

A taste of Ecuador: From the Pacific to the Andes, to the Amazon

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From the Pacific to the Andes, to the Amazon

A taste of Ecuador

By Lloyd Wipf

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Ecuadorian food was often described as “ugly” and “not pretty.” That was not the case. Food was always presented on brightly coloured dishes.

“I hope you enjoy the plain empanadas and tasteless tamales,” a friend texted me a few days before I left for Ecuador.

I didn't really know how to respond. For one thing, I had no understanding of Ecuadorian cuisine, aside from a few dishes. So I had no idea what to expect on this food adventure. Second, when I was asked to write about Ecuadorian food, my reaction was like that of my friend. Ecuadorian food? Really?

However, as a lover of food and all things food-related I quickly realized that I was being a snob. There is beauty in all cuisines, and Ecuador is one of the most bio-diverse countries on the planet. Farmers grow vast varieties of fruits and vegetables, which are in season all year long. The food had to be amazing because everything is always fresh, and available at markets everywhere.

Food is wonderful. It wields a power very few of us truly understand, and when my friend or I roll our eyes at the mere mention of Ecuadorian food – or any other food that is not French or Italian – we undermined that power without ever giving it a second thought.

So I set out to learn as much as I could from blogs and recipe books. But there is only so much you can get from other people's opinions and interpretations. Something may sound good, but to fully appreciate a dish you need to see it, smell it and of course, taste it. Then begins the analyses. How do I react to the texture? What spices and flavours do I detect? Are there nuances a carry-over from a dish tasted previously? There is an entire realm of things to take into account that blogs cannot provide.

My first stop in Ecuador was at the culinary institute of the Universidad San Francisco de Quito, where I was hoping to get a well rounded perspective of Ecuadorian food. I had found numerous blogs that placed Ecuadorian food on par with Mexican and Peruvian cuisines, and I wondered why the export of Ecuadorian food was virtually non-existent.



Plantain are a staple in the Ecuadorian diet. There are countless ways of preparing this starchy fruit. Simply fried, mashed and refried is most popular.

“Because Ecuadorian food is ugly,” a young trainee-chef told me. “Just look at it; it looks disgusting.”

He went on to say that local people have always eaten these foods in a certain way, but foreigners take one look at it and want nothing of it because it doesn’t look “pretty.”

I was taken aback by this attitude, especially from a native Ecuadorian. A nation’s cuisine is the foundation of its culture and heritage. For someone who has chosen to build a career in the culinary arts to be so dismissive of his own heritage was surprising to say the least.

So, I was even more disturbed when Anna Teresa Perez, the lead instructor and dean of the institute, echoed those sentiments.

“Well it (Ecuadorian food) is ugly to look at,” she said. “But there is a current generation of chefs trying to change that. Our food is not at the same level as North American or European cuisine is, and that is something that we are trying to change here at the university.”

In an effort to make traditional Ecuadorian food more appealing to the foreign palate, students are challenged to reinvent traditional Ecuadorian dishes, not only for taste but for presentation. Ever heard the expression, We eat with our eyes first?

However, the fact that, at an educational level, appearance seems to trump taste is simply mind-boggling. What was even more disturbing was that these Ecuadorians, in the business of teaching and advancing the food culture in Quito and Ecuador, held the same narrow-minded attitudes I had.

I had heard all I wanted to hear from trained chefs and professionals. I didn't come all this way to eat at five-star restaurants, and talk to chefs pursuing a high-end clientele. I wanted real, authentic food made by people who have been making it for generations. Cooking with recipes that had been passed down year after year, generation after generation. Made by people for whom cooking meant survival, and not social status.

Luckily, I met a guy who knew just what I was searching for.

Gustavo Canas is a botanist by education and a guide by trade. He has a vast knowledge of South American history and loves food as much as I do. On a tour of the Old City of Quito that he was guiding, I mentioned to him what I was doing in Quito. He immediately offered to take me to a few places where I could get authentic Ecuadorian cuisine.

There are very few people who know Quito like Gustavo knows Quito. He is very passionate about his city and knows its history better than anyone I have met. He points out numerous places of historic value as we make our way along a cobblestone street, snaking up the side of a steep hill.

We talk a little bit about Ecuadorian food, but I try not to distract him too much from navigating through the crazy traffic of Quito, strangely we didn't see any accidents.

"Because we don't want to hurt each other," he answers when I ask why there aren't more traffic casualties.

I saw Quito as very few tourists ever see a city. From cobblestone back roads that seemed to endlessly snake and climb up the sides of surrounding mountains.

Gustavo seems to know almost every plant and tree we come across, and knows just how some these plants are used in cooking. I begin to realize just how diverse is the food of this nation.

Ecuadorian food varies by region. The cuisine is built on what is necessary to survive and what is available. High in the Andes, carbohydrates play a huge role in the diet. At above 3,000 metres, a person requires a lot of slow-burning energy to get through a tough work day. That energy largely comes from corn, cassava or *yucca*, rice, plantain and potatoes. The potato is native to the Andes region and more than 150 varieties can be found in Ecuador.



Pescado encocado translated is “fish in coconut sauce.” Traditionally a coastal dish of fish in coconut milk and tomato.

The plantain is similar to the banana, and can be found on every Ecuadorian table at every meal. From simply cooked and mashed, to mashed then fried into crispy chips (*patacones*), to stuffed with cheese and chorizo dumplings (*bolon de verde*) and literally anything else you can think of, the plantain truly is an Ecuadorian essential. The dish I had consisted of fried pieces of semi-ripe

plantain with a warm, peanut buttery side that was a mix between a crumble and a dust. The method of eating this dish was fun. You had to smash the plantain piece into the peanut crumble before you ate it, a unique finger food.

Probably one of the more famous dishes in Ecuadorian cuisine is the *fritada de chanco* or braised pork fritada. Not to be mistaken with the Italian *frittata*, this is pork braised in a mixture of water and orange juice with onion, garlic and cumin until the juices are absorbed and the pork browns in the remaining mixture of fat and spices. It is normally served with numerous sides. Sometimes the plate is layered with three and four carbohydrates such as plantain, cassava, potatoes, rice or corn. The dish includes avocado, a tomato-and-onion salsa and a hot sauce made with *aji* peppers – is better than Frank’s Red Hot Sauce, Tabasco or ketchup on any given day.

Gustavo tells me that the place where we will be trying the fritada is the most popular one in the city for this dish.

The place is certainly not a restaurant; it is not even a food stall. It is literally a hole in the wall. Or, as Gustavo calls it, a “*huecas*.” As we arrive, I look about for a sign to announce where we are, what the place is called. There is nothing to indicate that we are about to eat something.

There is a plump woman standing behind what seems to be a large chafing dish, nibbling on what I presume we are about to have. Gustavo gives our order and, few minutes later, we have a styrofoam plate, heaped with crispy, delicious pieces of pork, fried plantain, corn, avocado, tomato-and-onion salsa, and a few other starchy vegetables. As I am devouring the food, I cannot help but think back to what I heard at the university. The food may not be pretty, but it does what food is meant to: feed the hungry. For \$5, (Ecuador uses the U.S. dollar) this massive plate of food does not need to be pretentious, it is cooked by a house-wife who has been doing this her entire life. She cooks to survive.

The woman in the stall is obviously doing something right. The street in this rundown neighbourhood is lined with cars – some very expensive.

“All here for the food,” Gustavo remarked.

“All the politicians and rich people who work in government come here to eat.” He points to the long line of black SUVs with blacked out windows. “They all know that this is the best place. The food here is made with heart, and they know it’s good.”

A few minutes later, we are walking through Old Quito into a quaint little shop with sparse decoration, a few wooden tables and very dim lighting.

We are here to try the *guatitas*, or cow-stomach soup, another local favourite and considered a national dish. *Guatitas* is a stew in which the main ingredient is pieces of tripe. Gustavo assures me that is cleaned thoroughly, but when our bowl of brown gravy and cow stomach arrives, I have reservations about trying it.

The first mouthful is as much a mental experience as it is a tasting one. The stew's base is a thick nutty blend of peanut and potato, with avocado. It is somewhat bland, but spoon in some hot sauce and the flavour is punched up a few notches. Now for some tripe pieces. The texture takes some getting used to; it is very chewy, and has an interesting mouthfeel that I'm not sure I enjoy. The meat itself has no flavour and depends solely on the sauce to survive. (The "nose-to-tail" revolution overtaking Western cuisine seems to have missed the call on cow stomach. I am very happy about that.)

Soups are a big part of the cuisine in Ecuador. There is a vast selection, from traditional seafood soups on the coast to meat soups in the Andean Highlands. Ecuadorian soups are made with a variety of different things that don't normally jump out at you as soup ingredients, like cow stomach. Soups are made with plantains, with quinoa, with fava beans, with cow feet. There is even a soup called *caldo de guanchaca* (possum soup). Soups are a must-have at every lunch, and are always served with avocado and that indispensable *aji criollo* hot sauce made with *tomate de arbol* (tomatillo).

Having tasted a few of the essential meals that it takes to survive in the mountain regions, I was now ready to try some seafood from the coast.

Across the city, we stop at a small restaurant for a mid-afternoon meal. The rustic feel of the room is reminiscent of an old country cabin. The creaky floors and heavy wooden furniture, contrasted with the bright window trimmings make it very comforting, and equally comforting is our main course, *pescado encocado* (fish in coconut sauce.)

The quintessential coastal dish features giant butterfly shrimp seasoned with citrus and spices and then cooked in a sauce of cilantro, onions, tomatoes, bell peppers and coconut milk, and immediately had me thinking of butter chicken. There was certainly an element of Indian fusion with notes of coriander, paprika and cloves. It is served with a fragrant basmati rice.

"There are a number of variations to this dish," Gustavo says. "The sauce is a base for a lot of dishes, but it's all in how you extract the flavours that make a dish stand out."



There are many variations of ceviche. Ecuadorian shrimp ceviche is similar to a cold soup.

Our final meal – the one I was waiting for – was the *ceviche*. There are many variations of this classic South American specialty such as lobster, mango, octopus, and white fish. But perhaps the most famous is the shrimp ceviche. One bite of this bright, citrusy and spicy cold soup and

the senses come alive, and I am transported to the beach. The elements of orange and lime are an explosion of flavour, and the cold shrimp pop slightly when bitten. Served with sides of plantain chips and *chifles* (Ecuadorian cornuts), this dish is light, refreshing and everything I was expecting.

Ecuadorian *ceviche* is different from that of its neighbours to the south. The difference between Ecuadorian ceviche and Peruvian ceviche is that Ecuadorians prefer to slightly blanch the seafood before completing the cooking process, (*denaturing*) in citrus juices. The blanching liquid, a seafood broth, is then added to orange and lime juice with onions, cilantro and spicy peppers. The marinating juices are served with the fish, making it more of a soup, whereas in Peru the dish is much dryer, much to the detriment of the overall dish. The flavour is in the juices.

To cap the day, Gustavo insists that we visit one more restaurant. The sun has sunk behind the Andes, so I was unsure of where we are. Deep inside a Quito suburb, we stop at a small café; a cabin with a thatched roof, with furniture entirely of wood.

We are served a warm tea and corn bread. The tea is made of numerous different flowers and leaves. It smells wonderful, but has a slight soapy finish – from the flowers I assume. The cornbread, is thick and pasty, steamed inside a corn husk.

The snack is light and refreshing. The right end to a day packed with food, knowledge and experiences.

If you happen to go to Ecuador, and you're looking for a food adventure, don't be afraid to eat at little out-of-the-way places. Eat where the locals do if you really want a taste of Ecuador.