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EDITORIAL

Bolivia is hardly famous for its food, internationally speaking. For its mountains, geographical diversity, and affordability? Sure, but not so much for its gastronomy. Travelers often come and go home unimpressed by Bolivian cuisine without giving it a proper chance. But there's more than meets the eye here (or rather more than meets the nose and tongue), and with some research and mild risk taking one can end up pleasantly surprised at Bolivia's hidden culinary secrets.

Of course, it's *de rigueur* to cover the basics. We partake in celebrating the 'Year of the Quinoa', by looking into its lesser-known health properties. We turn to coca, to discover whether this traditional-leaf-turned-narcotic-precursor can viably be turned into food. And no local food tour could be complete without a wander through La Paz's Mercado Rodriguez, perhaps better known for its colourful produce than for the slumber, chaos and litter which are its essence. And potatoes, of course. Potatoes. Bolivia has over 4000 species of them, but one of our journalists still believes they're boring. Will the elusive charm of this local favourite win him over? Perhaps.

Yet there are some less-likely candidates on this month's menu. Being landlocked is not a problem for fish lovers here; there are plenty in Lake Titicaca, into which we plunge to learn about its most famous transplant: the trout. Never heard of Bolivian wine? You will. We travel to the south of the country to get a glimpse into the future of Bolivian high-altitude wine. And who ever thought Bolivia has its own cake-making tradition? We follow the extravagant quinceañeras to learn about the cakes these debutantes commission to mark their sweet entry into womanhood.

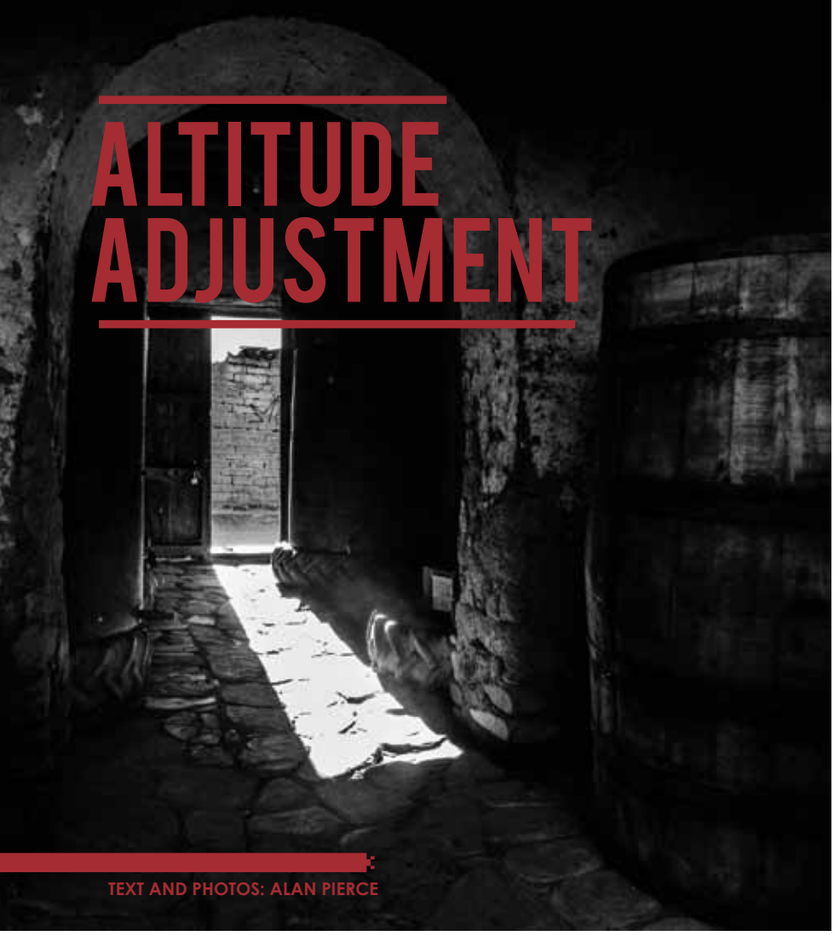
There's not a single McDonald's in Bolivia, though as it's been almost a decade since their departure, we figured we'd stop celebrating and ask ourselves what didn't work out for them. And, Pachamama forgive, could they make a return? We're fine with McDoñas for now, thank you very much Ronald. Golden Arches aside, there is a new player in the local fine dining scene. We eat at Gustu, Claus Meyer's latest creation which follows in the footsteps of a three-times voted Best Restaurant in the World. Kind of a big deal.

No sooner did we start this issue we knew we'd only take a slice off the vast food pie this country has to offer. We're left wanting to write about api, salteñas, fried chicken, bolivian beers, Singani, llama meat, anticuchos, silpancho, llajwa. So this will have to be Volume 1 in a series of issues about food. Gracias, and buen provecho.

N.B. Several Spanish and Aymara words are marked in **bold** throughout this issue
Their meanings can be found in our glossary

GLOSSARY

AGUAS VERTIENTES	Spring waters
ALTIPLANO	The Andean high plateau extending throughout the western region of Bolivia
BOTES DE REMO	Rowing boats
CHOLITA	Indigenous woman in traditional dress and bowler hat
CHUÑO	Freeze-dried product obtained by exposing a variety of potatoes to very low night temperatures, freezing them, and subsequently exposing them to the intense sunlight of the day
COMIDA RÁPIDA	Fast food
CREMA DE LECHE	Cream skimmed from milk
FERIA 16 DE JULIO	El Alto Market, said to be the largest fleamarket in South America
ISLAS FLOTANTES	Floating islands
LANCHA	Motor boar
LOCO	Crazy
MATE DE COCA	Coca tea
PACHAKUTI	Time/Space upheaval
PARCELA DE QUINUA	Quinoa plot
PESQ'E CON LECHE Y AHOGADO	Quinoa based dish with milk and a rich and spicy sauce
PIJCHEO	The ceremonial chewing of coca leaves
PRODUCTORES	Reproducers
TARIJEÑOS	From the city of Tarija
TAXISTA	Taxi driver
TOTORA	A reed found in Lake Titicaca, used to build the floating islands
VALLE	Valley



ALTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

TEXT AND PHOTOS: ALAN PIERCE

WITHIN A COUNTRY LARGELY UNFAMILIAR WITH THE WORLD OF WINE, SUCCESS FOR THE BOLIVIAN WINE INDUSTRY MAY DEPEND ON REINVENTING BOLIVIAN CULTURE ITSELF.

'*I don't care for wine, but many people who come here do*'. Fresh off the aeroplane, and flush with an eager journalistic naiveté to discover the people's love for wine in Bolivia's wine country, my taxi driver's words were perhaps the best introduction I could have asked for. Enigmatic at best, though decidedly apathetic, Bolivia's relationship to wine reflects both the traditional mentality of a nation, and the ambitious and determined will to change it.

I'll be the first to say that I am no wine expert, but perhaps this is what makes me qualified to explore Bolivia's wine industry. For most Bolivians, an appreciation or understanding of wine is rare. So, like most Bolivian tourists who venture to Tarija and el **Valle** de la Concepción in the heart of Bolivian wine country, I did so with limited knowledge of the complexities of the craft, in part gained by living in the winemaking Sonoma Valley in California.

Bolivia has some of the highest wine-growing regions in the world, between 1.600 and 3.000 metres above sea level. The popular Bolivian wine branding slogan 'Vinos de Altura', highlights this distinction. According to the winery representatives I spoke with, the altitude gives Bolivian wine characteristics unique to the country.

Cristian Villamor, owner and manager of a boutique winery called Tierra Roja, explains: 'Due to closer proximity to the sun, the plants behave differently; they take on different characteristics. There is a higher concentration of tastes and aromas. A recent study even showed that wine made at altitude has higher concentrations of resveratrol, an antioxidant with well-established health benefits'.

The Spanish conquistadores and Jesuit monks who produced wine in Bolivia in the late sixteenth century certainly didn't have its health benefits in mind; however, the pressures of modern market-based production make such knowledge highly valuable, if one has the savvy to highlight it for marketing purposes.

Until relatively recently, the Bolivian wine industry didn't bother to market itself internationally, and exports of wine abroad along with tourism to its wine country were untapped economic arenas. New varietals, though, were introduced a few decades ago by pioneering viticulturists, and an era of experimentation and adaptation began, initiating a significant turning point for the industry.

'The 1970s marked the beginning of industrial wine production in Bolivia', explains Mauricio Hoyos, commercial manager at the Aranjuez winery. 'A bigger perspective, that of commercialization, began to take hold and has expanded every year since'.

Today, massive billboards adorn the walls surrounding the airport's baggage conveyor belts, beckoning newly transplanted travelers to enjoy a glass of Bolivia's finest. However, such flashy display of tourist propaganda was not always Tarija's forte. In fact, many **tarijeños** clearly remember a time not so long ago when wine didn't provide tourists with a destination in southern Bolivia.

'I've lived in el Valle my whole life', recounts a different taxi driver as we bounce along the dirt road to La Concepción vineyard. 'When I was a kid there were almost no tourists here for the wine. But every year the numbers have grown'.

Today, Tarija's bevy of daily 'Wine Route' tours, which take tourists to various wineries for tastings and viticulture education, demonstrate the wine destination the region has become. While there is still ample room for growth (in 2010, Bolivia ranked just forty-seventh in wine production by country), the fact that Tarija is a wine destination at all in Bolivia is somewhat remarkable given the formidable cultural obstacles to such progress.

At one of the first wineries to receive tourists (starting back in 1975), Bodegas y Viñedos La Concepción, tourism manager Fabiola Mejíz tells me of the early history of the industry, 'It was difficult to enter into the Bolivian market because the people didn't have that culture. In the past, wine was mostly thought of as something to get drunk with, which made it difficult to introduce a wine culture where wine is considered more for special occasions, or to pair with the food you are having for dinner'.

Bolivians consume very little wine, just over a litre of wine per person per year, a paltry drop on the palate compared to the fifty-four litres that a French citizen will consume on average. And yet, the daunting task of creating a tourism industry for wine in Bolivia was perhaps the most straightforward task in the development of its wine culture. The peculiarities of the Bolivian mindset may have been, and continue to be, the most stubborn component preventing more rapid growth of a wine culture in Tarija and among the people of Bolivia.

'A Bolivian idiosyncrasy is to always value foreign products over the national ones', says Franz Molina, commercial manager and oenologist at Bodegas Kuhlman, another winery in Tarija. 'It's something cultural—many Bolivians tend to think what is foreign is better'.

The task of the Bolivian wine industry, then, involves developing a sophisticated and successful wine culture within a national culture that has historically underappreciated the role of Bolivian wine in daily life. To create such a shift in cultural mentality has proven understandably difficult.

'Sure, the market is stable, but it does not show a strong growth like it does among other products', laments Molina. From 2007 to 2010, Bolivia's wine production experienced little increase in the amount of annual litres produced. Even though the industry has been trying to create something authentically Bolivian—a Bolivian experience and a Bolivian product—growth in the Bolivian market remains stubbornly slow.

To add one more element to this roadblock, Mejíz tells me, 'Another difficulty in creating an authentic wine culture is simply the economic aspect of it. Much more often than not, people in Bolivia will opt for the cheapest wine rather than a more expensive, higher-quality variety.'

Even though the industry has been trying to create something authentically Bolivian, growth in the Bolivian market remains stubbornly slow

And this economic hesitance isn't limited to just the general populace. According to Mejíz, the Bolivian government has also been reluctant to provide much in the way of comprehensive incentives, infrastructure, or support in tourism marketing to help develop the wine industry nationally or internationally.

As my taxi nears La Concepción, the road somehow reaches a new level of bumpiness, and my driver adds, 'If the government would take more notice of wine tourism,

they would support el Valle more—for example, by paving the roads. This would help support the local economy and quality of life'.

But as my time in Tarija came to a close, I marveled at the level of development that wine tourism does seem to possess in the area. While it appears the progress hasn't been easy, it certainly has been made, and ambitious groundwork for future innovation continues to be put in place.

Recently, in partnership with a Dutch export development agency, a group of Bolivian wineries joined together to strategically map out a plan to improve and increase wine exports from the country. Called 'Wines of Bolivia', this coalition has established a range of objectives for the future, including a PR campaign to establish the image of Bolivia as a producer of wines and to provide logistic support and assistance in the international market.

Of course, as the industry looks to the future, the number of wineries and level of production is still nowhere near close to the neighbouring wine giants Argentina and Chile. But while Bolivia may never have the land mass or resources to compete with the big players in international markets, it has experienced a healthy 10 percent industry growth as of late, and it exports to countries as distant as Mexico, Switzerland and Spain.

According to Molina, part of this success is quite simple. In talking about his company's champagne line, 'It starts with quality—we have to make sure the quality is good. Nobody believes that Bolivia makes champagne, but when they try it, they think it is from somewhere else. They are impressed with the taste, and when they are told it is Bolivian, they are astonished'.

Some of Bolivia's wines have also won recognition in international competitions in a variety of categories. If anything can revert a cultural inferiority complex, it is such esteemed recognition by one's peers in the industry. And yet, a more validating measure, and one certainly more enduring, must be brought about from within the country itself. 'Above all else, we want the loyalty of the Bolivian consumer', emphasises Mejíz. And perhaps this will ultimately be the strongest catalyst in shifting the 'idiosyncrasies' of the Bolivian mindset and accelerating the growth of Bolivia's wine industry.

In a cloud of dust my car skids to a stop in front of the office at the vineyard of La Concepción and my **taxista** tells me, 'The people of el Valle feel the wine culture is very good for the town. Almost all the families here work in the wine industry in some way. Our quality of life is much better because of this, and this can be true nationally as well—if more people came to know the wine'.

Before, wine was mostly thought of as something to get drunk with, which made it difficult to introduce a wine culture where wine is considered more for special occasions, or to pair with the food you are having for dinner

Yes, if only people came to know the wine. This is the alpha and the omega for an industry that must court a nation with a product and a culture that is at once alien yet truly, authentically Bolivian.

And remarkably, as that ravenous gulp of Cabernet is steadily transformed into an educated gaze, sniff, and taste, a drink culture that was once wholly and completely foreign is reshaping what is Bolivian in every sense of the word, every small sip of the way. ×

MUCH ADO ABOUT POTATO

FINDING MY ROOTS

MAURO SCRAFTON ISN'T TOO IMPRESSED BY POTATOES, BELIEVING THEY LOOK DULL, TASTE BLAND, AND HAVE UNDERWHELMING NUTRITIONAL PROPERTIES. WILL THE PRIDE AND INSISTENCE OF LOCALS WIN HIM OVER?

Potatoes might just be the most boring food on the planet. They taste bland, look uninspiring and have pitiful nutritional properties. As you are now hopefully aware, I am not a fan. And I find it hard to believe that Bolivians don't share the same view. So, how and why are potatoes still the most important food in Bolivia and the Andes?

It was over 8000 years ago in the extreme north of Bolivia that this starchy, tuberous crop was first domesticated and became the staple food of this part of the world. In Bolivia, potatoes are everywhere. Cultivation mostly takes place on the **Altiplano**—the great expanse of high plateau stretching from Lake Titicaca to the Argentinian border—but they are grown countrywide from the Andean valleys to the tropical lowlands to the east. Unbelievably to someone brought up on the simple Maris Piper, I have discovered there are some 4000 different varieties of potatoes grown in the Andes.

After purchasing a bagful of dirty, dull-looking papas, my challenge was underway

Ok, so far we have established that the Andes are the birthplace of the potato and that they're locally overabundant, but I still don't get the hype or particularly like them. Yet, for some unknown reason, Bolivians do. A lot.

So why do I bother? Here's the thing: I am in fact Bolivian (half at most) and that is why I have snatched at the opportunity to try a variety of common, popular and unusual potatoes in the hope that I will be won over. Maybe, just maybe, I will be able to understand why they're so important here. And by doing so I can also prove to my dad that I'm worthy of being called 'Bolivian', as I would probably be disowned as a son if I admitted the truth—I detest **Chuños** and strongly believe that anyone who enjoys their dry, weird taste deserves a straightjacket.

Early one Friday morning I headed to the largest market in La Paz, the bustling Mercado Rodriguez; an ideal place to get my hands on a good variety of Potatoes. After purchasing a bagful of dirty, dull-looking papas, my challenge was underway. And for the first time in my life—whilst strolling out of the market with a bagful of potatoes—I felt like an authentic Bolivian.

Usually if I want to carb-load, I go for pasta or rice instead of potatoes. Every time. This time however, was an exception. I wasn't preparing for any energy-demanding exercise but instead, I was aiming to find my roots. I tipped out all the 20-something potatoes onto the kitchen table and admired the plainness of every single potato before dumping them into a large 5L saucepan of boiling water. (Yes, you caught me out. I did forget to wash them. Schoolboy error, I know. I blame my non-existent potato-cooking experience.)

After thirty-or-so minutes they were ready and spooned into a big dish. The next step was to introduce each one of them to my uncultured taste buds. I had hoped my tongue would eagerly welcome each new forkful. But being a realist and a self-confessed-potato-hater, I was rightfully apprehensive. After sampling the first three (Papa Imillia, Holandesa and Pureja) without noticing any distinguishable difference, I fell back into my initial prejudice that all potatoes are boring, bland and insipid.

My next encounter was with a large piece of chalk. After some investigation I discovered this was actually the Chuño's big, white brother: a fist-sized Tunta. Produced in a similar way to its black counterpart, the large dehydrated potato is given a wash down and dried off in the sun, after being freeze-dried for a few nights. Anyway, I finally gained enough courage to take a mouthful. It sat like an IED on my tongue. I knew as soon as my teeth chewed down, it would explode its unpleasantness into every corner of my mouth. I took the plunge. Each one of my three chews resulted in a grimace. It didn't just taste awful but it also possessed a strange moisture-robbing texture which left my mouth feeling uncomfortably dry. 'Mouthwatering' my ass! Who would wish this experience upon anyone?

Next up was the most eye-catching potato in my possession, the snazzy Papalisa. With pink and yellow splashes covering this stone-shaped potato, my buds were expecting an exotic flavour to match. I had one bite of lisa and before coming to the disappointing realisation that looks can be deeply deceiving—even when it comes to potatoes. The spud offered a sickening mushy sweetness that lingered long after I tried to wash it down with a glassful of water.

I was becoming paranoid and suspicious, even conspiratorial, convinced that Bolivians lie about their love of potatoes solely for patriotic reasons. Yet I persevered. Perhaps combining (read: masking) their flavour (or lack thereof) with other ingredients would do the trick.

I gathered the half eaten remains and selected a few simple sauces which I could try. I was quietly optimistic. I began to melt a wedge of the Bolivian San Javier cheese on to my old foe, the Tunta. The white cheese was then smeared all over the large chunk to ensure none of the Tunta's surface would touch my tongue.

It was a complete shock beyond my most **loco** dreams. Far from merely bearable, I enjoyed it. The strong flavoured San Javier was the kick it needed, the rubberiness of the cheese and the dryness of the potato somehow combined perfectly. To be sure it wasn't simply the cheese that I loved or that my mind was playing a sick trick on me, I dug in for seconds, this time with a smaller amount of cheese. I experienced the same pleasure. Unbelievable. Who says you can't polish a turd eh?

With the radical transformation of the white Chuño I couldn't wait for what the Papalisa and Imillas had in store for me.

A combination of chilli, onion and tomato puree were fried with the sliced-up papalisa. The smell was salivating (probably just the chilli). Frying enhanced the texture as the Papalisas' overwhelming juiciness was reduced to a reasonable level. It was undeniably nicer. Each ingredient complemented one another amazingly. I'm slowly beginning to understand what Bolivians see in potatoes.

Call potatoes whatever you want: bland, starchy, hard to swallow. All true, though it's also true that their unique differences in taste and texture can be manipulated with the right sauces and knowhow. I set out my quest to fall in love with the potato and become a worthy Bolivian. I may not have achieved either but I feel slightly closer.

There is much more to potatoes than just the taste. You don't have to love the potato's taste to appreciate what it has done for the Andean culture since its domestication. The potato is still an essential part in the 'trueque' economy in many rural areas and its ability to grow just about anywhere and easily is why it is relied so heavily upon.

Since the potato's introduction to the rest of the world its impact has been phenomenal. Reports show it has been responsible for significant population growth worldwide and is now commercially grown in three-quarters of the world's countries. Call the potato boring, but we couldn't live without it.

THE GOLDEN GRAIN OF THE ANDES

QUINOA UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

TEXT AND PHOTO: FLOREN SCRAFTON

Quinoa, the grain-like 'pseudocereal' and sacred grain of the Incas has been a key food in Andean diet since 3000 BC. Its status as the mother of all grains was suppressed during the early Spanish colonial rule; relegated to being a food product only fit for native 'lower' classes. Today, however, it has been heralded as the latest superfood and is being celebrated with international recognition. In 2013 we are living in the 'International Year of Quinoa'. Even astronauts are thinking of taking it to space. Francesa, a Bolivian company, are exporting quinoa biscuits to the US, and it's not just humans who will benefit from this, but also dogs. In the world's largest quinoa producing nation, the latest nutritional secrets of quinoa, along with its evolving economic and cultural significance, leave much to be explored.

Quinoa grows in the most adverse of conditions. It endures 4 months of hostile temperature changes, ranging from -10 to 30 degrees Centigrade, as well surviving a scarce and irregular water supply. It grows in a highly saline soil at an altitude of over 3600m, with the corresponding low oxygen levels.

The southern **altiplano**, from Salar de Uyuni to Oruro, has a meandering route of parcelas de quinua, that have been feeding the growers and their families for centuries: but the trend is quickly changing. In recent years, the demand for the crop has soared, and with it its price. 'Quinoa used to be the food of the people. Now it's a luxury, even for rich people', Virginia, the housekeeper at the BX house laments. Whilst the price of quinoa has more than tripled over the past three years, from Bs.4 to Bs.14 per pound, local consumption has drastically diminished by an astonishing 34% - according to the Agricultural Ministry.

For decades, NASA has provided quinoa to astronauts as a life-sustaining food

I sit amongst a dozen families at the **Feria 16 de Julio** in El Alto eating **pesq'e con leche y ahogado**, the 35 year old dish pioneered by the partners Josefa Mamani and Javier Quella. They strive to keep the dish affordable to locals, producing it for Bs. 5, despite it costing Bs.1.20 when they started out.

Since becoming a 'superfood', quinoa is now sold in packets of pre-washed grain, replacing the freedom of buying it 'a granel', whereby buyers were free to have a bag stuffed with quinoa and pay for it by the gram. This Western-style packaging has elevated the status of the quinoa, isolating it from other staple grains such as rice and wheat.

Yet the way in which the grain is now sold has some troubling effects on the local market. A 500g packet of Quinoa Real costs Bs.15 in Bolivia, which is expensive enough for the local market, but can be exported for up to $10 (over 4 times the price) to the US. It is clear that there is a growing worldwide demand for the Andean grain. But why?

As bizarre as it may seem, the answer may well be found in outer space. For decades, NASA has provided quinoa to astronauts as a life-sustaining food. Quinoa has a complete and extensive nutritional content, high in an endless list of nutrients including the cardiovascular strengthener magnesium. In fact, it drove researcher Phillip White to state that, 'quinoa comes as close to any other food to supplying all the essential life sustaining nutrients in the plant or animal kingdom'.

The list of proven health benefits appears varied and endless, even extending to protection against gallstones and cataracts. Dr Absalon Pacheco, my local family physician, states that quinoa can even combat adverse menopausal symptoms: 'Bolivian women rarely suffer from the menopause'.

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size: As Much As You Can
Servings per container: 1

VITAMIN E	An antioxidant, which protects cells against free radicals that are known to contribute to ageing and cancer development
POLYUNSATURATED FATS	Help reduce cholesterol levels and lowers the risk of heart disease
IRON	Mineral needed to make haemoglobin, the major oxygen carrying component of red blood cells and key to our energy release, hindering the development of anaemia
SELENIUM	Trace mineral with antioxidative properties
ZINC	Trace mineral, critical for correct functioning of our immune system
ESSENTIAL AMINO ACIDS	The building blocks of proteins needed for the growth and repair of body tissues

Intrigued by quinoa's bountiful list of health properties, I was fascinated to hear of current research in Bolivia into some of quinoa's lesser known salutary effects. Paola Chavez, an ecophysiologist who's carried out research on the grain introduced me to saponins. These infamous sugar and fat based chemicals aid plants like quinoa by deterring fungi, bacteria and animals, as well as protecting them from the harsh sun of the Altiplano (think of them as sunblock for plants). Saponins are found on the outer shell of the quinoa grain, but never listed on the back of commercial food packages. Their toxicity in terms of hemolysis (splitting of red blood cells), and bitter taste, make it customary to remove saponins by a strict 4-cycle washing procedure during the industrialisation process. But Dr Pacheco mentions over and over 'el poder de la saponina', and believes it the key to preventing menopausal disorders.

Late one evening, in the centre of La Paz, I meet with research scientist, food engineer and dietician Guillermo Tapia. He introduces himself as an Orureño who grew up eating saponins every day, praising these compounds and their high levels (of up to 8%) in quinoa. He claims the antibacterial properties of saponins protected him and his friends from stomach infections during childhood, and cites his own vitality as an example of their incorrect labeling as toxic. He backs this up with the 2007 EPA conclusion that saponins are only toxic if injected directly into blood stream. Within minutes his energy and excitement for saponins has intoxicated him, and the secrets of saponins start pouring out.

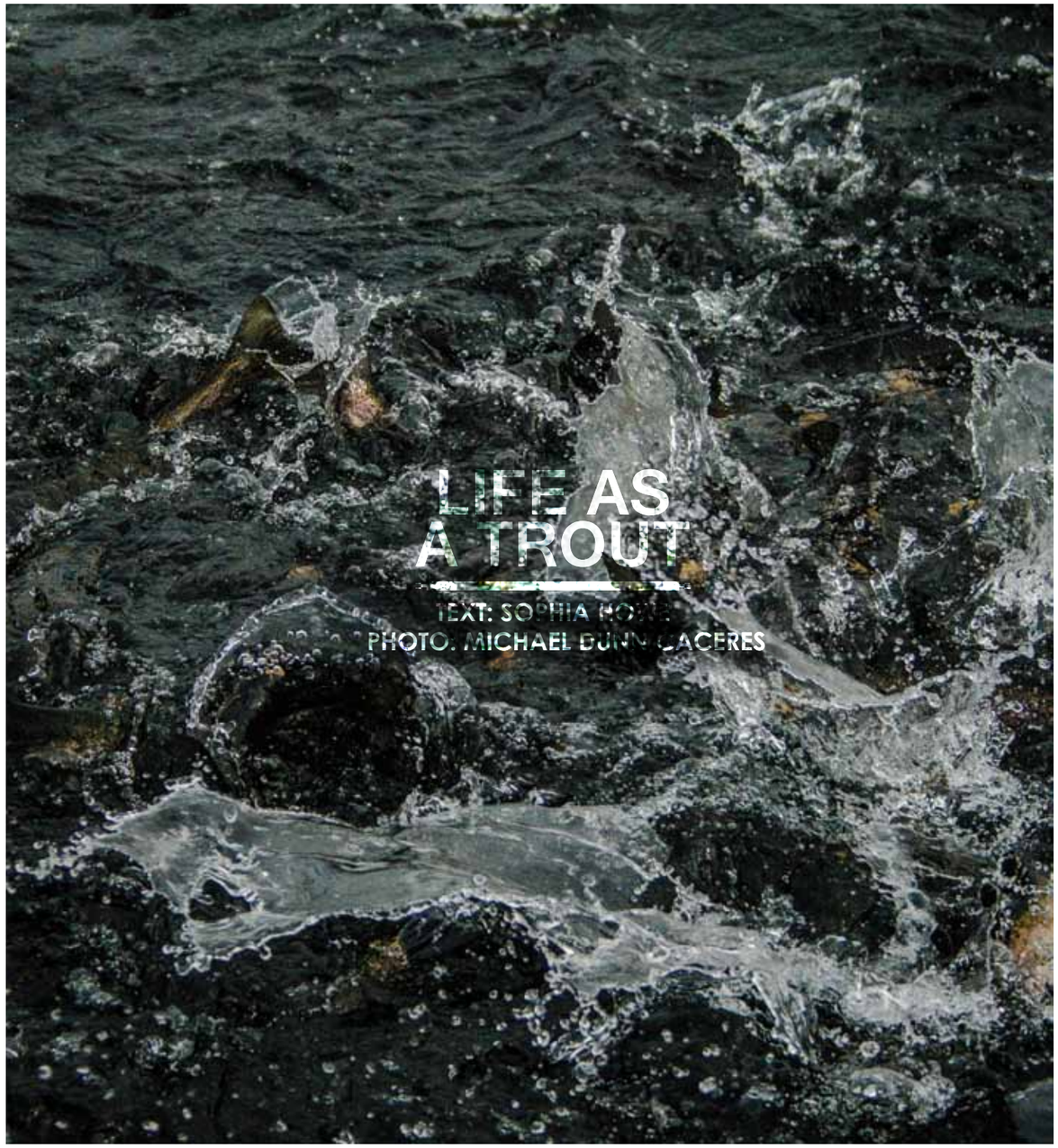
'El secreto de la juventud', 'the secret of youth', can be traced to the high antioxidative properties of saponins. He talks of the therapeutic, rather than nutritional, properties of this compound, listing four major diseases for which saponins can be beneficial: diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer and arthritis. His research also sheds light on its antiviral properties. Saponins have the capacity to stimulate a response of the immune system and in this way they make strong formulations for HIV and therapeutic cancer vaccines.

Why, when there is such a diversity of therapeutic benefits, do major quinoa producers like ANAPQUI (The National Association of Quinoa Producers) continue to remove 80% of the them? The bitter taste? 'This can be eliminated through cooking skill', jokes Guillermo.

The problem comes back to a lack of understanding about the salutary properties of saponins. A market seller proudly promotes the superiority of her black quinoa over white, brown and red varieties, by boasting its higher vitamin content, though she wasn't able to give further details. Guillermo aims to start a campaign informing the quinoa producers to change the industrialisation process of quinoa to cease the elimination of these wonder chemicals. ANAPQUI continue to receive pressure from its importers to remove saponins due to the scaremongering and desire for neutral taste. Guillermo is hopeful that within two to four years enough faith in saponins will have developed to change this.

Regardless of this, the quinoa industry is booming in Bolivia. Wandering through the streets of La Paz, numerous products stand out; from quinoa biscuits to chocolates, yoghurt, juice and even pizza. The government is introducing schemes to increase local consumption, and a law to ensure all schoolchildren eat quinoa as part of their breakfast diet is soon to be passed.

It will be interesting to see how quinoa production in Bolivia will change. Will saponins become another major selling point of the golden grain? Will the process of industrialisation adapt to incorporate saponins? Will the public grow used to the ensuing increase in bitterness? It is hard to predict. One certainty however is that the optimum climate of the Southern Altiplano of Bolivia, along with the experience of its quinoa growers, places Bolivia at the forefront of whatever changes are to come.



LIFE AS A TROUT

TEXT: SOPHIA HOWE
PHOTO: MICHAEL DUNN CACERES

My late Grandfather, George Howe, was a keen fisherman. He dedicated his weekends to sitting in whatever English weather came his way to provide my family and I with Saturday-night trout. He kept a small pond in his garden to make his retired life pleasurable, despite the hungry heron prowling the skies of Northumberland. I looked forward to his secret recipe, trout paté, every Christmas, which was kept in a navy blue marble pot, and is something my family now misses at the dinner table.

Whenever he wasn't fishing, he spent his time tending to his vegetable crops. As a little girl, he reminded me of Mr McGregor (the gardener from the Peter Rabbit stories), with his watchful eye and the help of a scarecrow, we were always too scared to slip into the soil. I vividly remember the giant goldfish he kept in the pond, and how we used to feed them over the bridge and watch them disappear under us.

Some years later, I find myself on a bicycle in the dizzying heights of Lake Titicaca, with a standard journalist's notepad in my pocket. I hate bikes, especially when they don't have competent brakes and a cushioned seat. But it was a cheap way of seeing the shoreline and accessing the lake's **islas flotantes**, not to mention a great opportunity for getting a forearm tan.

I meet my first fisherman on the floating island of Kalakota, who welcomes me donning a hat and a thick woolly jumper, an attire seemingly impossible to wear for the radiant heat of the Andean sun. His name is Germaín Kengua Quispe, and he guides me along a wobbly walkway to show me his trout stock and explain how they cater for tourists. Drifting alongside the island is a plush **lancha**, used to bring tourists from Copacabana, to try the freshest trout money can buy.

Tourism is the island's main source of income, but it is the trout that gets the 'gringos' hooked. At a price of $10,000, keeping the island afloat is no cheap business. The polyester blocks that hold up the wooden floorboards, draped in **totora** reeds, need cutting and replacing regularly. Adding to that is the constant attendance to the trout's every need. 'We need a project', Quispe says, 'to help fund the floating islands, it is a huge sacrifice for us'.

In the wild, trout get their pink colouring from prey, such as shrimp and crayfish. But in trout farms, however, they need to use colouring in the fish feed to imitate this natural effect, which they must import from Peru.

Tourism is the island's main source of income, but it is the trout that gets the 'gringos' hooked

Over the next hill, lies the village of Chañi, hidden in a secret cove. As I descended from my bike at this new location, I meet a young couple: Oscar Condori Mamani and his lovely wife, who are very knowledgeable on the topic and quickly begin to explain what life as a trout truly means.

'The trout here are for national and international tourism, we don't sell to export, only for consumption'. Here the trout is sold for 30 Bolivianos per kilo and it comes as fresh as it gets; you get the chance to watch your food be caught, gutted and fried, straight onto the plate within five minutes. Bolivia's fast food at its finest.

Chañi has three types of trout, creating colourful circles as they parade in the nets. There are arcoiris, dorada and amarilla, split into their appropriately sized nets of small (2 months old), medium (7-8 months old) and large (up to 3 years old). The biggest fish boast patterned flesh and are around 3 years old, weighing up to 5 kilos each. 'Más grande, más rico' Oscar tells me. But these larger fish are mainly used as **productores** to create other juicy trouts that will be eaten by hungry tourists, when they are between 2-8 months.

The productores get together once a year between the months of May to July to spawn their eggs, which are then taken straight to a river one to two hours away from the Lake. The prime waters for these huevitos are **aguas vertientes**, where these babies are born, only to return after a few weeks to the closed nets, or criaderos of Lake Titicaca. After 2 months, they are upgraded to the open nets of the islas flotantes, where they swim in the open air, waiting to be scooped up and fried in a pool of hot oil.

It's not hard to spot the abundance of wooden square nets bobbing on the waters of Lake Titicaca. These are criaderos, where copious amounts of trout are kept. To my disappointment, the only fishing to be done here involves rowing to the nets and collecting the trapped trout.

My initial expectations involved putting on my yellow overalls and wellies to join these fishermen out in the depths, battling the storm and chaotic waves. But, being in Titicaca, one of the highest lakes in the world, sitting at 3,811 metres above sea level, the calm water reaches the horizon and the only waves in sight appear when a motor boat glides past. Maybe I've been watching too many 'Deadliest Catch' TV shows...

PHOTO: SOPHIA HOWE

At first I imagined that I would be able to join the Titicaca fishermen out on an early catch and encounter the excitement of reeling in a monstrous fish, as my Grandfather once did. When talking to the trout farmers of the Lake, I soon realised I had confused sport fishing with the practicalities of running a fish business.

Grandpa Howe was a traditional trout man, who searched for Rainbow Trout and Wild Brown Trout with a fly, rod and line. He wore a checked shirt with a sweater vest, always in a shade of green, and drenched in an outdoor odour. For my Grandfather, he loved the thrill of casting the line and pulling in that record 2 kilogram fish. He would always have a story about the 'one that got away' but for the fishermen at Lake Titicaca, survival is the biggest accomplishment.

DAWN TILL DUSK AT MERCADO RODRIGUEZ

A PHOTO ESSAY BY ANA RYAN FLINN

A world away from the tourist haven of Sagarnaga lies Mecardo Rodriquez, the biggest food market in La Paz. The streets are filled with the exuberance of local life, saturated with colours and textures and alive with characters from every corner of the city. This world awakens at four in the morning, coming into being in bitter darkness and accompanying the sun as it comes into life. Dogs and children litter the roads, creating a playground out of the mess of the market floor. Mundane characters and their lives engulf you from all directions as suspicious eyes follow your progression through the stalls, unused to foreign presence and suspicious of the camera's lens. There is a murky beauty to the market; the abundance of colourful fruit and vegetables is set against the grime of urban life at its most chaotic. The harshness of outdoor work in the sun and rain is revealed in the appearances of the vendors as the years carve lines into their faces and their heavy produce bends their bodies. During an 18-hour work day it is no surprise that you occasionally have to rouse the sellers as busy movement and lethargy intermingle. The women sitting behind their products have become part of the market itself, becoming one with their surroundings and part of the urban landscape. As the market fades into the night the colour slowly drains. People disperse, leaving a trail of rubbish as a reminder of the past bustle. By nine in the evening it is only the dogs that remain, roaming the streets to discover forgotten treasures.

17:00. A rare opportunity to capture an expression from the merchants, most shying away from the camera's intruding lens

17:30. These men transport the produce through the market, selling their services to various vendors

6:30. The sellers settle themselves for a long working day, finding a position that they could maintain for up to 18 hours

TEXT: FELICIA LLOYD

Chicas in Bolivia don't have a super sweet sixteen, they have a super sweet fifteen. There are other grand events such as weddings and 'prestes' where the large and idiosyncratic catering industry shows off its best cakes, canapés and treats. Fliss's job is to visit some of these firms, and hopefully events, to check out their grandest and most extravagant creations.

A white dress, a grand cake, heartfelt champagne toasts, and adoring crowds of family and friends, diligently doting on your every desire—this describes what, for some girls, is the happiest day of a woman's life: the Wedding Day. Except that here, in Bolivia, this also describes another of the most significant celebrations in a girl's life: the Quinceañera party.

Western interpretations of this celebration have resulted in gaudy shows such as 'My Super Sweet 16', which conjure horrible images of 'Veruca Salt'-style girls let loose with Daddy's credit card to have the most extravagant, money-burning bonanza to boast to your closest friends. In Bolivia, though, at the age of fifteen, a young girl's entry into womanhood is celebrated as a rite of passage by the entire family with anything from a quiet family barbecue to a huge 1920's ball to mark a debutante's entrance into society.

Traditionally, the ceremony starts with a Mass, where the girl is presented with gifts from her friends and family, whilst wearing flat shoes. The event then progresses to a party, where she is presented to those in attendance by her father with her first pair of heels, symbolizing her transition to womanhood. This is a party like no other. No detail is overlooked to make this the most wonderful of days—especially not the cake.

As is tradition in Bolivia, the quinceañera cake plays a significant role in the proceedings. Since the Quinceañera is the 'Queen' of the party, she has a court customarily made up of 'siete damas y siete pajes', 'seven maids of honour and seven pages' of her choice. This group of 15 is represented by 15 dolls who ascend the stairs connecting the multiple tiers of the cake. Since these parties are grandiose in glamour and size and can sometimes host up to 400 people, the cake has to be prepared accordingly.

So you're fifteen and suddenly involved in planning one of the biggest celebrations of your life, armed with a certain budget and an insatiable desire for perfection—how do you choose the right cake? And where do you go to find it? A research investigation that took me up to the Max Paredes commercial district of La Paz (and resulted in one of the best mornings of my life sampling various types of cake), showed me the traditional types of cream covered cakes sold to the people of this city.

Generosity knows no bounds here, and so when I approached some of the cake vendors in town they were more than happy to cut me a free slice of their product. Light, fluffy, creamy and very sweetly flavoured, the cakes were the exact kind of crowd-pleasers I had imagined. With our mouths full of cream, we set out to find out more about the creation and cost of such masterpieces.

Baked with flour, butter, **crema de leche**, nuts and the incessantly coveted (in the BX household) dulce de leche, the cakes are then covered in elaborate designs with flowers, biscuits, fruit and unthinkable colours of jelly. These cakes are both a sight for sore eyes and a food for the soul. When we asked for prices, the vendors told us that on average a cake for 300 people would cost around 1200 Bolivianos ($150), transport included.

A trip downtown took us to some slightly more upmarket bakeries that cater for similar events. I needed a façade. Under the pretense of wanting to actually throw a Quinceañera myself, the owner of the bakery and I sat down to discuss the logistics of catering, and the type of cake I might like (though frankly I wanted them all).

The contrast between the two different types of vendors was stark. For one, the upscale bakery didn't offer us any cake, immediately making it a less appealing option. Secondly, the bakery didn't have any prepared cakes to exhibit, and so we had no choice but to flick through a catalogue of elegant pictures, featuring delicate multi-tiered cakes adorned with flowers, stencils, gems and ribbons, like those you might find at a wedding.

Essentially, the cakes from both types of vendors had much of the same ingredients, but the upmarket bakery offered the choice of chocolate flavourings and frosting. When I asked for the prices of their masterpieces, it was lucky they hadn't offered me any cake as my jaw dropped: transport included, a cake from this bakery for 300 people would cost nearly 3500 Bolivianos ($500). At almost three times the minimum wage, this was clearly an extravagance only an elite minority can afford.

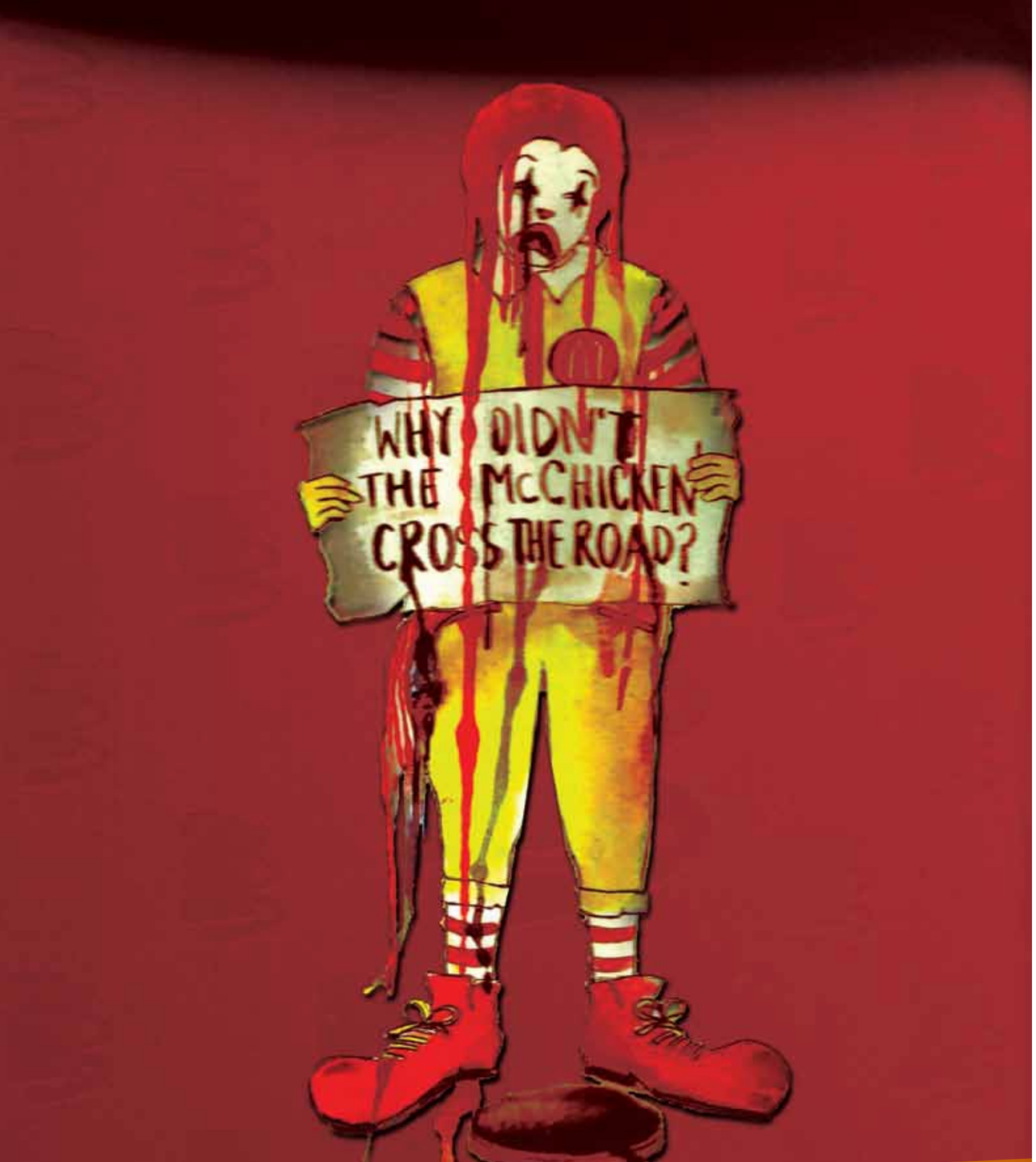
But how are these masterpieces created? How much time and effort goes into the preparation? Surely something as crucial as cake for such an important event would take several weeks to prepare? Interestingly enough, this was not the case.

Speaking to the owner of Pasteleria Nataly in Max Paredes, I was informed that to produce one of these veritable works of art, the bakery needs a week to gather the more intricate ingredients (such as jelly, vanilla essence and colorants), but only an evening to actually put the cake together, no matter the size of the order. This in itself is quite astounding, since the Quinceañera Queens often ask for a variety of complex shaped cakes, ranging from basic circular and rectangular, to those mimicking the favourite hobby or interest of the Queen: stars, flowers, football, or even the figure of the girl herself (a horrifying level of complexity I can attest to, after having spent a whole term in school in Food Technology classes trying to make a novelty 'Pumpkin Cake'). The most popular flavouring of cake is 'nuts and black forest fruits', whose success could be attributed to the fact that all ingredients (flour, nuts, chocolate and fruits) are sourced locally, fresh from the market street on which her shop is located.

This is a party like no other. No detail is overlooked to make this the most wonderful of days—especially not the cake.

From personal, if haphazard, experience in cake baking (I just don't understand how it is they're supposed to rise), it was a marvel for me to learn the ease at which these women bake the cakes. When speaking to Nataly, I couldn't help but notice the size of her tiny shop and her children running around her, pulling at her sleeves, crying to be fed. During the interview, she hoisted her baby onto her hip and began to breastfeed, while simultaneously clearing her other daughter's lunch and coherently following all my questions and guiding me through her cake catalogue. Nataly was, however, bemused by my awe. Smiling, she told me that 'nothing is too difficult when you have the patience'.

Unfortunately, to the bakeries were as far as my research would allow me to go. Not having befriended a soon-to-be fifteen year old in my time out here, I couldn't get an invite to a Quinceañera party, and so never got a slice of the action. I did learn, however, that no attempt at a cake for a Quinceañera, nor the event itself, is ever half-baked.×



MCDONALD'S SHUT ITS DOORS IN BOLIVIA IN 2002. THEORIES ARE CONSPIRACIES ARE ABOUND FOR ITS DEMISE AND EVENTUAL DEPARTURE. IN THE LATEST TURN OF EVENTS, OTHER ICONIC US CHAINS ARE KNOCKING ON THE COUNTRY'S DOORS. COULD THIS SIGNAL A RETURN OF THE GOLDEN ARCHES?

TEXT: ROBERT NOYES
ILLUSTRATION: ANA RYAN FLINN

On average, an estimated 58 million customers are 'lovin' it' every day in one of the 33,000 McDonald's restaurants worldwide. Yet there hasn't been a Big Mac served in Bolivia for over eleven years. Many have speculated as to why the corporation closed all eight of its restaurants here in 2002; a documentary was even produced in 2011 investigating 'Why McDonald's in Bolivia went bankrupt'. Political, social, economic, logistical and ideological reasons have all been put forward, but why the McChicken didn't cross the road still remains an unanswered question.

After having courted Bolivian fast-food diners for four years, the corporate giant made the decision to pull out of Bolivia, making it one of the few remaining countries in the Americas without a McDonald's. Surveying information to be found online, a common perception is that Bolivians don't like fast food. An often cited documentary to advance this theory is 'Why Did McDonald's Bolivia Go Bankrupt?', which claims that 'Bolivians have nothing against hamburgers, but they don't agree with the principle of fast food'. Bolivians consider a good meal to be made with 'love, dedication, certain hygiene standards, and a certain cooking time'—therefore they steadfastly reject the idea of **comida rápida**. Yet a gringo like myself only has to meander through city streets swimming with salteñerias and Subways to realise this is just not the case. Besides, why would Burger King still be popular in all of Bolivia's large cities?

I decide to ask the company itself why it withdrew from the country. A McDonald's representative informs me—in the way that only a perfect PR team could—that the withdrawal was merely part of 'an alteration of global strategy'. I won't quote any of the rest as it reads slower than an encyclopaedia. Regardless, the facts do seem to indicate this would seem to be a just argument—in the same year it ditched Bolivia, McDonald's withdrew from nine other countries, closing 700 stores in the process.

But is that the end of the story? It's hard to tell, as the McDonald's in Bolivia were primarily franchises rather than corporate locations, making the search for their records a difficult task. Finding anecdotes about McDonald's was easier. 'I remember McDonald's as being a luxury, a treat for a special occasion. It was almost a sign of status to have your child's birthday party at McDonald's', one Bolivian informs me. Perhaps this in itself explains the decline. In the rest of the world, the success of McDonald's relates to its universal convenience and affordability. If anything, it's generally associated with late-night revellers in varying states of inebriation and low-income families. Perhaps by primarily appealing to the aspirational end of the market, and not adjusting its menu or prices to its core market, were the main reasons for McDonald's inability to secure a foothold in Bolivia.

'I remember McDonald's as being a luxury, a treat for a special occasion. It was almost a sign of status to have your child's birthday party at McDonald's', one Bolivian informs me.

Still unconvinced, I head to the streets to conduct a survey. Maybe here, with the customers themselves, I might be able to gauge the real motivation for the mighty McDonald's retreat into oblivion. The best suggestion I receive was that the rejection was politically based. One middle-aged, particularly engaged gentleman leans forward, eager to answer the question—What do you think of McDonald's and why did it fail in Bolivia? 'The yellow "M" is synonymous with imperialism, an emblem of American ideals', he says. Given Bolivian President Evo Morales's at times belligerently leftist stance, it would seem fitting that something so identified with the United States should not succeed in Bolivia. Private US enterprise and hegemony appear to clash with Bolivian ideals.

Others support this claim. 'McDonald's was always the first place to be targeted when there were riots', remembers one local. 'It was a physical embodiment for everything we hated about the government', recalls another. A little historical context is needed here. In 2002, the Bolivian president, Gonzalo 'Goni' Sánchez de Lozada, was a white, American-educated politician dubbed el 'Gringo' as he looked and spoke like one. (He's currently in exile in the United States, facing extradition charges over the Bolivian gas conflict in which over sixty Bolivians died). During his presidency, anti-US sentiments were running high in Bolivia. As such, the golden arches became a clear target whenever there were riots. In particular, during a four-day strike in Cochabamba, the franchise was attacked. Perhaps they got the message, and fearing continued attacks due to the brand's increasingly hostile reception were reason enough to understand that they were not welcome in the country.

Nowadays, however, the political turbulence that shrouded the future and safety of the McDonald's brand within Bolivia is not as evidently apparent. The belligerent, anti-US segments of the population helped to get Evo Morales into power, and since his election there's been a revindication of the traditionally impoverished and relegated indigenous class. Bolivia is also much more receptive to private investment from international companies now than it was ten years ago. With a burgeoning middle class with money to spend, McDonald's might succeed were it to return.

Next year, another emblematic US brand will embark on a mission to 'colonise' the Bolivian market with one-pump vanilla lattes and Frappuccinos. This small step for Starbucks may signify a threshold moment for the Bolivian food market. Yet it's arrival will leave us with the lingering déjà-vu feeling that we've seen this before. There may be something to the government's proclamation of us having entered the era of the **Pachakuti**, based on a circular Andean conception of time which posits that history will repeat itself *ad infinitum*. With the indigenous majority well on its way to having its power reinstated after 500 years of oppression and inequality, there's a corresponding increase in affluence within this group. This socioeconomic turn may inadvertently make Bolivian soil ripe once more for the Golden Arches to make their comeback. It remains to be seen whether this dual resurgence, ethnic and economic, will lead to further tensions between the new affluent indigenous peoples and the 'empire'. They may well come hand in hand.

EAT, CHEW, LOVE

TEXT AND PHOTO: JONATHAN COUBROUGH

With the historical exceptions of Coca-Cola and the heavily regulated pharmaceutical industry, the use and consumption of coca outside of South America is generally illegal. This is due to an alkaloid which can be obtained from the plant: cocaine. But, after seeing the huge cultural significance of coca in Bolivia, I set out to explore the benefits of the indigenous plant when used in food and drink, and to discover what, exactly, the rest of the world is missing out on.

Eduardo Garcos sits behind a large desk in his office in El Alto, its walls lined with fat bags stuffed with coca leaves. He is the administrative manager of the Pukara restaurant group, which has branches in La Paz and El Alto (the El Alto location is vegetarian, and features many coca products). Eduardo tells me that most of his customers buy coca for its health benefits. The coca products sold here include biscuits, bread, pasta, and pastries.

'The use of the coca leaf is ancestral', Garcos explains. '**Pijcheo** allowed the farmers to have perfect teeth, thanks to the calcium. It helps considerably when you use it in the right way. When you use it in the illegal way, it is bad'.

Garcos is a member of a coca producer's association in charge of creating coca products for the Bolivian coca industry. 'We buy the coca leaves from the market, but Pukara has its own miller, so we can grind it ourselves. We don't trust much of the ground coca that is sold on the market'. He then shows me an enormous Swiss roll made from nearly 1 kilogram of ground coca mixed with wheat flour and sweet chocolate.

I ask him whether he thinks that coca could become popular outside of South America. 'The coca leaf could be popular. Coca is not cocaine', Garcos says. 'Coca tea is used to treat stomach pains, the pijcheo calms hunger, and it's also a household remedy—it's a very old medicine'.

Garcos does admit that it's not for everyone: 'Not everybody likes the taste—a lot of people don't. But coca is used far more now in cities such as Santa Cruz, which is not a region where people traditionally use coca. It's in the valleys and rural areas of the **altiplano** where the use and knowledge of coca is a tradition passed through generations'. So, perhaps, this shows that a foreign market can be receptive to coca's culinary potential.

My quest brings me to a back street in the Sopocachi neighborhood of La Paz. A non-descript door opens into 'La Costilla de Adan', 'Adam's Rib', a bar covered from wall to wall and ceiling to floor in trinkets and memorabilia—electric and manual typewriters, toy soldiers, soda adverts are arranged artfully. I flop down onto a large old leather armchair and am given an 'Evaristo', an elegant drink made from coca liqueur. It's sweet, like **mate de coca** mixed with syrup, but it's got a strong after-kick from the alcohol. It's not to my liking, though, so I leave the bar to try to find a more appealing coca treat.

Even though I didn't like the taste of my Evaristo drink, I hope that I at least absorbed some of the coca's health benefits. From my research, I learn that 100 grams of coca leaves can fulfil the recommended daily dietary requirement for calcium, iron, phosphorous, and vitamins A, B, and E. In fact, the Incas put so much faith in the leaf that two of their emperors' wives were named after it.

'We want to bring back Cocadent and we want to develop a bottled coca tea, aphrodisiacs and condoms.'

Two posters of President Morales watch over Roberto Ramirez as he sits in his underground office and proudly tells me, 'I have been regularly consuming coca for the last two or three years; I didn't catch the flu this year'. Ramirez is chief of the Industrialisation Department at the Ministry for the Coca Leaf. The department aims to promote the coca leaf by finding new uses for it.

Ramirez believes that the political classes in countries outside of South America are aware of the beneficial properties of the coca leaf. 'They will not decriminalise it because it is not in their interests, or the interests of industry in their country, as coca is only produced here in South America', he says. He believes that it is for this reason that the public is not told of the plant's beneficial effects, and that governments use the bogeyman of cocaine to tip the scales of public opinion against the plant.

The Industrialisation Department has been responsible for the development of a soft drink, painkillers and even a sweetener, all made from coca. Ramirez says that while the department's budget is limited, it has big plans. 'We want to bring back Cocadent [a toothpaste]. We also want to develop bottled coca tea, aphrodisiacs and condoms'.

While talking to people, I heard of a coca myth in which God told the Andean people, 'When you feel the sting of pain in your heart, hunger in your body, and darkness in your mind, take coca leaves to your mouth and softly draw up its spirit, which is a part of mine. You will find love for your pain, food for your body, and light for your mind'.

I heard of similar effects from almost every Bolivian I talked to, that the coca plant brings many health benefits such as quelling hunger, alleviating pain, and curbing general sickness. These days, one might think that the global market is ripe for another natural healing remedy. But cocaine—made from the alkaloid comprising only .25 to .8 percent of the unprocessed plant—continues to be the only thing associated with the plant outside of South America.

The legend continues, and rings true: 'But if your torturer, who comes from the North—the white conqueror, the gold seeker—should touch it, he will find in it only poison for his body and madness for his mind. For his heart is so callous and his steel and iron garment. And when the coca—which is how you will call it—attempts to soften his feelings it will only shatter him as the icy crystals born in the clouds crack the rocks and demolish mountains'.

Pasaje Jauregui 2248 (between 20 de Octubre and 6 de Agosto. La Paz)

PRONTO DALICATESSEN

TEXT AND PHOTO: ALAN PIERCE

Initiation to Pronto Dalicatessen's Italian fusion is like getting back together with an old flame. The culinary experience sparks an effortless mix of the familiar, paired with the unexpected pleasure of the totally unexpected. The Italian purist in me quivered at traditional offerings of pesto pasta or a tantalizing tiramisu, while my more adventurous taste buds tingled at the possibility of a llama carpaccio or quinoa ravioli. Bathed in romantic candlelight, the surrounding décor for this breathtaking and very complementary union of ingredients is less eclectic, although equally as unique as the menu. As the restaurant's name alludes to, almost the entirety of the interior is dedicated to the works of Spanish surrealist artist, Salvador Dalí. Yet, while one eats under his famous *Persistence of Memory,* savoring the unforgettable embrace of Italian and novo *andino flavors*, any feeling of overreaching culinary surrealism quickly blends away, replaced exquisitely with a tummy full of gratitude for the courageous blend of flavors that is Pronto Dalicatessen's Italian fusion.

FACETIOUS FELICITATIONS: A TALE OF FRANTIC DEVOTION

TEXT: ROBERT NOYES

'Café Mocha, por favor?' These words elicit more pleasure, excitement and relief than any other combination of Spanish words I will ever learn. When I left my job at The Gorvett & Stone chocolate shop to follow in the footsteps of Che Guevara and travel through South America, I assumed I would never love again. The lonely evenings spent rocking myself to sleep like a baby in the early days of my trip reminded me time and time again that life was tough. Truth be told, I considered going home. Life just wasn't quite the same without the silky, salacious beauty of the Gorvett and Stone mocha. And then I met Alexander.

Alexander works tirelessly throughout the day, smothering customers with his ever-changing wifi-coded love. Sliding thin green notes of adoration under my empty coffee at irregular intervals—surprises let me know he cares. Alexander cares not for a return of gratitude—he loves freely (at an average minimum consumption of Bs 20). He envelopes you with his wide, welcoming arms between 7 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Sure, Alexander isn't the richest, nor the most handsome (though at least I think he is). But damn, he makes a mighty fine mocha. Sitting in front of me is my muse. From top to toe, she is a pure miracle of creation. Crisp crests of cream ebb and flow, betraying the mythical labyrinth enclosed within Davy Jones' locker. Once the spoon has surreptitiously slipped into the deep, the inevitability of what's to come strikes, so mouth-watering I think I may drown in my own sultry saliva.

Blindly swimming down to recover the wreckage of the sunken submarine of chocolate at the bottom is a tantalising experience at the best of times. Some mix in this submarine with their coffee. By doing this, the mystery of the sunken vessel is lost forever in a whirlpool of chocolatey espresso. Unthinkable. Any regular knows that the only way to drink it is to dunk into the pit and scoop up the submarine: Don't Postpone Enjoyment.

Alexander's Coffee
Plaza Avaroa Av. 20 de Octubre, Multicine, Calle Potosi, Av. 16 de Julio, Calle Montenegro, Calle 21 de Calacoto
La Paz

Philosopher William Paley once had an observation when he stumbled across a watch. He decided that the watch, being a most elusive wonder of beauty, must have a creator. As such, he resolved that the world, also being a complex matter of extreme, striking attraction, must have a creator—God. I like his argument for design. It seems appealing. Yet surely he made a mistake in stumbling across the watch before the muse staring back at me from the table. Paley's watch argument would surely be more compelling if only it focused on the perfect design and completion of this exact, golden, mocha.

Or. Or, it's just a coffee and I really should get out more. Either way, this dangerous chocolate, coffee and cream concoction is still smiling silently, patiently waiting for me to grab a spoon and plunge carefree into its pool of oblivious perfection..

DOÑA LUCY

TEXT AND PHOTO: SOPHIA HOWE

From lakeside to streetside, I go in search for the hidden Bolivian gem; Doña Lucy of Calle Lizardo Taborga, hidden amongst the crowded corners of La Paz General Cemetery. Her door opens each night at 6 p.m. faced by an already-queuing crowd, who battle it out for the limited 40 trout dishes; '40 platos, no más'.

The fish is prepared daily and brought from Desaguadero by her eponymous supplier, Doña Lucy. The lucky few who try her trucha frita can be thankful to these two exceptional women for preparing the best caught fish available. Having carried out research for my trout article, I can safely say that it rivals the fish I tried on the shores of Lake Titicaca.

'Bueno, bonito y barato' advertised one of her regular customers, who had brought along her Peruvian friend, possibly to show that a landlocked country can also offer exceptional fish.

When asked about the secret for her success, Doña Lucy proudly states that 'it was the Lord who taught me how to cook'. The small concrete room (seating capacity for 12) is decorated with religious posters. Couples, old friends, businessmen, and street workers feast in silence. People enter one-in-one-out like at a bustling London pub.

Karachi and trout are the only fish on the menu. We're warned in advance by a regular customer to ask for less carbohydrates, which even after the request come in plentiful supply. The locals leave nothing but the splintered spine in their wake. The fish comes stacked-up on top of a bed of carbs and there are no knives or forks, so not an ideal place for a first date, unless you expect a 'fishgasm', as a friend describes his experience. The Karachi is filled with bones, though the tender taste of the flesh is unique and rewards patient and nimble fingers. It's not unusual to fish out runaway bones from inside one's mouth during the eating procedure. I wonder whether the Heimlich Manoeuvre is taught in the staff safety training. Happily satiated by the fish, and only 15 Bolivianos poorer, I left the venue without daring to pose the question.

GUSTU

A NEW FLAVOUR IN TOWN

TEXT: AMARU VILLANUEVA RANCE
PHOTOS: NICK BALLON

Dinner is booked for two for Friday at 7 p.m. at the latest *haute cuisine* establishment in town. Come to think of it, it's not just the latest, but arguably the only restaurant to truly belong in this category in La Paz. Of course, there's La Suisse, there's La Comedie, as well as a small handful of other restaurants which have set the bar for fine dining in the city. But this time it's different.

Barely a week after its official opening, Gustu already promises to turn the local food scene on its head. To say such a thing would be hyperbolic had Noma, the restaurant's creator's better-known creation, not been voted the world's best three years running: in 2010, 2011 and 2012. Which it has (no big deal).

Gustu, which means 'flavour' in Quechua, has partnered with the Melting Pot Foundation and IBIS (an NGO) to do much more than start a new chapter in Bolivian food. They've set up a training scheme for young Bolivians, many of them socially disadvantaged. Melting Pot has prepared them for the grand opening by sending these aspiring cooks to work at the best restaurants in Peru, and hopes this way to create a new generation of not just chefs, but entrepreneurs and agents for social change.

This $1.4m restaurant has a lot to live up to, and I'm not just talking about its culinary and social ambitions. Not that they knew this or have reasons to care, at the same time the previous evening Nick and myself found ourselves at Doña Lucy's fried fish joint near the General Cemetery. For Bs.14 we gorged on the finest trout money can buy, in at least one sense of the word 'fine'. Basic? Yes. Grubby? Perhaps. The best trout we've ever had? Without a doubt, fingerlickingly so. Gustu: it's on.

We arrive at our destination and linger for some seconds outside the imposing but understated exterior; it's a good indication of what's inside. No chandeliers or petulant front-of-house staff in sight. We're warmly greeted by two young women who take our bags (we came from a photography shoot and arrive with a suitcase and a Tesco bag, though we're not made to feel awkward about this. It's not that kind of place). The reception is warmly lit by the glowless amber light from almost 200 naked light bulbs.

Our budget is $100 for two and, having told them in advance, they've already arranged for us to have the five-course taster menu, plus wine and cocktails. Before trying a single bite this already seems thoroughly reasonable; and it's reassuring to know they haven't overinflated their prices in the hope of attracting the type of clientele for whom price is a proxy for quality (drug traffickers, faux aristocrats, snobs, etc).

We're sat at our table and the singani cocktails arrive shortly after. One has llajwa and is like the Bolivian take on the Bloody Mary. The other comes with chankaka and is the superior cocktail out of the two. That, along with the chicharron snacks on the table, already give me reason to come back.

As we wait for the first course, I stare fascinated out of the large (understatement) windows which seemingly hang off the walls like picture frames, and which are tinted in such a way that it can seem like you're staring at the city from inside a fishbowl. There are also large windows into the kitchen, which reveals an interesting mix of heights and ethnicities among the staff, who can be occasionally caught looking out at the diners, a bit in the way a DJ might survey the dancefloor to see whether his track selection is doing the trick.

The first course, amaranth with cherries rehydrated in white vinegar, arrives on stone slates which at first glance look like posh rustic bathroom tiles, but on closer inspection are actually the same as the wall slates. I say 'Nick: We're eating off a piece of wall. How cool is that?' Halfway through the amaranth (it's a tad salty), I realise Nick's slab is shaped differently to my own; it's slightly wider and has a jagged edge. It's in these pleasing asymmetries the character of the restaurant's matted brilliance shines through. The light is slightly harsh in the main eating area, which on the upside allows you to see what you're eating.

Next up is Gustu's reinterpretation of the popular street food anticucho, traditionally made from flame-grilled cow hearts. Obviously, there's a twist. They're chicken hearts rolled in ground peanuts on swirling lines of peanut sauce, crowned with thin slivers of green tomato. 'Chicken hearts usually taste quite irony' Nick points out, 'I usually don't like them'. (Neither do I). He takes another mouthful. I've already finished my plate. The anticuchos are a resounding success, if only for making us like something we otherwise wouldn't consider eating. All of the irony-ness of the hearts is gone and the tomatoes give the dish a sparkling sharp finish. The powerful and aromatic Malbec Sepas del **Valle** they bring with this course complements the anticuchos very nicely.

We then get another slab, this time it's llama medallions in a sauce which consists mainly of banana and Brazil nuts. It's artfully tender and works as a dish. But it doesn't transport Nick anywhere special, and it's far too reminiscent of baby food for my taste. If the amaranth was a tad salty, this one is lacking in something; can't decide whether in punch or crunch. I suppose I could add some of the cool pink salt (coarse and fine grain) on the table, which comes from Uyuni but looks like it comes from Mars. But I don't. It belongs in the 'interesting' category, I decide, so I leave my plate unfinished to save space for the next two courses.

To our surprise, they bring us two desserts, one after the other. The first is chancaca and tumbo ice cream with singani. It's outrageously creamy and outrageously good, and gains a place in the evening's hall of fame, standing proud next to the anticuchos. This is followed by a coconut cake with crumble, passion fruit and cacao sorbet. Also great (though merely great, no hyperbole required). Both are accompanied by a sickly sweet Kohlberg

Head Chef Kamilla Siedler

dessert wine, which in my case doesn't need topping up (though I've never liked dessert wines so I'm the wrong person to judge whether it was any good). But two puddings? Really? Head Chef Kamilla Siedler later reveals that she knows Bolivians have a sweet tooth. A sure way to someone's heart is to give them sweet things, they say. It sure worked with me. At the end of the meal I was sated and verging on full, but it felt just right. That placid fuzzy happiness you feel after an outstanding eating experience.

Aside from some flavours, a few questions linger on my mind after the meal. How does this compare to Doña Lucy's Bs.14 fried trout? Do these experiences even belong in the same category? Is this even a fair question to ask?

Eating Doña Lucy's trout can only be described as a fishgasm. Perhaps her food was unique not despite it's simplicity, but because of it. The unsubtle flavours and extravagant fat contents surely appealed to our inner neanderthal, not our inner intellectual. Doña Lucy offered us an authentic Bolivian experience without knowing, or needing to know, what it was doing. Its authenticity was it's essence, a property only unintentionally achievable. (Besides, you can make pretty much anything delicious by deep-fat-frying. Ask any Scot.)

The corollary of this question, and at the root of any fine dining experience, is whether it's justifiable to pay twenty times the price for something which isn't guaranteed to elicit an experience of this sort? Or even forgetting about the price, what is it one's supposed to expect from a restaurant which, before it has even opened, is lauded so overwhelmingly, or whose precursor is ranked in such categorical terms ('Best', #1, etc)? It's a hard expectation to fulfil, and this is unfortunate and unfair.

If Gustu doesn't yet epitomise the elemental mouthwatering feeling even pre-linguistic infants can recognise (if not verbalise), it must do something else. And it does. When dining at such a place (and it's worth being explicit about this in a place such as Bolivia which doesn't yet have such a <?>haute cuisine culinary tradition), you're engaged on several levels, of which food per se is but one element. At a place such as Gustu you're invited to revel in the aesthetic set of experiences unfolding across all of your senses, in the history of the ingredients and the social dimensions of what's being cooked up beyond the kitchen.

The question you, the reader, probably want answered is whether you should go and eat there. So here's what I think you should consider. What really sets Gustu apart from its local competitors is its integrity, it's philosophy, and vision. Here are people trying to create something truly new and unique, and while doing so they aim to transform an entire society and culture. More than a restaurant, it's a movement. The scale of their ambition puts them in a league of their own. La Suisse is certainly commercially successful, but what's a Swiss restaurant doing offering an uninspired Sushi on the menu? Or why are you sometimes made to feel the owner is doing you a favour by allowing you to dine at La Comedie? Both of the aforementioned establishments are without a doubt professional and well run. Why, the food's even consistently good. What they're lacking is heart and artistry, and this is something Gustu has, unequivocally so. Even in the décor you can sense that extra attention to detail and craftsmanship, through which the restaurant manages to be obsessive without being fastidious. You should go. It's an imperative.

The last set of questions on my menu is speculative. In Noma's footsteps, Gustu does a good job at establishing itself as an experience restaurant. Everyone should go at least once, sure, even if only to be intrigued and amazed at the exotic creations. Yet to succeed commercially it will need to do more than this. They will need repeat customers who go and seek out the same succulent signature dishes time after time; where gluttons and aesthetes alike can find something to return back to. Somewhere you can go to irrationally. Thankfully, the menu is continually evolving. Head Chef Kamilla Siedler tells us they're experimenting with aloe vera: 'It's kind of disgusting. It's slimy. It's weird'. **Chuño**? 'Haven't cracked the code yet'. Gustu is a research facility, and their basement bakery definitely has a laboratory air to it. There's even a large glass separation which you can draw on with board markers like a nutty professor. Going back to Doña Lucy, Kamilla acknowledges that 'without a doubt the best food here is street food'. It's clear this is the challenger to beat, not the other fine eateries in La Paz.

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