



A  
Taste  
of Culture



FOODS OF  
**PERU**

BARBARA STEVEN

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# Foods of Peru

Barbara Sheen

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# A Diverse Land

**P**eru is a land of contrasts. Within its borders are snowcapped mountains, great rivers, huge lakes, vast deserts, high-altitude cloud forests, tropical rainforests, windswept plains, fertile valleys, and sandy beaches that meet the Pacific Ocean. In fact, 89 of the world's 104 ecosystems, places where living and non-living things interact, are found in Peru.

Peru's diverse landscape provides its people with an abundant supply of food. Its markets overflow with fruits, vegetables, seafood, and meats. Peruvian cooks take advantage of this bounty. Yet, there are four staples—potatoes, corn, chili peppers, and seafood—that Peruvian cooks cannot do without. These ingredients

COLOMBIA

# FOOD REGIONS OF PERU

★ Quito

ECUADOR

Gulf of Guayaquil

- Rice 
- Potatoes 
- Coffee Beans 
- Grains 
- Asparagus 
- Corn 
- Sugar Cane 
- Fish 
- Peppers 

PERU

BRAZIL

Lima

Pacific Ocean

BOLIVIA

Lake Titicaca

★ La Paz

CHILE

★ Sucre



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## Ancient Civilizations

Peru was the home of many advanced ancient civilizations. One of the first was the Chinchero culture (6000 BC). This group mummified its dead long before the ancient Egyptians did.

The Chavin culture (1200–400 BC) was another advanced group. These people built the Chavin de Huantar temple in the Peruvian Andes, which is known for its sophisticated engineering.

The Moche (200–700 AD) and Nasca (300–800 AD) cultures arose next. The Moche built great temples. The Nasca etched huge permanent geometric and animal symbols into the desert, known as the Nasca Lines.

Next, came the Inca Empire (1200–1532 AD). The Peruvian city of Cusco was the Incan capital. The Inca also built Machu Pichu (MAH-chu PEE-chu), a magnificent city in the Andes Mountains, which is a tourist site today. The Inca were highly organized and had a sophisticated farming and economic system. They also had a strong army. Their empire extended from Colombia to Chile, an area larger than that of the Roman Empire.

have played a major role in the Peruvian people's diet for thousands of years.

## Thousands of Varieties

Peru has a long history. It is one of the world's great centers of ancient civilizations. The ruins of ancient **pre-Columbian** cities dot the landscape. Potatoes, which originated in Peru, have nourished civilizations here for 8,000 years.



*Nearly 4,000 varieties of potatoes grow in Peru, each with its own taste, shape, and color.*

Worldwide, there are about 5,000 varieties of potatoes. Almost 4,000 of these, in every size and color imaginable, grow in Peru. Most Peruvian supermarkets have two entire aisles just of potatoes.

“Here,” explains Peruvian Guillermo Payet, “are countless baskets of potatoes—red, fat, black and bright orange with pink spots.”<sup>1</sup> Each type tastes different. They can be sweet, tart, bitter, creamy, sticky, starchy, waxy, hearty, or delicate.

Peruvians eat potatoes at almost every meal, in much the same way as other cultures eat bread. They fry potatoes, turn them into pies and brightly colored potato chips, roast them, bake them, boil them, put them in salads, and top them with cheese and spicy sauces.



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They layer cold yellow or blue mashed potatoes with chicken, tuna, or shrimp salad to make causa Limeña (CAH-ooH-sah lee-MAY-nyah), a popular lunch dish. And, they freeze-dry potatoes to make **chuño** (CHOON-yo), a traditional Peruvian specialty.

Chuño may be the earliest form of freeze-dried food. The **Inca**, Peruvian Indians who ruled over a vast South American empire from the 13th to 16th centuries, began making it as a way to preserve potatoes. The process required leaving the potatoes outside where they were exposed to freezing nighttime temperatures and intense sunlight during the day. This cycle, which lasted about five days, caused the potatoes to dry out, harden, and shrink until they looked like small white stones.

The dried potatoes could be kept for months without spoiling. When they were soaked in water, they

*In its preserved state chuño resembles small white stones. Once it is rehydrated, however, chuño cooks and tastes much like any other potato.*



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## Peruvian Potato Salad

This is a simple Peruvian-style potato salad. It can be served hot or cold. In Peru, the chili in the recipe would be ají amarillo. It is hard to find in North America. This recipe uses a serrano pepper instead. Any medium-hot red, yellow, or green chili pepper such as jalapeño or Big Jim chili would work.

### Ingredients

2 medium potatoes, peeled and cut into chunks  
1 large tomato, diced  
1 serrano chili pepper, seeded and diced  
1 tablespoon olive oil  
1 tablespoon red wine vinegar  
1 teaspoon cilantro, chopped  
salt and pepper to taste.

### Directions

1. Put the potatoes in a pot. Cover them with cold water. Cook over medium heat, bringing the water to a boil. Cook until the potatoes are soft. Drain the potatoes well.
  2. Put all the ingredients in a bowl and mix well.
- Serves 2.

softened and rehydrated. Then, they were cooked much like any potato, or they were ground into flour. Chuño was so valuable to the Inca that they used the dried potatoes as a form of payment for their taxes.

Today chuño is available in cans. It is a key ingredient in carapulcra (cah-rah-POOL-crah), a tasty stew that Peruvians have been eating for centuries.

## Choclo

Corn, or **choclo** (CHOH-cloh), as it is known in Peru, was also an important part of the Incan diet. More than that, the Inca revered corn. One of their most important gods was the Corn God. Corn was so vital to Incan lives that their chief, who was believed to be descended from the gods, planted the first corn seeds himself every year.

Corn is still important to Peruvians. One hundred fifty varieties of corn, in every color of the rainbow, grow here.



That is more than anywhere else on Earth. Peruvians boil, steam, roast, bake, grind, dry, and pop corn. In fact, popcorn originated in Peru.

Fried kernels of corn and ears of whole steamed corn are favorite snacks all over Peru.

According to

*Street vendors across Peru can be found selling steamed ears of corn.*

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Peruvian writer Alvaro Ruiz de Somocurcio, “There is nothing more exquisite to eat than steamed corn, soft, toasted and sweet, accompanied with a slice of fresh cheese.”<sup>2</sup>

Corn is also the chief ingredient in casseroles, stews, soups, savory pies, jellies, desserts, and beverages. Inchi cache (EEN-chee CAH-chay), a stew made with chicken, roasted bright-yellow corn, and peanuts, is a popular dish. Chicha morada (CHEE-chah mor-AH-dah), a refreshing drink made with purple corn is another colorful favorite. And, chicha, beer made from fermented corn, has been a popular Peruvian alcoholic drink for centuries.



### **Measuring a Pepper's Heat**

Chili peppers contain a chemical called capsaicin that makes them hot. The more capsaicin in a chili pepper, the hotter it is. To determine a pepper's heat, food scientists use units called Scoville units. These units represent the amount of capsaicin a particular type of chili contains.

Units range from zero to over 1 million. The hottest pepper in the world, the bhut jolokia, also known as a ghost chili, comes from India and contains over 1 million Scoville units. The Mexican red habanero chili is the second hottest. It contains about 500,000 Scoville units. By comparison, ají amarillo contains about 30,000 units, while bell peppers contain zero.

## The Color of the Sun

**Ají** (ah-HEE), or chili peppers, are another ancient and indispensable part of Peruvian cooking. They brighten already-colorful Peruvian dishes, and give everything a fresh, zesty flavor. The hot peppers have been part of the Peruvian diet since 8000 BC. Archaeologists have found their remains in caves, and drawings of them on ancient pottery.

Three hundred different varieties of chili peppers grow here, each with its own unique size, shape, color, and heat intensity. The most popular is **ají amarillo** (ah-HEE ah-mah-REE-yo), or yellow chili. These long, slender peppers have a delicate, spicy flavor. Their brilliant-yellow color, which turns deep orange as



*The majority of Peruvian dishes contain some variety of chili peppers.*



it matures, gives many Peruvian dishes a distinctive sunny hue. Ají amarillo is so popular that bowls of **salsa** (SAHL-sah), or sauce made with the peppers combined with onions, lime juice, and spices, are served with almost every meal. Diners add the sauce to anything and everything.

“Just add a little ají to soups, stews, meats, or cebiches [a raw seafood dish] to give a wonderful kick to the food,”<sup>3</sup> says author Maria Baez Kijac.

Peruvian cooks not only use the peppers in salsa, they add sliced fresh peppers to salads, stews, and fish dishes. They bake them stuffed with shrimp and cheese. And, they grind them into a paste or powder, which they use as seasoning. There are few Peruvian dishes



## Salsa Criolla

Salsa criolla is a popular Peruvian sauce. It can be used as a dip or added to food as a spice. Peruvians usually use ají amarillo in this salsa. The following recipe contains jalapeño peppers, which are easier to find in North America.

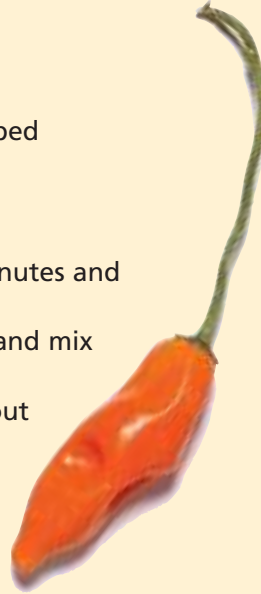
### Ingredients

2 jalapeño peppers, seeded and minced  
1 small red onion, diced  
juice of 1 large lime  
1 teaspoon red wine vinegar  
½ teaspoon garlic powder  
2 tablespoons cilantro, chopped  
salt and pepper to taste

### Directions

1. Soak the onion in cold water for 20 minutes and drain.
  2. Combine all the ingredients in a bowl and mix well.
  3. Cover the bowl and refrigerate for about one hour.
- Makes 1 cup.

*Ají amarillo is traditionally used in this salsa recipe.*



that do not contain chili peppers. Yet, Peruvian food is not overly spicy. Peruvians value chili peppers more for their delicate flavor than for their heat. In fact, most Peruvian cooks remove the peppers' veins and seeds and simmer them in water before adding them to recipes. This lessens their heat.

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## Seafood

Seafood, too, gives Peruvian foods delicate flavor. It has always played a key role in Peruvian life. The Humboldt Current, a cold, nutrient-rich ocean current that supports all sorts of marine life, flows off the coast of Peru. Peruvian coastal waters brim over with edible water creatures, as does the Amazon River, the second longest river in the world, which flows through Peru and Lake Titicaca (Tee-tee-CAH-cah), the world's highest lake, which is located on the border of Peru and Bolivia. Eels, scallops, shrimps, squid, mussels, octopuses, lobsters, piranhas, cod, sea bass, and red snapper are just a few of the hundreds of water creatures that inhabit Peruvian waters. More species of fish and shellfish are found in Peruvian waters than anywhere else on Earth.

With so much seafood readily available, it is not surprising that archaeologists, people who study ancient

*With the close proximity of the Pacific Ocean and the Amazon River, fresh seafood is abundant in Peru.*



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cultures, have found piles of fish bones in the ruins of ancient villages and tombs. Ancient coastal people such as the Moche (MOH-chay) built little reed canoes for fishing, which in modern form are still used today. They ate fresh seafood morning, noon, and night. And, they preserved fish by smoking or sun-drying it. They took the preserved fish inland where they traded it with other tribes for **llama** wool.

For modern Peruvians, only the freshest seafood will do.

“The fish go from the sea to the kitchen to the table in rapid order,”<sup>4</sup> explains author Copeland Marks. The idea of eating day-old or frozen fish is unthinkable to Peruvians.

Fresh seafood is grilled, broiled, boiled, baked, fried, steamed, and eaten raw. It is turned into thick chowders and stews, thrown into omelets, steamed in banana leaves, featured in salads, and topped with spicy or creamy sauces. In Peru, according to Marks, “seafood is king, and so are the myriad [many] numbers of recipes. ... Peruvians can be thankful for the quantity, quality, and variety of their natural bounty from the sea.”<sup>5</sup>

Peruvians can also be thankful for the many other fresh foods that abound here. Flavorful chili peppers, brightly colored corn and potatoes, and fresh seafood are among everyone’s favorites. These ingredients have played an essential part in Peruvian life for thousands of years.



# A Cultural Blend

**M**any different cultural groups have played a role in shaping Peru. Migrating tribal people first arrived in Peru more than 8,000 years ago. Historians say these people came from Asia or Polynesia, a group of islands in the South Pacific. They built great cities, pyramids, and irrigation canals, created beautiful works of art, and developed far-reaching trade networks and complex forms of government.

In 1532 Spanish **conquistador** Francisco Pizarro arrived, seeking gold and riches. He claimed Peru for Spain. Spanish settlers soon followed. They introduced many new foods to Peru. Many of the settlers intermarried with native Peruvians, creating a cultural group known as Cri-



## The Columbian Exchange

The Columbian exchange is the name given to the interchange of animals, plants, culture, and diseases between Europe and the Americas, following Christopher Columbus's voyage in 1492.

The Europeans introduced to the Americas cattle, sheep, pigs, chickens, wheat, rice, onions, citrus fruit, sugarcane, coffee, olives, and grapes, among other food stuffs. They also brought horses, which became an important means of transportation for Native Americans, and a new religion, Christianity. Unfortunately, they also introduced diseases that were unknown to Native Americans, too. One such disease, smallpox, killed 200,000 Inca.

In exchange, the Europeans brought home such items as corn, potatoes, yams, tomatoes, chili peppers, strawberries, pumpkins, squash, various nuts, cocoa (a bean used to make chocolate), pineapple, and tobacco.

ollos (Cree-OH-yos), or Creoles. The Spanish and wealthy Creoles brought African slaves to Peru to work on vast plantations. When slavery ended, Chinese laborers were brought to Peru. Immigrants from other countries, such as Italy, France, and Japan, also made Peru their home.

Peruvian cooking is a mixture of the foods and cooking styles of these different groups. Favorite dishes such as **ceviche** (say-VEE-chay), lomo saltado (LOH-moh sahl-TAH-doh), ají de gallina (ah-HEE day gah-YEE-nah), and **cuy** (COO-ee) are delicious examples of this cultural blend.

*Ceviche is one of Peru's most well known dishes.*

## Ceviche

Ceviche is Peru's national dish. It is made of cubes of raw fish or shellfish that are spiced with chili peppers, red onion, and salt, and marinated in lime juice for about a half hour. Acids in the lime juice



change the look and texture of the fish turning it from pink to white, much like heat does, but the fish is not actually “cooked” in the same way as it is with heat.

Peruvians use only the freshest fish to make ceviche. Less-than-fresh fish and seafood tastes mushy and can cause food poisoning. But this is not a problem in Peru where, according to Claudia Reano, who grew up in Peru, “a fish will be cubed, marinated, and put in a bowl sometimes less than an hour after being caught.”<sup>6</sup>

Peruvians have been making ceviche in some form



## **Ceviche**

Ceviche can be made with any type of fresh fish or seafood. Since eating raw fish presents a danger of food poisoning, the fish must be very fresh and not frozen. This minimizes but does not entirely eliminate the threat of food poisoning. Peruvians also make ceviche with mushrooms. One pound of sliced white mushrooms can be substituted for fish. Lemon juice can be substituted for lime juice, or for a sweeter taste, use three-quarters of a cup of lime or lemon juice and a quarter cup orange juice.

### **Ingredients**

- 1 pound white fish of choice (tilapia, sole, bass), rinsed and cut into 1-inch chunks
- 1 small red onion, thinly sliced
- 1 tablespoon cilantro, chopped
- 1 jalapeño pepper, seeded and chopped
- 1 cup lime juice
- 1 tablespoon minced garlic
- salt and pepper to taste

for thousands of years. Peru's earliest native people made ceviche by marinating fish and chilis in an acidic native fruit known as tumbo (TOOM-boh). The Spanish brought limes and onions to Peru, which were soon added to the recipe.

Ceviche tastes tart and spicy, and smells faintly of the sea. It is traditionally served on a bed of lettuce accompanied by a small piece of corn on the cob, a chunk of sweet potato, and boiled yuca, a starchy na-

### Directions

1. Soak the onion in cold water for 20 minutes, then drain.
  2. Mix the lime juice, garlic, chili pepper, onions, cilantro, and salt and pepper.
  3. Put the fish in a bowl. Pour the juice mix over the fish. Make sure all the fish is covered. Cover the bowl and refrigerate for at least 2–3 hours. The fish is ready to eat when it has turned firm and opaque.
  4. Serve ceviche on a lettuce leaf accompanied by corn, sweet potatoes, or avocado slices and crackers.
- Serves 4.



*Ceviche is shown here with a side of cancha.*

tive vegetable. A bowl of cancha (CAHN-cha), a type of popcorn made from giant white corn kernels toasted in oil and salt, is served on the side. Peruvians often end the meal with tiger's milk, the juice that remains after the ceviche is eaten.

Cevicherias (say-vee-chay-REE-ahs), restaurants that specialize in ceviche, can be found all over Peru. They are a popular meeting place for hungry Peruvians who cannot get enough of their national dish.

## A Touch of China

Lomo saltado is another national favorite. This colorful dish consists of juicy slices of steak cooked with ají amarillo, tomatoes, and purple onions, seasoned with ginger and soy sauce, then topped with fried potatoes. It combines native Peruvian ingredients with beef, which was introduced to Peru by the Spanish, along with ginger and soy sauce, popular Chinese seasonings,



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and the Chinese method of cooking food rapidly over high heat known as stir-frying.

Chinese immigrants began arriving in Peru in 1850. They came to work on railroads and plantations. By 1880, about 300,000 Chinese people were living in Peru. Eventually, many opened restaurants in which they combined fresh local foods with Chinese ingredients and cooking methods.

The results were wildly popular. Today, there are about 5,000 Chinese-Peruvian, or **chifa** (CHEE-fah), restaurants in Lima, Peru's capital. The food they serve is different from any other food in the world.

According to Peruvian writer Mariella Mazzei, "It is unique not only because of its authentic origin, but also due to its wonderful fusion of flavors, colors, exquisite aromas, textures and Chinese and Peruvian ingredients. ... Chinese cooks understood the richness of our popular kitchen and learned to prepare Peruvian dishes flavored with slight Asian touches."<sup>7</sup>

*Chinese-Peruvian restaurants, or chifa, are very popular in Peru.*



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