

## PERUVIAN CUISINE



Michael van Warmelo, executive chef of Concept Creations, which is opening a Peruvian restaurant. The country's cuisine is garnering critical acclaim. Photo: Dickson Lee

# Peru takes on the world



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To some, guinea pigs are adorable, fluffy pets. But in Peru, *cuy* as they are called, are a staple food that has been eaten since Incan times. Two paintings of *The Last Supper*, in churches in Cusco and Lima, depict a whole roasted guinea pig. A good protein source, the rodents are low in fat, easy to raise in small spaces, and require little preparation before cooking, save for removing the hair. They also multiply rapidly.

Sophie Coe, a culinary historian, wrote in *America's First Cuisines* that two males and 20 females are said to be able to provide a family with a *cuy* a day. Will eating guinea pig become the next big global food trend? That's unlikely, given that many consider them pets.

But Peruvian cuisine is tipped to be the hot new craze. It's a blend of indigenous cooking, with Spanish, African, Chinese, Japanese and Italian influences. Peruvian restaurants in New York, London and Los Angeles have recently opened to rave reviews.

Lima's Astrid Y Gastón is number 35 on the Top 50 Best Restaurant list this year, a rise of eight places. What's more, celebrity chef Ferran Adria is shooting a documentary about the cuisine. "The future of

gastronomy is being cooked up in Peru," he said in *Details* magazine.

Recent guest chef at Nobu in Hong Kong, Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, is introducing Amazonian ingredients such as edible clays and algae to a wider audience.

Hong Kong restaurant group Concept Creations is picking up on the trend. It opens the city's first Peruvian restaurant, Chicha, tomorrow. "Peruvian food is vibrant, with rich depth," says Viviano Romito, co-owner of Concept Creations. While *cuy* will not be on the menu, there are plenty of other definers of the cuisine, such as *cebiche* (or *ceviche*), *tiradito*, *causa*, *anticuchos* and *picacones*.

"Ceviche is now popular all over the world," says chef Nobu Matsuhisa, who first introduced his diners to the dish of raw seafood marinated in citrus acids 25 years ago. What makes Peruvian *cebiche* different is the addition of *choclo* (indigenous corn with extra large kernels), sweet potato and *aji* (chilli).

"Aji in its many forms is used a lot, it is an essence of the cuisine, which is not overly spicy. It adds depth, colour and aroma," says executive chef of Concept Creations, Michael van Warmelo.

Raw seafood is also the star in *tiradito*. Reflecting the Japanese influence it consists of sashimi-like

slices of seafood that are prepared like *cebiche* and served with a delicately spicy sauce.

The marinade for both dishes is called *leche de tigre* (tiger's milk) and it is common for a glass of the liquid to be served on the side. It can be a dish in its own right, with the addition of fish stock for body and usually garnished with cooked seafood, such as prawns. It is also consumed as a fortifying shot to which Andean herbs are sometimes added, and has gained a reputation in Peru as a hangover cure, an aphrodisiac, and an aid for men who need a performance enhancer.

The humble potato was first domesticated in Peru, and there are thousands of varieties. So it's no surprise that potatoes feature in the cuisine. Its versatility is represented in a dish called *causa*, which uses the buttery, yellow fleshed *papa amarilla*. The spud can take many forms – mashed, filled, rolled, or layered, combined with ingredients such as avocado, tomato, egg, chicken, and seafood.

It's typically served cold, and *aji*, onion and lime often feature. At Chicha, the potato is whipped and topped with tuna, squid or crab.

A favoured dessert is *picacones* – ring-shaped pumpkin and/or sweet potato fritters. "One bite will cement a love for this dish," says Van Warmelo.



Wagyu beef on the rocks (above). The rocks are an edible clay mixed with root vegetables such as parsnip and taro root. Gourmet guinea pig (below) in Cusco, Peru. Photo: Corbis



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FERRAN ADRIA, CHEF