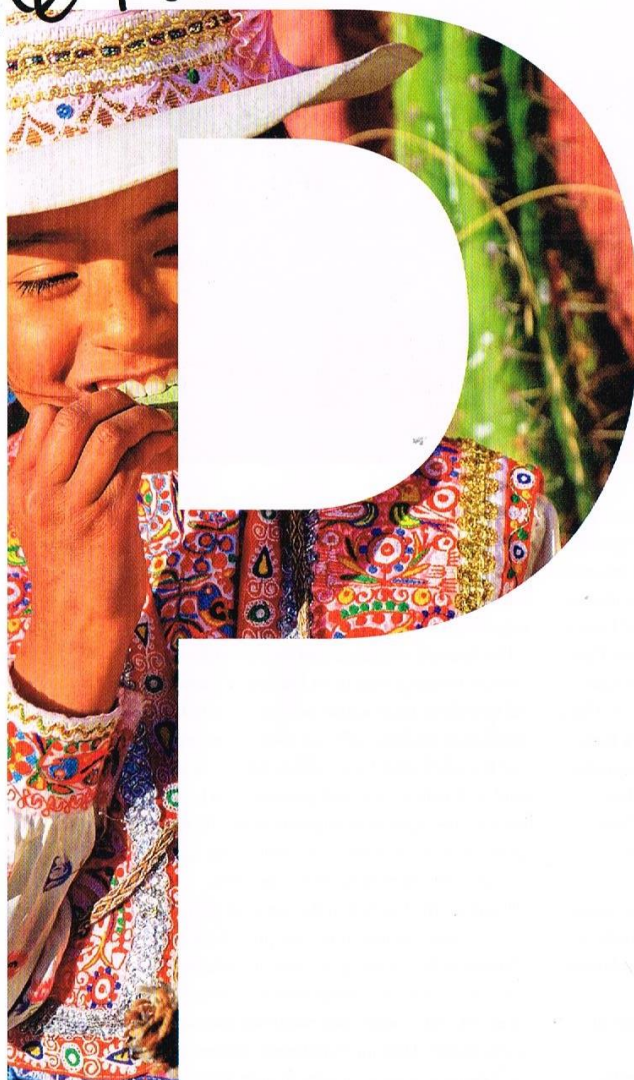


On the road:



PERU

Super-fresh ceviche in Lima, alpaca carpaccio in the Andes and pisco-spiked lomo saltado in Ica – a culinary journey around Peru is no mean feast

Words LUCY GILLMORE



"There's no TV, radio or WiFi in the rooms, just a window seat and a framed Andean tableau: fields of corn and fluffy-headed quinoa, clusters of adobe houses and peaks swathed in mist"

Maria Julia Raffo hands me a helmet and we sputter off into Peru's cloud- and traffic-cloaked capital by Vespa on a tour of Lima's culinary highlights. Gone are the days when this coastal city, founded by Francisco Pizarro in 1535, was simply the jumping off point for Peru's Inca sites. Today, it's a magnet for foodies, the searing core of the novoandina gastronomic trail that blazes all the way from London's Lima to New York's Llama Inn via Tampu in Madrid and many more.

Our first stop is **El Pan de la Chola**, an artisan bakery and brunch spot in Lima's chic Miraflores neighbourhood. Here, bakers knead dough beside a giant brick oven while, outside, the city's well-to-do tuck into jam jars of juice and scoop creamy avocados from their skins.

Revived, we set off again to gritty **Surquillo Market**. According to Julia, this is where chefs come to buy their ingredients rather than at the chi-chi eco markets now peppering the Peruvian capital. Inside there's an encyclopaedic array of produce from avocados to aji, maracuya to mandarin, banana passion fruit to tree tomatoes, papaya to prickly pears. She points out lucuma fruit, cherimoya (custard apples), cacao pods and bags of chuño, a chalky, dried potato, rehydrated to make sauces – or mixed into a paste to soothe babies' bottoms. Potatoes are Peru's most famous export with a mind-boggling 3,800 types. Quinoa, its other staple, notches up a mere 2,000 varieties.

The country's rollercoaster topography careers from coastal desert to high-altitude plain. From

the teetering, thin-aired Inca terraces of the Andes it plunges down to the steamy Amazon jungle. The numerous ecosystems produce a bountiful natural larder while its tumultuous history and waves of migration have created a vibrant fusion cuisine.

The Spanish conquistadors arrived in the 16th century bringing with them limes and onions. The African slave trade added peanut sauce to the anticuchos (skewers of meat cooked over wood), and the traditional lomo saltado (slivers of sautéed beef with onions, rice and potatoes) can be traced back to the Chinese immigrants of the 1800s. Then, at the turn of the 20th century the Japanese brought with them their love of raw fish.

Traditionally the fish in the national dish, ceviche, was marinated in lime juice for a couple of hours in the morning to 'cook' it. Today's dish however, is raw fish tossed with lime juice, chopped chilli, onion and coriander and eaten immediately. This spicy marinade, known as *leche de tigre* (tiger's milk), is also thought to be a hangover cure and aphrodisiac.

As we pass Surquillo's fish section, ceviche stalls are setting up for the lunchtime rush. "Ceviche is eaten from around 11am," Julia tells me. "You never eat ceviche at night – it has to be fresh, the fish straight off the boat."

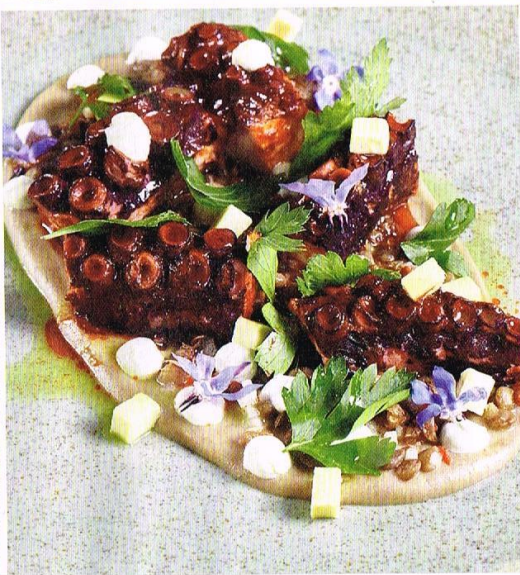
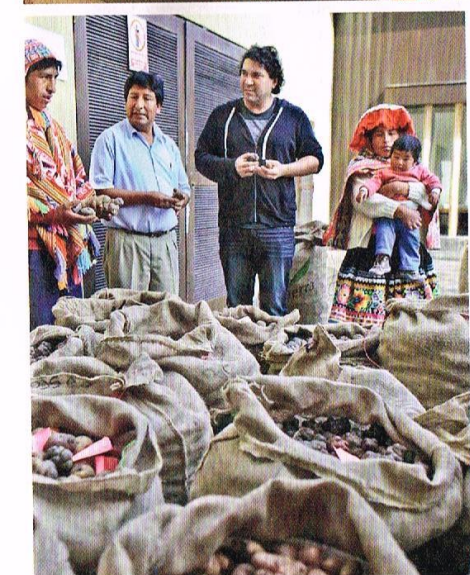
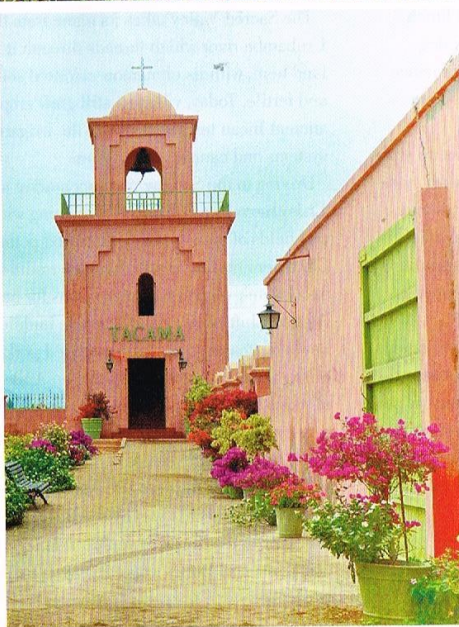
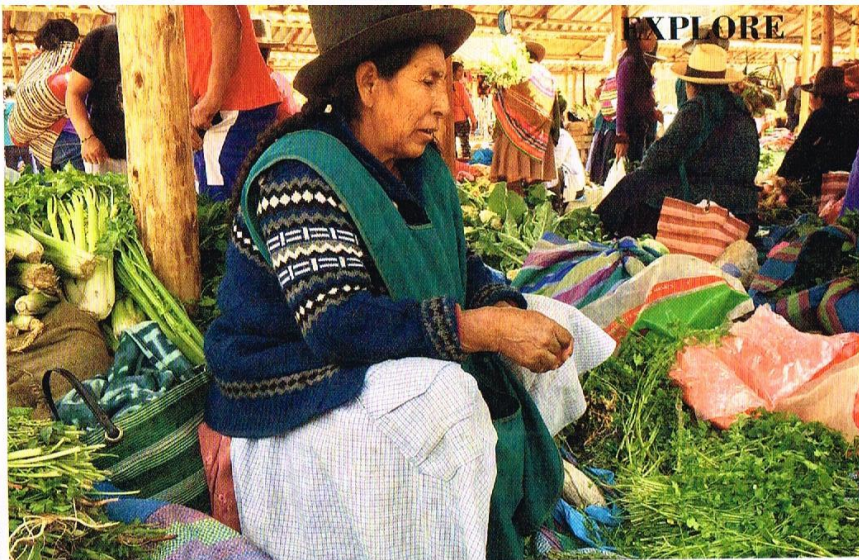
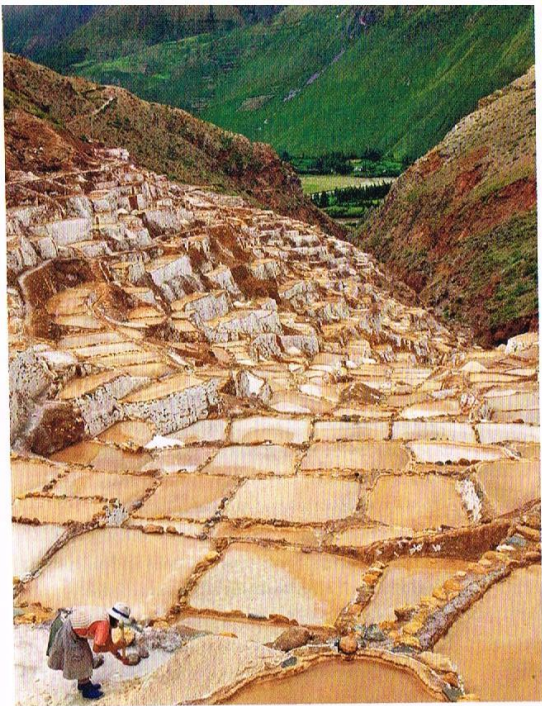
Back on the Vespa we screech off to **La Preferida** (restaurantelapreferida.com) a 1940s bodega in Miraflores that's now a Peruvian-style tapas bar. Grabbing a perch at the counter, Julia orders three ceviche tapas served in shells. Choro a la chalaca is a spicy mouthful of mussel mixed with onion, coriander, chilli and lemon – I scoop up the oniony juice with some crisp corn like a local. Next, scallop and avocado, then octopus in

mayonnaise darkened with black olives to a pungent purple – drinking another purple concoction, chicha morada, with it. This non-alcoholic drink is made from purple corn, pineapple rind, cinnamon, cloves and sugar.

Carreering on to bohemian Barranco, once a seaside resort for the Limeños but now a coastal suburb, we dip in and out of little huariques, hole-in-the-wall joints like **La Canta Rana**, tasting traditional dishes such as causa – a circular tower of yellow mashed potato topped with seafood and avocado, and tiradito (milder than ceviche and minus the onion). Afterwards we join the queue at **Isolina** for lunch: ceviche, of course, served market-style, the edge taken off its zesty sharpness by the mounds of sweet potato and a double dose of corn – fried and on the cob.

After our whirlwind tour Julia drops me back at my hotel and I reluctantly hand back the helmet. I'm staying at **Hotel B** (hotelb.pe) in Barranco where poems are placed on your pillow at night and Gregorian chants accompany a grand breakfast that stretches to quail eggs, delicate pastries and tiny cappuccinos in gold-rimmed cups and saucers.

My gourmet grazing's not over for the day yet, however. I'm dining at **Astrid y Gaston** (astridygaston.com), the flagship restaurant of celebrity chef Gaston Acurio. Gaston flies the flag for Peruvian cuisine around the world and paved the way for chefs such as Virgilio Martínez and Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, whose Lima restaurant, Malabar, is the setting for some inventive culinary conjuring from the weird and wonderful roots and shoots of the Amazon. Gaston also founded **Mistura** (mistura.pe), a local food festival that >>



EXPLORE

takes place every September and is now in its 10th year.

In an elegant colonial mansion in the stylish San Isidro district, **Astrid y Gastón** is a warren of restaurants and bars, plus a food lab and kitchen garden. The restaurant's 13-course tasting menu elegantly celebrates Peru's cultural heritage with dishes such as Pekinese guinea pig, a Peruvian take on Peking duck with a hand-rolled mini purple corn crepe and a silkily sweet rocoto chilli and peanut hoisin sauce.

The next morning I'm in another market, this time San Isidro, with chef Penelope Alzamora. A one-time colleague of Gastón, she spent seven years teaching Peruvian cooking in San Francisco before returning to Lima and offering cookery experiences in her Barranco apartment. We wander from stall to stall shopping for lunch ingredients, picking out scallops, flounder, thin-skinned limes from the northern province of Piura and tiny round orange chillies from the Amazon.

Back in her kitchen Penelope whizzes up a jug of frothy pisco sours, the national cocktail made with pisco (grape brandy), sugar syrup, lemon juice, egg whites and angostura bitters, then spoons pisco onto the scallops before sprinkling them with chilli, coriander, salt and pepper as an appetiser.

Next we make ceviche, first soaking the onions in water so they don't overpower it. "Squeeze the lime by hand just until you feel resistance so you don't get the oil from the skin and bitterness from the middle of the fruit," she tells me. A sprinkling of chilli, sea salt, white pepper, garlic and coriander and we're ready to eat.

Ceviche, I discover, is not just a coastal compulsion. The following day, a one-hour flight from Lima in the ancient Inca capital, Cusco, I try

a delicate pink trout ceviche in **Cicciolina** (cicciolinacuzco.com) – along with oil-drizzled, pepper – and chilli-sprinkled alpaca carpaccio.

My base here is the new **Explora** hotel (explora.com), outside Cusco in the Sacred Valley. A sleek wood and glass space cradled in 24 hectares of farmland, there's no TV, radio or WiFi in the rooms, just a window seat and a framed Andean tableau: fields of corn and fluffy-headed quinoa, clusters of adobe houses and peaks swathed in mist.

For breakfast, a porridge of quinoa swimming in hot orange juice with dried apple is surprisingly delicious. This protein-rich super-food, now a western staple, has been dubbed Inca gold and was eaten by the Inca army to sustain it as it marched.

The Sacred Valley takes its name from the Urubamba river which threads through it. The land here, with its cinnamon-coloured soil, is rich and fertile. Today, villagers still grow crops on ancient Incan terraces and use the irrigation systems and canals built by them.

Driving to the Sunday morning market at **Chinchero** I pass villagers ploughing with cattle and fields of blowsy purple-flowered potatoes. At Chinchero trading is still done the traditional way and I watch women bartering beans for bananas. At makeshift cooking stalls people huddle over bowls of steaming chicharrone (fried pork) with crispy potatoes and tutu haucha, an Andean dish of beans, greens, potato and corn dressed with a spicy sauce and seasoned with Maras salt.

Salt has been harvested on the mountainside at nearby Maras for over 500 years. All the work is done by hand as it was by the Incas. More evidence of the Incas' agricultural innovation can be seen at Moray where a series of sunken concentric stone terraces, originally thought

to be a giant amphitheatre, are believed to be one of the first food laboratories, where they experimented with crops at different elevations.

The Spanish also contributed a little innovation to the agricultural landscape here, introducing vines. Down near Ica, 300km south of Lima, **Hacienda Tacama** (tacama.com) claims to be the oldest winery in South America, having been founded by Francisco de Carabantes Tacama in 1540. Today the hacienda – candy floss pink and frilled with flowers – is open for tours and tutored tastings. Owner Luz Maria ushers me in for a lunch paired with the estate's wines and piscos.

To start we have a salad of local lima beans, tomatoes, onions and basil. Then lomo saltado, filet mignon sautéed with ripe tomatoes and onions and flamed with the hacienda's Demonio de los Andes pisco to give it a charred fierceness. For dessert we try tocinno del cielo, a heavenly custard flan (which uses up the leftover yolks after you've whipped up a batch of pisco sours). I go in for seconds and beg for the recipe. It's her grandmother's. She smiles with pride.

Pride in their cuisine has been a long time coming, but now, with the world applauding novoandina's stratospheric rise, Peruvians are finally taking a bow.

HOW TO DO IT

Direct return flights from Gatwick to Lima start from £653 (ba.com). Peruvian specialists Aracari offer 10-day Peru with Flavour journeys from \$4,847 per person including the Urban Eats tour of Lima but excluding flights (aracari.com). More info: peru.travel

