type of Peruvian, subtropical fruit) ice cream and chestnut covered in rich crisp chocolate; tiny meringue kisses with black botija olives and anchovies; three crisp wafer *barquillos* to dip in a yogurt of lemon, basil, strawberry and rocoto pepper; and a pillow of crispy chicken skin dusted with ginger flakes.

The show goes on in the same dazzling vein, unravelling nuances of Peruvian culture and psyche that visitors rarely see, showcasing alien flavours, textures and ingredients that bring about both joy and nostalgia, even for this non-Peruvian. It is an awakening, and I understand at once stories of tourists who make travel plans based on the availability of a table at Astrid & Gastón.

A verdant dish featuring asparagus (above) is just one of the many dishes at Astrid & Gastón that take diners on a journey around Peru

Great care is taken with each and every dish in Astrid & Gastón's extensive tasting menu (right)



A FINE TIME TO DINE

It's not just the formal establishments that are doing amazing things in Peru; the fine-casual dining concept has found a perfect home in Lima, with outlets such as Christian Bravo's Bravo Restobar, Rafael Osterling's El Mercado and Hector Solis's Fiesta proving that great food doesn't have to command astronomical prices.

At Bravo Restobar (Av. Los Conquistadores 1005; +51 221 5700; www.bravorestobar.com), a trendy nightspot on a busy corner of San Isidro, the graphic designer-turned-chef brings out a sequence of dishes that would be at home in any fine-dining restaurant. Here too, dishes embody the entire Peruvian spectrum, epitomised in a plate of salmon, mahi mahi and octopus ceviche with sesame, olive oil, lemongrass and *leche de tigre* (the acidic juice from ceviche), with black and white toasted quinoa; a work of art both visually and sensually that celebrates land and sea.

Hector Solis has refined the cuisine of Chiclayo, a northern Peruvian town famed for its seafood, at Fiesta (Av. Reducto 1278; +51 1 242 9009; www.restaurantfiestagourmet.com) and added his personal touch to Peruvian staples like ceviche. "Ceviche is not a dish, it is a concept," he explains as we go through the menu, which features nine ceviche elaborations. His signature is the ceviche *caliente* (warm ceviche) in which the dish is wrapped in a banana leaf and baked in hot coals before serving.



At El Mercado, (Av Hipólito Unanue 203; +51 1 221 1322; www.rafaelosterling.pe) a casual bistro in Miraflores, Rafael Osterling blends the entire constellation of modern Peruvian cuisine, with local classics such as *conchas a la pamesana* (scallops smothered in parmesan cheese) and *causa original* (crab and langoustine on a tower of olive oil mashed potato and chilli sauce); alongside *Nikkei* dishes like *tiraditos* (another Peruvian raw-fish dish) sushi and eight types of ceviche.

At the end of my time in Lima I feel like I have been let in on a big secret, one that is slowly going global. Gastón Acurio continues to extend his empire beyond the borders of the American continent, and today Peruvian cuisine is becoming a mainstay in cities around the world.

But it is Diego Muñoz who seems to capture the spirit of the Peruvian food revolution best, as he describes his plans to change the dining concept

in Astrid & Gastón to focus on food, products and suppliers from Lima Province, a geographical area spanning thousands of square kilometres of coast, mountains and bountiful rivers. "I don't try to measure [success] by our international impact or awards. More important for me is what we can do inside our country and the impact that we can have here," says Muñoz, as the doors to Astrid & Gastón swing open for another busy lunchtime service. "I think if we can construct a good network of farmers and change their lives a little bit, and we are running a mega-professional kitchen in a third-world country – for me that is a great change." ☞

Stay

HOTEL B
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www.hotelb.pe

Bright El Mercado (above) is a semi-open-air dining space covered with canopies and ideal for a laid-back afternoon meal

Lime *blanquillos* (right), part of the "Memorias de mi Tierra" tasting menu at Astrid & Gastón

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Fiesta's Hector Solis (above)

A dish of *costillar de cabrito* features succulent lamb (left) at Fiesta

