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A taste Of Peru

By Wendy Alperstein

Anyone who has lived or spent time in Lima understands from the savory tip of their tongue the culinary delights that are available from the fancy streets of San Isidro to the more seedy parts of town. Surprisingly, even the tourists who are usually stuck eating \$10 buffets leave town praising the local fare. However, as a tour operator and owner of Magical Cusco tours, who has sent many passengers on the quest for the best \$10 buffet, I knew there was something more to offer to the short term visitors to my country. It has always been easy to sell the magic of Cusco and Macchu Picchu, but it did not seem fair that the true culinary gems were being hoarded by us locals.

What resulted with the tremendous help from the esteemed Chef Gaston Acurio is Magical Cusco Tours Taste of Peru tour. The goal from the beginning was to create a unique culinary experience for tourists visiting Peru, something nobody else was offering. We knew that the major destinations would have to be included, but we were committed to creating a gastronomic component to each stop on the tour. The target was to bring together the best chefs in Peru to teach the basics of the classic Peruvian dishes like Lomo Saltado and ceviche, specially designed tasting menus at the quintessential Peruvian restaurants, and most interesting for me, visits with our chefs to the local markets to pick out the freshest ingredients for the classes.

As luck would have it, we started offering the Taste of Peru around the same time that Peru started developing a true international culinary reputation. In addition, the local support we have received has been nothing less than spectacular. In Lima, Gaston helped to design the tour and developed a 7 course (it was initially 10 courses, but we had to carry people out of the restaurant) tasting menu that is unforgettable.

Humberto Sato, the great Japanese chef and one of the originators of Nobu cuisine also put together a tasting menu at his flagship Costanera 700 that leaves your mouth watering. Chef Cucho La Rosa, the famous ceviche chef, restaurant owner and teacher leads our market visit and our ceviche class. Le Cordon Bleu, and its internationally acclaimed teaching chefs, have opened their kitchen and lead the course of the basics of Peruvian cuisine. As many of the members of the American Canadian Association of Peru (ACAP) recently experienced, we also do a class with the very capable chef Flavio Solorsano at his restaurant Señorío de Surco.

Most of us know that Lima is one of the culinary centers in Latin America. However, one of our greatest challenges was figuring how to share the andean flair for food during the classic stops in Cusco, the Sacred Valley and Macchu Picchu without taking away from the magic of those places. In spite of a lack of sophistication in the local cuisine, the rich bounties from the land are so wonderful that we needed to find a way to showcase them. Making matters more difficult was the fact, as anyone who has visited Cusco can attest, that the standard 4-day tour does not leave a lot of time or energy for leisurely pursuits. Working with Rafael Cassabone, owner of the Inca Grill and MAP Café and other restaurants in Cusco, we put together a cooking class that highlights the potatoes and other basics of the Cusquenian Cuisine. We also have a multi-course "Novo Andina" tasting menu at the beautiful Map Café which in addition to the amazing food offers a chance for a night-time stroll through the Museo de Arte Precolombino.

The results have been mouth watering. The Taste of Peru tour has attracted world renowned chefs, famous restaurateurs and also those regular folks who just love to eat well. We now make a point to include a culinary experience as part of every tour even if it is just one class or one amazing meal.

Peru has so much to offer, so many amazing destinations, but, in my opinion, the food is something special we need to promote as a destination in and of itself.

Please eat well and enjoy the tastes of Peru.

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