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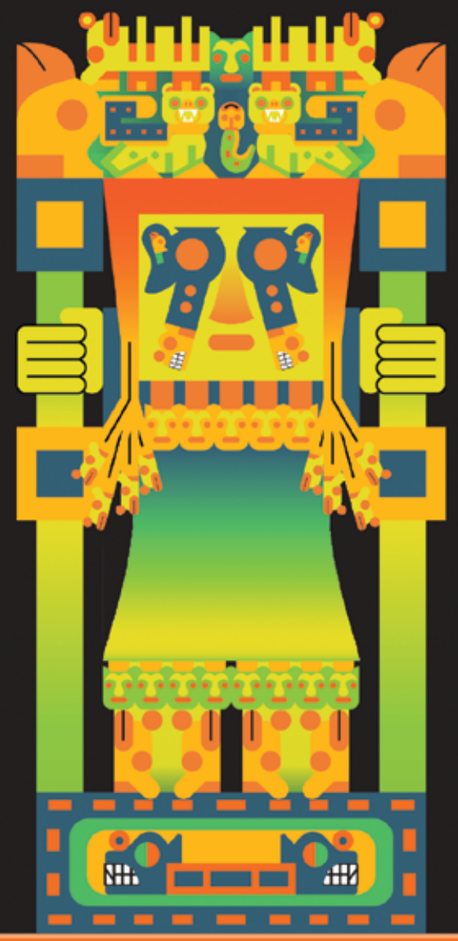

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Quality tradition

EDITORIAL

You don't even need to set your mind to it. Get into the local culinary swing and you'll find yourself eating round the clock. And we are not just talking fitting in an extra snack before dinner. Follow these simple instructions to learn how to fit in 10 courses within a single day, Bolivian style.

Wake up before dawn, head to Perez Velasco and look for the El Alto commuters getting off the minibus. Follow their example and warm up with some hot apple and quinoa served from a small cart. This is not something you eat, exactly. It's been pureed and comes in a disposable plastic bag, liquid enough for you to drink it through a straw.

Peckish now? Head to Mercado Rodriguez at 7 a.m. and follow up with a freshly baked *llaucha*, a volcanic-looking pastry subtly sprinkled with red *ají*, filled with white molten cheese—thick like lava and just as hot. Take a small bite and let it steam in the cold spring morning before wolfing it down.

Walk to Plaza Abaroa at around 9.30 a.m. and look for a *salteña*. There's no final verdict on which one comes out top but there are plenty of contenders within a four block radius including Castor, Miriam, Chuquisaqueñas and Paceña La *Salteña*. Don't eat more than one. Just sayin'—the culinary tour has only just started.

You might feel in the need for something refreshing at this stage, so walk off your previous meals by heading for Acuario on Calle Murillo. Here you will find a local interpretation of *ceviche*, a Peruvian delicacy comprising fish, onion, coriander, sweet potato and plenty of lemon juice.

It should be between 11 a.m. and noon by now. Head back towards the Prado and up to Calle México. You are at the global headquarters of the *tucumana*, the *salteña's* domesticated (read:boring but equally delicious) cousin. There will be several vendors lined up, so pick the longest queue to be guaranteed the best ones. Try each of the 8 sauces on offer at least once. One sauce per bite should do the trick.

Continues on Page 8

EDITORIAL

It will be time for lunch soon enough so walk to Silpich's on Calle J.J. Perez where you will find a decent and affordable take on *chairo*. This classic soup combines finely chopped vegetables, giant soaked corn kernels known as ***mote***, and chuño, all in a beef broth.

Time for some pudding. Hop on the M bus, head all the way up the General Cemetery and find the court behind the flower market which is the world's mecca for *helados de canela*. Look for a bench and wait elbow-to-elbow next to a stranger while you watch the lady spinning a massive block of ice in a Victorian-looking machine. She is creating cinnamon slushies. The ying to this treat's yang is an *empanada*, a dry cheese-filled pastry which perfectly balances out the experience.

It's mid-afternoon by now and you will be excused for feeling slightly full—so here's a challenge: walk down the wide road the M bus grumbled up earlier, and look for a lady carrying a straw basket covered by an *aguayo* (the name given to the multi-coloured traditional fabrics typically found on the backs of *cholitas*). If the basket shows the slightest indication of steaming then chances are you've struck on *huminta*, a sweet tamale-like snack made with ground corn and cheese, all wrapped in corn husks. Baked is better than boiled. Trust us on this one.

The afternoon's puddings aren't yet over, though we'll give you a couple of hours to recover. Think of these snacks as a simultaneous prelude and epilogue to any important meal. Walk down to the Mercado Lanza, near where you started off, and navigate your way through the labyrinthine alleys until you find the *api* vendors. You've struck purple gold. These thick corn-based drinks can be drunk on their own or with their pale evil twin: *tojorí* (which looks a bit sicked up—sorry). Stick to just api if you are among the uninitiated and eat it with a *pastel*, a delicious fried and puffed cheese pastry powdered with caster sugar. Think of it as the blowfish of the empanada world—they are just as lethal (ie, dead good).

Stay in Mercado Lanza for your next course. There are dozens of options but we recommend going for a *silpancho*. A thin steak has been pounded with a stone and breaded before taking a swim in hot oil, just for your enjoyment. Think of the dish as a meat pancake with rice, potatoes, an egg, plus a small serving of finely chopped tomato and onion.

It's now time to start drinking heavily. It's not that we want to get you drunk *per se* (though we do want to get you drunk). We just want you to get a chance to experience some food enjoyed by party goers and night dwellers. Get a street burger from 6 de Agosto and Aspiazu (delicious. Free tapeworm potentially included), otherwise known as a *perroguesa* (or dog-burger). Don't worry, we're reasonably sure there's no dog meat involved. The number of spoonfuls of hot llajwa sauce should be equivalent to the number of drinks you've had. Drink some more.

Lose consciousness. Repeat.

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

By Amaru Villanueva Rance

HERBAL ESSENCES

THREE TRADITIONAL FLAVOURS IN BOLIVIAN CUISINE

TEXT: LAURA VAN ANTWERP **PHOTOS: MICHAEL DUNN**

Bolivian cuisine is always an exciting affair, one that features an appetising cast of ingredients of both Spanish and native origin. Potatoes, rice, meat, and vegetables join forces to provide the sustenance, while herbs do their part by infusing the flavors Bolivian dishes are recognised for. From the bowl of llajua that graces every table setting, to the soups that prefix most meals in this country, herbs are a prevalent and essential component of the Bolivian dining experience.

While Bolivians use a wide variety of herbs in their cooking, there are a few that stand out not just for their savory contribution but also because they are among the most traditional in Bolivian cuisine. The following three herbs may seem exotic and unfamiliar at first to the foreign palate, but they are commonly used in Bolivian cooking.

HUACATAYA

Also known as the Amazon Black Mint, wacataya is a herb that grows in temperate grasslands in the southern regions of South America. With a rather pungent aroma, this herb's flavor has been described as a cross between basil, tarragon, mint, and lime. Bolivians usually keep an abundant store of this herb at home as it is used in making the daily **llajwa** that accompanies most meals.

Found in: *Queso Humacha* – this creamy and extremely flavorful dish is made with khati potatoes, fresh green beans, corn, milk, altiplano cheese, and comes garnished with huacataya. If you have a penchant for all things cheesy (aside from your father's jokes), then you will most likely be unable to resist a second serving of this delectable dish.

QUIRQUIÑA

Also known as Bolivian Coriander, or killi, sophisticated palates have described this herb's flavor as 'somewhere between arugula, cilantro, and rue'. Quirquiña possesses a powerful aroma, which makes this herb easy to detect while shopping through leafy greens. While its flavor is considered by some to be an 'acquired taste', it doesn't take long to be won over. A Quechua favorite, quirquiña has been used for millennia by this indigenous group for both culinary and medicinal purposes.

Found in: *Soltero* - this unique salad is especially nice on warm days. It is comprised of fresh chopped corn, onion, tomato, queso fresco, chilies, and quirquiña, all tossed in oil and vinegar with a bit of salt. This is the type of salad that, if taken to a potluck or picnic of any sort, would be gone in the blink of an eye.

KOA

Koa is an herb that is most commonly used in a fish-based soup called wallake (which, you may know by now *wink*, also happens to be an aphrodisiac). Koa has a distinct and pleasant smell, one that could be described as minty with a hint of basil. A nice thing about Koa is that it tends to keep longer than most herbs, thus making it easy to store for a longer period of time. Because of its pleasant smell and flavor, Koa can also be used for making tea or garnishing salads.

Found in: *Wallake* – for most individuals, an especially fishy soup like this one may not be a favorite. But someone must like it. Right? After all, this traditional recipe based on the spiny karachi fish has been around for many generations. Perhaps we have koa to thank for that, considering it helps mask the dish's fishy flavor. ×

Culinary Come-Ons

Bolivia's Most Popular Aphrodisiacs

TEXT: LAURA VAN ANTWERP
PHOTOS: MICHAEL DUNN

It is almost impossible to navigate the steep streets of La Paz without running into one of the many food carts that adorn its crumbly sidewalks, or squeezing past an enamored couple entwined in the throes of public passion. Food and lust, two elements that come together in some of the city's most provocative dishes.

Aphrodisiacs, or foods that enhance sexual performance, have quite a history with the indigenous population of Bolivia. For centuries, Bolivians have used these lust-inducing concoctions to serve the needs of both taste buds and the libido. It is believed that aphrodisiacs help boost fertility, spice up relationships, and encourage overall happiness.

The real question is though, is there any truth behind the myth of aphrodisiacs? Is there a reason why I wander past colorful food carts and canoodling couples every day? And, more importantly, should I join the movement? I decided the only way to find out was to put three Bolivian dishes, known for their sensuous effects, to the test.

Maca

Maca, a root that grows at an elevation of about 3800 meters above sea level, is primarily cultivated in the Andean mountains of Peru and Bolivia. It is believed to have such strong aphrodisiac qualities that it could replace most libido-enhancing prescription drugs on the market. I find this claim hard to believe. However, when I inquire about its libidinous powers at a local pharmacy, the woman behind the counter excitedly declares 'It's one of my best sellers!' Well, when you put it like that...

Maca can be consumed in a variety a ways, but it is typically dried and then crushed into a white flour, after which it can be added to food or drink. After a bit of pondering, I decide I would enjoy this lust-inducing powder best in one of my morning fruit smoothies. I toss two spoonfuls along with a fine assortment of fruit into a blender and brace myself for what I am told will be a below the belt fireworks show.

To my surprise, Maca is rather easy to drink. It adds a distinct earthy flavor to my concoction, but not to the point of overpowering it. Upon finishing my delicious mixture I lean against the counter and wait. For what exactly?, I don't know. I feel a sense of warmth wash over me. Is this an indication of my carnal desires surfacing?, nope. It turns out the warmth is only coming from a boiling kettle. Oh well, at least I got my fruit portion for the day.

Aphrodisiac rating: ★☆☆☆☆

Caldo de Cardán

The Cala Cala restaurant in the Buenos Aires district of La Paz is famous for it's **Caldo** de Cardán. This single item on the menu has made the business tick for more than 25 years. Along the restaurant's ceiling, a sequence of adult magazine centerfolds are on display. Aside from this awkward sight, nothing else points to the sought after side effect of the famous **Caldo**, which, simply put, is a soup that features bull's penis (euphemistically called 'nervio') and testicles ('criadillas') as its main ingredients.

Caldo de Cardán is perhaps the most visually scandalous aphrodisiac native to Bolivia. When I am served my bowl of soup, I spy a stew of familiar ingredients: potato, beef, a chunk of chicken. The milky broth looks and smells delicious. Then, of course, my spoon stumbles upon the most nutritious and libitolicious component in the mix, a penis.

Surprised, I turn to the restaurant's owner, Fanny Revolla, for guidance and a brief explanation. What qualifies this dish as an aphrodisiac, she informs me, is the **Caldo**, which they prepare at four o'clock every morning, supposedly giving a boost to her patrons' fertility. The high concentration of nutrients in the broth comes from the meat and the '*nervio*', she explains without cracking a smile. One serving she tells me, is enough to nourish the body for an entire day.

Unfortunately, I don't have the nerve to go for the 'nerve', although I do find the rest of the soup to be rather savory. For the rest of the day I'm in a surprisingly good mood. There's a pep in my step and... could it be… a spark in my loins? I think I even feel my fertility meter go up a few notches! Yes, I believe there may be some truth in the theory behind this soup, even if that truth only exists in the realm of the placebo.

Aphrodisiac rating: ★★★★☆

Wallake

I travel across town to the fish I travel across town to the fish market near the General Cemetery. Along one of the side streets I spy a cluster of stalls loudly advertising various types of soup, including the one I'm looking for. Wallake is a fish based soup that has been around for centuries. Its ancient recipe is famous for raising the heart rates of even the most lustfully void of personalities.

I opt for the nearest vendor and approach a cholita who is hacking away ruthlessly at a dead fish. Yup, she seems like she knows what she's doing. I order my soup to go, I'm not exactly keen on setting my loins on fire in a market filled with women gutting fish. As I wait for them to package my order, I inquire about the soup's aphrodisiac qualities. The vendor throws me a hesitant glance at first, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. Then she relaxes and tells me her secret. 'It's the phosphorous', she says, 'it helps with fertility'. Hmm, phosphorous and fertility, how did I not see the connection before?

Once I'm in the comfort of my home, I decide I'm ready for a good dose of phosphorus. Unfortunately, my intake is limited as I am simply unable and unwilling to down an entire bowl of this soup. It's just too fishy!

Phrodisiac rating: ★☆☆☆☆

BOLIVIAN SPIRIT

TEXT: NEIL SUCHAK
PHOTO: MICHAEL DUNN

When thinking about Bolivian alcohol, the most likely things to come to mind would be beers such as Paceña or Huari, Tarijan wines or **singani**. Besides these select few, the world of Bolivian spirits may seem fairly barren. However, it is the aim of Daniel Lonsdale and Joan Carbó—and their liquor company, La República—to change this. Their goal: to create a unique drink for the premium market that is distinctly Bolivian.

Having already pioneered their first Bolivian spirit—Supay (named after the Quechua and Aymara god of death), a spiced liquor produced from the **locoto** pepper—the Bolivian-Spanish duo are now set to move into the area of gin. Daniel is no stranger to the world of spirits, coming from a family with a history of spirit-production. In fact, his grandfather produced some of Bolivia's first dry gin, though only from imported ingredients. Joan, who is Spanish by birth, drew on his background in chemistry to create this new brand of gin. However, if you're thinking of the dry, chemical-tasting alcohol that you get back home, you'd better think again. This is Andean gin.

Gin is produced by flavouring alcohol with certain ingredients called botanicals, including juniper berries, which are found in all gins, including this new Andean variety. According to Daniel and Joan, though, there is a crucial difference between their gin and all the other gins on the market.

'We try to use the best, natural, freshest ingredients', Daniel says to me while pouring out a sizeable measure of the clear liquid. 'We get the juniper from Macedonia and the cilantro we buy from an American company, as well as the cardamon. Everything else is local: the orange peel, the lemon peel, the anise, the cinnamon, the ginger and the rest of the typical Bolivian flavours.'

And tasting the gin myself, it really does stand out—the flavours are subtle, the aroma is gentle and fruity. When compared to the harsh, burning sensation produced by some variants of the spirit back home, the delicate blend of gentle sensations is pleasantly surprising.

However, it is not only the classic gin ingredients that are sourced locally: Daniel and Joan have also added to their gin many solely Bolivian ingredients, such as the **tumbo** fruit and **locoto** and ulupica peppers. 'That is what we're trying to do with this product—we're trying to show the diversity of everything we have in Bolivia', says Daniel.

Not only are most of the ingredients Bolivian, but the production facilities are located in El Alto, more than three and a half thousand meters above sea level. While this may seem somewhat insignificant, the altitude at which the gin is distilled is, in fact, a key factor in its production. The lower atmospheric pressure that comes with the high altitude means that both alcohol and water boil at lower temperatures. Because of this, the gin retains a distinct complexity of flavour. Normally during the distilling process the high heat causes much of the flavour to evaporate; however, this altitude allows Daniel and Joan to distill at lower temperatures and to maintain much of the flavour of the fresh local Bolivian fruits and herbs.

As Daniel mixes my gin to give me a slightly more jazzed-up variant on the traditional gin and tonic, Joan says, 'For me, the juniper berries are what you really smell in other gins, but in here, juniper is at the same level as the other aromas. To me, this is the true meaning of balance'.

'I think it is important to have a personalised flavour', says Daniel -- and I believe that here lies the quality which makes Daniel and Joan's gin truly individual. The root idea was not simply to make a gin but to make a taste of Bolivia, and rather than take the well-trodden road of making a traditional gin they have worked to showcase Bolivian ingredients and to utilise their unique setting. 'We don't just want to do what the people of Europe have been doing for the past hundreds of years', says Joan. This gin is special: distinctly Andean -- distinctly Bolivian. ×

STONE SOUP

TEXT: OLLIE VARGAS

A Quechua soup originating from Potosí, *kallapurca* is thought to have been popularised around the 17th century. Characterised above all by the fact that the broth is boiled using heated pieces of volcanic rock placed in the bowl, it likely originated from the era when fire cooking was less common in the colder regions of Bolivia. Although it is an ancient dish, its nature has evolved over time -- today's *kallapurca* is produced with more **ajo** and other flavours brought over by the Spanish conquistadores.

The environment in which this dish emerged is key to understanding its nature. Potosí is a cold, barren part of the country, where **campesinos** have to exert back-breaking effort to farm the meagre produce the harsh land is willing to yield. Often starting their workday at 5 am, by 10 am *kallapurca* is the dish of choice. It's a spicy and heavy dish—nutritionally perfect for the **campesinos** to help them recuperate and prepare for many more hours of gruelling work. Furthermore, *kallapurca* has its roots placed firmly in Potosí's culinary tradition; the history and rituals of the region reflected in this ordinary food, that remains as popular now as it has ever been.

As a traditional dish, it requires some ingredients that are often not possible to find outside Bolivia, including **willkaparu** and mote pelado (peeled corn kernels). *Kallapurca* is rich in both calories and protein, which lends itself well to manual labor high in the Andes -- giving those under the cosh the energy, strength and endurance to keep on going.

Kallapurca cannot be reproduced so easily in other parts of the country, not least because its signature volcanic rock has to be transported from Potosí. Nevertheless, it is still available—though not common—in other parts of the Andes. In La Paz, the best place to find *kallapurca* is on Calle Conchitas in the San Pedro neighborhood, near Franz Tamayo University.

We spoke to a Swiss tourist named Hannah who had recently eaten the dish in Potosí, and she expressed incredulity: 'I couldn't believe it! A soup of stones! I thought it was some kind of joke'. Very few ever master the preparation of *kallapurca*. Luisa, from Potosí, said, 'I tried to learn how to cook it so as to serve at home, but it just couldn't be done. I think only certain people can ever learn'. Despite being such a unique dish to us foreigners, it's perfectly normal for locals, both for the older generation who work and also for the youngsters, who know it as a foolproof hangover cure. With its thick and spicy flavour, *kallapurca* is always being reinvented. Now it seems it has found a new life as the top choice for those **potosinos** who can't remember much about their previous night... ×

AGAINST THE GRAIN:

The Unconventional (Or Downright Cranky) Restaurateurs Of La Paz

TEXT AND PHOTO: PENELOPE CARTWRIGHT

Even before I learned that this issue of Bolivian Express would be food themed, my housemates were already overwhelming with me with restaurants to visit, street stalls to try, markets to die for. Eating is clearly big business in La Paz, where six different *salteña* cafes can exist on the same street and still turn a profit. What impresses me most, though, is talk of those eateries that are decidedly *not* big business: family-run or one-man enterprises, seemingly scraping what they need to get by.

Over the course of my first week here, I discovered some of La Paz's greatest 'anti-business' eateries: places built into family homes, where chefs are waiters and serve bills on the same napkin you just ate with—and where the owners sometimes make no effort to hide an intense and personal dislike for their customers. What links all these, from the friendliest to the most hostile, is their resistance to the kind of sleek, monotonous corporatism that increasingly dominates British high street dining, where the chain reigns supreme. Instead, these places revel in their own glorious eccentricity. But can this last?

One of the major consequences of Bolivia's recent economic boom appears to be the success of fast food outlets. Ask Bolivians why McDonald's famously failed in their country (the company shut the last of its doors here in 2002) and there's a good chance they will tell you this was not because of the cultural rejection of fast food, but because it was too expensive. But Bolivians are getting richer, and the presence of Burger King, as well as numerous home-grown brands—such as Pollos Copocabana, Api Happy and Panchita—show that locals enjoy their quick carbs as much as anyone.

Jose Maria Pantoja, owner of Los Nopalitos, feels no fear of competition from the fast food giants. For him, these are two different market niches, both of which La Paz has room for. After all, for all the numerous high street chains to be found in Western food culture, there is also the backlash trend from those missing the intimacy and uniqueness that chains inevitably lose—think of Rachel Khoo's two-person restaurant in her Paris apartment, or Mayfair's recreation of Phileas Fogg's gentleman's club (reborn as slick cocktail bar).

There are always two sides of the story, and while fast food, or even more upmarket chains such as Starbucks, could certainly represent the corporatization and monetisation of food culture, they could also simply suggest a more gastronomically complex society. Many Londoners can start their night in a little-known speakeasy and end it ferociously nuzzling a post-club McDonald's—so why not **paceños**? Bolivia is at an interesting juncture now, in which emerging chains could become either an addition to or a replacement of traditional eateries. Exactly what will happen is hard to guess. All I can say is you'll miss those handwritten menus when they're gone.

Los Nopalitos (Avenida Ecuador between Guachalla y Rosendo Gutierrez)
Los Nopalitos is perhaps the archetypal example of laid-back eccentriLos Nopalitos is perhaps the archetypal example of laid-back eccentricity. Founded by José Maria Pantoja after he fell in love with Mexican cooking while living there in the 1980s, Los Nopalitos features walls decorated as an homage to the country's bandits and revolutionaries. The location was chosen because one of José's friends was already living there, and the restaurant retains its homely feel, right up to the shower and bathtub that remain to surprise visitors to the **baño**. Even the staff seems more like a family—José works alone, alongside one chef, whose baby son José calls el **diablo** in the ringing tones of an exorcist-performing priest.

José prioritises the freshness of his ingredients—'my quesadilla comes with the streaky texture and flaky edges that show it is hot from the pan, not out of a packet'—even where such attention to detail means compromising on size. Indeed, the dinky-but-tasty portions can make it seem as if you are getting a tasty snack from your grandma rather than a restaurant meal, but this is all part of its charm. A trip to Los Nopalitos is not just about the taste of the food, but the taste of one man's way of life.

Chifa La Hoja Verde
(Av. Ecuador 2514 esq. Belisario Salinas)
With its stucco tiles and mismatched tables and chairs, La Hoja Verde's aesthetic is that of a Sino-sized greasy spoon—there may be soya sauce and toothpicks on the table instead of salt and pepper, and monochrome ink prints on the walls instead of calendar pinups, but this is the only clue that you're not getting your English fry-up here. The food works by taking the best of Chinese takeout (the copious oil, the deliciously metallic taste of MSG) and running with it. Not exactly haute cuisine, then, but shrewd about what many punters want.

The real attraction of La Hoja Verde is, however, its owner: Señor Ye. He engages with the stereotype of the **chino renegón** with gusto, wantonly making me move seats (and one family move an entire table) midway through the meal, as if staging some kind of musical chairs for his private enjoyment. When taking too long to order, he simply walks away—perhaps to give us more time to choose, perhaps simply to catch the football scores. According to the online food review site Buenos Restaurantes de La Paz, the reason for La Hoja Verde's total lack of publicity—the restaurant doesn't even have sign on its shuttered front—is because Ye's wife refuses to be belaboured with any more cooking. An enjoyable bit of guesswork, but hard to swallow for those who, like me, cannot see Ye taking lip from anyone. This, though, is the joy of La Hoja Verde: go for guilty food and plenty of mythmaking.

La Costilla de Adan
(Calle Armaza #2947)
Roberto Cazorla Guzman tells me that his venture first started because friends would always want to go come back to drink at his house after a night out. One day he simply bowed to pressure—and La Costilla de Adan was born. A single glimpse at the bar, however, shows that the creation of La Costilla that we see today has been a far greater labour of love. La Costilla is a veritable *Alice in Wonderland* explosion of strange and marvellous artefacts—all starting with a coffee can that Roberto ferreted from his grandmother at age 5.

Through a life spent in much of Europe and South America, and in a variety of professions (architect, graphic designer, hairdresser), Roberto's collection slowly amassed. It is these souvenirs that crowd the walls and jostle from the ceiling in today's bar. Reeling off a few of the best, Roberto lists a crystal rock mirror, tables adapted from glass-topped bathtubs—just a few of the 5,000-plus objects that decorate his bar.

But La Costilla is decidedly not about being flashy. Even as he plans a second-floor extension in which to serve snacks (goat cheese empanadas, tamales from his homeland Tupiza), Roberto still proudly talks of his spot as 'the best kept secret in Sopocachi'—customers have to knock on La Costilla's deceptively residential door to come in. And he has reason for wanting to keep privacy, after all—Roberto's house is attached to La Costilla: 'I have a cat and seven dogs!'

For Roberto, the relaxed feel of the bar comes as a plus. He has no security and has never needed it. It is possible to pay proper attention to customers, sometimes with surprising results—most notably the night he found himself serving two schoolmates that he had not seen in 25 years, one now living in England, the other in Japan. A fitting reunion in a bar that is so much the culmination of many years and places travelled ×

PHOTO: DESPINA SERRANO PANTELIS

Los Heladeros

The Precarious Prospects of La Paz's Ageing Ice-Cream Men

TEXT: OLLIE VARGAS
PHOTO: MICHAEL DUNN

A ubiquitous sight across the plazas and pedestrian walkways of La Paz are the city's army of 'heladeros' (ice-cream men). Mostly male and relatively old, they scrape a living selling ice cream, either homemade or sometimes selling branded products from companies such as Delizia, Frigo, and Panda.

As I approached Alberto, an heladero near the San Francisco Cathedral, I had to wait for several minutes before speaking to him as he had his old battered shoes meticulously polished by one of the city's many shoe-shine boys—he wasn't about to start work in shoes he couldn't see his face in. This summed up the general attitude of the heladeros fairly well.

Most are fiercely proud of the way they've managed to eke out a living when all the odds are objectively stacked against them, 'I do this as a last resort when seasonal tourist work dries up. I barely earn enough to feed my family but I've never been on the streets and never had to rely on anyone, I always find a way'. If the old shoes represented their tough lives, the polish showed their pride in being always able to 'find a way' and fall on their feet regardless of what is thrown at them.

Another heladero I met outside the cemetery had closed his ice-cream boxes and had started selling umbrellas the second it had started raining. This is the level creativeness and versatility that's needed to survive in today's climate. Their role as ice-cream men can't be seen in a vacuum; they can be seen as a byproduct of a series of socio-economic policies which took place in the country over the past three decades.

Understanding the rise of neoliberalism in the late 1980's is key to understanding the birth of the heladeros and the evolution of their work. The closing down of key state-owned companies (along with the privatisation and eventual failure of several others) radically altered the situation of hundreds of thousands of Bolivians. Workers who were formerly protected by powerful and highly-organised unions were progressively left abandoned and made redundant. The period produced a situation of extreme 'labour flexibility' or precarious work (if we're to move away from euphemisms) that the heladeros are the products of today. They have neither a fixed salary nor stable working hours, and only earn a percentage of what they manage to sell on the streets; if they don't sell they don't eat.

Despite a gradual change in socio-economic policies since Evo Morales came into power, almost all the heladeros were explicit in articulating their sense of betrayal that the current administration has left them with. One Frigo employee told me, 'this government always talks about basing itself on the poor, but nothing has changed for me, there's still no job security, no real benefits and I still struggle to feed my family. Just like always'.

Looking at the shape of Bolivia's labour market certainly backs up the sense of frustration shown by the Heladeros. Recent statistics relating to the labour situation of Bolivians is clearly reminiscent of the neoliberal 'ancien regimes'. A study by Escobar de Pabón estimates that in 2008, 82.9% of workers across the country were in lines of work considered 'precarious' with 58.9% of these considered to be in work classed as 'extremely precarious'. In El Alto the figures are as high as 90.1% and 71.7% respectively.

It is not possible, however, to speak of the heladeros as a uniform group. There are significant differences between them in socioeconomic composition and in relation to their products. While the ice-cream men are generally a precarious group, some, such as the women who sell 'helados de canela' (cinnamon slushies) near the General Cemetery in La Paz are self employed and enjoy a more stable and comfortable standard of living. Doña Gladys, a woman I spoke to, had been working fulltime with these products for decades, ever since she helped her mother set up the stall over 30 years ago. Those with a fixed stall typically represent a privileged layer. For many of these heladeros, making ice cream is a family tradition and vocation rather than precarious employment of last resort, like it is for the old men roaming the streets of the city.

Another complicating factor in the work practices of the heladeros are the rivalries that exist among them. For example the 'independents' and '**raspadilleros**' look down on those selling branded lollies, such as those made by Delizia. Rodrigo, who works around the Prado area told me: 'the Delizia and Frigo ones just sell whatever packaged product is given to them. We learn how to make a real cone—and that takes skill'.

Several of the heladeros are organised under a 'sindicato' which sets out to act as a labour union and a mechanism of collective representation. This organisation however, hasn't always been the bulwark needed against struggles that they face in their line of work. The union itself has little history of struggle and victory on behalf of the heladeros. An heladero who works near Perez Velasco called Juan (an 'independent') had recently resigned from the union saying 'They've never fought or won anything, they charge you a membership but then do nothing, its just a way for some to make extra money, its better to just not be involved and carry on'. This attitude was certainly reflective of a pessimism that was widespread among heladeros about their future.

Alberto, another heladero said 'maybe in the future there'll be secure work and heladeros will be able to feed their families comfortably, but not in any of our lifetimes, most of us are old and only do this because we can't manage hard manual work anymore, we won't live to see these changes. We'll still get by though'.

These men are certainly characters, they have to be to survive in a period where 'just getting by' isn't an option. They themselves are not so in awe at their 'ingenuity' and 'creativity' as the readers may be. This isn't a path they choose and most of them longed for their previous lives as tourist guides or factory workers where they at least had a fixed income and a level of stability. Most hover around the ripe old age of 65 and would prefer to not be working at all. Elsewhere they might be lucky enough to be able to retire and live off a pension.

Towards the end of my research I went to look for heladeros outside a distribution agency (where they pick up their ice cream for the day) near Puente Avaroa. We turned up at 8am —the time they were due— though none of them turned up. An hour later the owner opened up and told us 'you are wasting your time'. He told us that 'if it's an overcast day the heladeros know they won't be able to sell enough so normally don't bother turning up, instead they'll look for day labour jobs or sell something else'. Like the heladero selling umbrellas in the rain, it is clear that these levels of awareness and planning are necessary for these men to get by. Paradoxically, to make it as an heladero often involves not being one all the time.

NOT FOR THE FAINT OF STOMACH

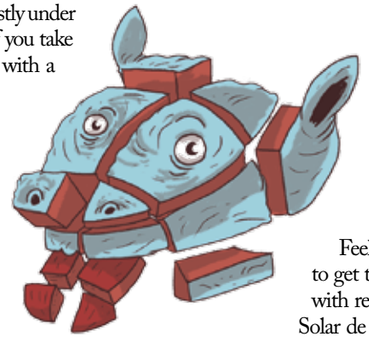
AN EXPLORATION OF BOLIVIA'S MOST UNEXPECTED DELICACIES

TEXT: CHLOË CADWALLADER BARRAN ILLUSTRATION: OSCAR ZALLES

Cabecitas

The restaurant El Solar de las Cabecitas is an open room painted with warm red and orange. Decorative mirrors cover the back wall and, from the wide windows, the sounds of the street rise to us on the top floor. I've come with Bolivian Express editor Andres to try cabecitas, the restaurant's title dish. Direct translation: 'little heads'. Lambs' heads, to be exact—they'll be boiled in a prepared soup, along with vegetables and seasoning, for three to four hours before serving. It's unlike anything I've ever heard of.

When my food arrives, it's hidden quite modestly under a covering of shredded lettuce and tomato. 'If you take off the salad, you'll see the eye', Andres says with a tinge of anticipation.



I eat a forkful of rice. Then, gingerly, I scrape away the lettuce with my fork. Underneath is an assortment of meats and bone and cartilage, but no eye. Maybe it's on the other side? Andres flips the head over and it suddenly becomes extremely apparent that what's sitting on my plate is an animal's skull. The (empty) eye socket gapes at us, the jaw stretches into a horrific grin, and wet sinews strain across the bone. The most odious, however, is the tongue, a thin white slab that lolls to one side. I quickly flip the head back over.

Examining the various types of meat, I decide to go for the tongue, which seems the most tender. It slices off easily, revealing the blackened teeth of the lamb. I put a small chunk in my mouth, chew briefly, and wash it down with some Coca-Cola.

Andres looks at me expectantly from over his completely average lunch. 'It tastes like morning mouth', I tell him. He takes a bite from my plate and agrees with me. Moving on, I cut a piece of the cheek, delicately removing it from the cartilage. This meat has a more irregular texture than the smooth muscle of tongue, but a much better taste.

The last part to try is the brain, a mass of white-yellow tissue and purple veins folded into each other. The skull cradles it like a perfectly-sized bowl. This section, despite seeming the most cringe-worthy, is actually my favorite by far—I imagine uncooked ground beef would have the same consistency.

Feeling slightly ashamed of my squeamishness, I ask to get the remains of the head wrapped up before chatting with restaurant owner Walter Rocha. Apparently when El Solar de las Cabecitas first opened, they served rostro asado, a different type of cooked lamb's head that's fried rather than boiled, allowing the head to retain the skin. This proved too grisly for most customers, however, and cabecitas replaced the dish. Both variations of cooked head originate from Rocha's home of Oruro, and he's pleased to bring to La Paz a unique dish that's enjoyed by Bolivians and adventurous tourists alike.

Chanfaina

My quest for the next unusual food takes me to the market of Cementerio, where cholitas display their wares in front of them—fish, potatoes, wheels of white cheese. I pass stalls of chicken legs and bowler hats to find the market's equivalent of a food court. Eating a variety of hot soup and warm drinks, small groups of people crouched on low chairs spread out down the street.

I approach several vendors before finding the stew I'm searching for—chanfaina. There's a few different ways to make it, all of which involve various parts of mutton or goat. This version, according to my confused communication with the cholita vendor, contains lamb's heart and lung, along with slightly less exciting ingredients like potatoes. I hand the vendor a note, she passes back a somewhat sticky coin from the depths of her apron, and I leave with my dinner double-wrapped in plastic bags like a lumpy hot water bottle.

At home, as with the cabecitas, I offer my housemates a taste of the dish; but, as with the cabecitas, there aren't many takers. The stew is quite good, despite a strange metallic blood taste that I might be imagining.

Lagarto

I next meet with Huini Dominguez, owner of the Amazonian fruit business Ama-Fruit. But he's come to talk with me instead about lagarto, an ingredient in many Amazonian dishes that translates directly to 'lizard' but which means anything from caiman to crocodile. Unfortunately, I'm not able to try any of these dishes—the most notable being chicharrón de lagarto—as recent floods have caused transportation of the meat to become increasingly difficult. This is not to say that the lagartos are unavailable, however. In many rural areas, they've been brought by the floodwaters to small towns, where they now live alongside people.

'Lizard' meat is apparently both delicious and nutritious, but there are regulations placed on how much can be harvested from the rivers. Even the fishermen who set traps to keep lizards from eating out of their fishnets must first receive permission from the Bolivian government in order to deal with the lagarto thieves. That said, Dominguez is pushing to expand the meat into greater Bolivia as a more mainstream ingredient. Though popular in the amazonian region, it's usually only found in La Paz in fancy restaurants. He explains a gradual process involving several stages, starting with families and small communities, to keep development sustainable. His larger vision? Conquering the international market.

Cui Asado

Walking up the steps into Layka restaurant, I am confronted with an alarmingly vivid mural depicting some sort of horrific Last Supper-style feast. Cholitas tear into cabecitas, grinning devils dance around the table, men eat boars and boars eat men. Of the many painted walls, this one is certainly the most captivatingly gruesome. I ask the owner, Mauricio Mier, about it and he simply laughs, telling me about his plans to commission a second mural on the ceiling, depicting a meeting of Heaven and Hell. He's not one to shy from spectacle.

The dish that pulled me here is cui asado, whole roasted guinea pig. The one I'll be eating comes, according to Mier, from a partner in the countryside who sends the restaurant only the biggest pigs ready to be cooked. Eating guinea pig is traditionally Peruvian, 'but it has a La Paz twist', Mier tells me.

When my plate arrives, I have a strong urge to play with my food. And by that I mean pick it up by its tiny claws and make it dance. Luckily, I'm able to restrain myself. The guinea pig is splayed on its stomach, arms akimbo, eyes squinted shut. I think briefly of my childhood wish for a pig as a pet, then slice my knife into its side. The meat has an odd silky texture, but what gives it flavor is the delicious yellow pepper sauce spread over the back. I offer a bite to Rodrigo, the Bolivian Express editor accompanying me, and he nods in approval.

Then the night takes a strange turn. Mier brings us two shot glasses of bronze liquid from a large clear jug containing coca leaves and some unidentifiable white knobbly lumps. He refuses to tell us what's involved in the process of creating the homemade alcohol, which burns pleasantly—he calls it llakalla and says that he gives it out on the hour, only to women. After a brief period of musing over the ingredients, Mier gives us two shots of **singani**, which we quickly down.

He gives us a look. 'Do you want to know what you just drank?' Reaching behind the counter, he pulls out something shrouded by a checkered napkin. From the way he holds it, it's obviously quite heavy. Rodrigo and I eye it suspiciously.

Mier places a hand on the napkin, telling me to count down.

'Three, two, one-and-a-half-' But he's already unveiled the object. One dull grey eye stares at me from the jar. A thick snake's body wraps around itself, **singani** covering it completely. It's difficult to tell exactly how long the snake is. I glance at Rodrigo, who's smiling in a horrified sort of way. It's a tense moment.

Apparently Mier captured the constrictor himself—he mimes the method of cramming it into the jar and the motion of the drunk snake trying to escape. It seems intensely over the top and possibly hazardous. But then, it was the best **singani** I've ever tasted.

ARCHEOLOGY OF A PALM HEART

Inside Gustu's Research Lab

TEXT: ANDRES PEREIRA PAZ
PHOTO: COURTESY OF GUSTU

Since its doors first opened in 2012, Gustu has quickly earned its place as one of the top restaurants in South America, and possibly even the world. Gustu has established itself as one of the most important cultural and gastronomic centres in La Paz's residential and affluent Calacoto district.

But it is not merely a place for fine dining. Perhaps above all else, Gustu should be seen as a school—in the traditional sense of the word. This might sound strange to some, but considering its position in a world obsessed with university degrees and fuelled by self promotion, we find in this restaurant a highly unusual model of organization based around the formation of young bolivians.

Gustu provides an educational program in collaboration with Melting Pot. This foundation helps among 20 to 30 young students to gain world-class training in gastronomy and entrepreneurship.

The business model behind Gustu is experimental, so it seems especially befitting for it to enclose a cooking lab in its basement. It is here that sophisticated international cuisine, ancient knowledge, and local ingredients come together in a gastronomic alchemy.

Head Chef Kamilla Seidler opened the doors of Gustu's lab to talk us through the process involved in deciphering the deepest secrets behind preparing the palmito.

Something that stands out about Gustu's kitchen is its obsessiveness with starting everything from scratch. Trial and error are fundamental parts in this process, as nothing but the very best will do. In fact, it is not enough to simply get the right recipe of ingredients in a dish—each of the latter must themselves be prepared using a unique formula. This goes a long way in explaining why the results they obtain are unique.

The palm hearts they use must travel all the way from Pando (the northernmost province of Bolivia) to La Paz, before reaching the southern side of the city where Gustu is housed. Before entering your mouth this ingredient has travelled from a small producer in the Amazon to the dry and cold plains of the Andes. Gustu's 'kilometer 0' policy strictly restricts the restaurant to work with products sourced inside Bolivia's borders. In addition, they must only work with micro-producers, adding to the individuality of the experience.

Soon-to-be-Chef Jhon Montoya, shows us the process behind preparing the perfect palm heart. When it arrives in Gustu it's a medium sized trunk covered with small prickly spines (the mere thought of a tinned product around these parts amounts to heresy). First, Jhon says, you must cut a thin vertical layer from the outside without touching the trunk.

The heart isn't exactly found underneath. What awaits the chef is another layer (the previous one is kept for some mysterious purpose). The surgeon must cut through it once more before revealing clusters of thin filaments which belong to the heart. He begins to pull them down, patiently and labouriously until the palm heart itself finally disappears.

The idea of taking these filaments off one after another reminds me of the Japanese term *muga*, which denotes the process whereby which you lose perception of the action being performed through its repetition, combined with high levels of concentration. Jhon indeed appears like a monk while he manipulates the heart palm. The results after all these efforts are plain to see. The *palmito* is one of the star items in Gustu's menu.

Watching this process, we could not help but wonder at just how long it takes to prepare a palm heart portion for a single dish -- especially when one serving involves up to three trunks.

In a country such as Bolivia, which is obsessed by tradition, we find a small gem: a space where apprentices are encouraged to experiment continuously and where creativity is prized. Other items to come out of their research facility include dry cured alpaca meat, egg yolks fried in almond oil, as well as an edible clay.

Gustu is not only a restaurant to look out for, but also a cultural movement in itself. The artist Joseph Beuys wisely once said: "My best work of art is teaching". In a similar spirit, Gustu may continue to provide an ingredient vital in the development of Bolivia's ancestral and emerging culinary tradition. ×

ELI'S AND THE COMANDANTE

Che Guevara's Pizza Diaries

TEXT: NEIL SUCHAK
PHOTO: ALEXANDRA MELEÁN

En route from La Paz to El Alto you are likely to drive past a roadside statue of Ernesto Che Guevara, the Argentine revolutionary whose iconic face has come to adorn anything from T-shirts to protest banners across the globe. The metal statue is overpowering, as are the myths and urban legends that surround his figure in this country.

In Bolivia, el Che exists as a paradox. He is lauded by everyday people and by President Evo Morales himself, yet it is here where he fell. He is an emblem of the Bolivian army even though it was precisely this army that killed him. Che is exalted as a leftist figure of Marxist thought although the Communist Party of Bolivia turned its back on him in the 1960s.

Despite these paradoxes, there is no doubt he lives on in the collective local imagination through numerous tales and stories. But none of the myths that precede him are quite as quirky and mundane as the one that ties him to a local pizza shop. Legend has it that, during his 'Motorcycle diary tour' of South America, Ernesto Che Guevara worked at a restaurant in La Paz named Eli's Pizzeria.

When Eli's Pizzeria began, more than 70 years ago, it operated out of a single shop next to the cinema on El Prado. Today, like el Che, the pizzeria in La Paz has become a popular icon. What began as a local pizzeria, has now become a growing Bolivian food chain with restaurants and street stalls across the country.

HE ALWAYS HAD A COFFEE AND APPLE PIE'

The chain does very little to advertise its supposed link with Guevara. When you walk into any of their pizza shops, you would hardly imagine such a place could have been a part of his revolutionary odyssey. Compared to other restaurants in La Paz, the original Eli's Pizzeria is vaguely reminiscent of an American diner. The walls are a modest tribute to the restaurant's staff and former owners with no reference to Guevara at all.

Despite having changed its name multiple times, Eli's has kept several members of its staff for the majority of its history. One such member was Don Max who, in life, ardently maintained not only that Che Guevara did work at the pizzeria at one point, but also that he stayed with him in his house for a brief period of time. Regrettably, Don Max is no longer around to verify these claims, although his story is at the heart of this urban legend.

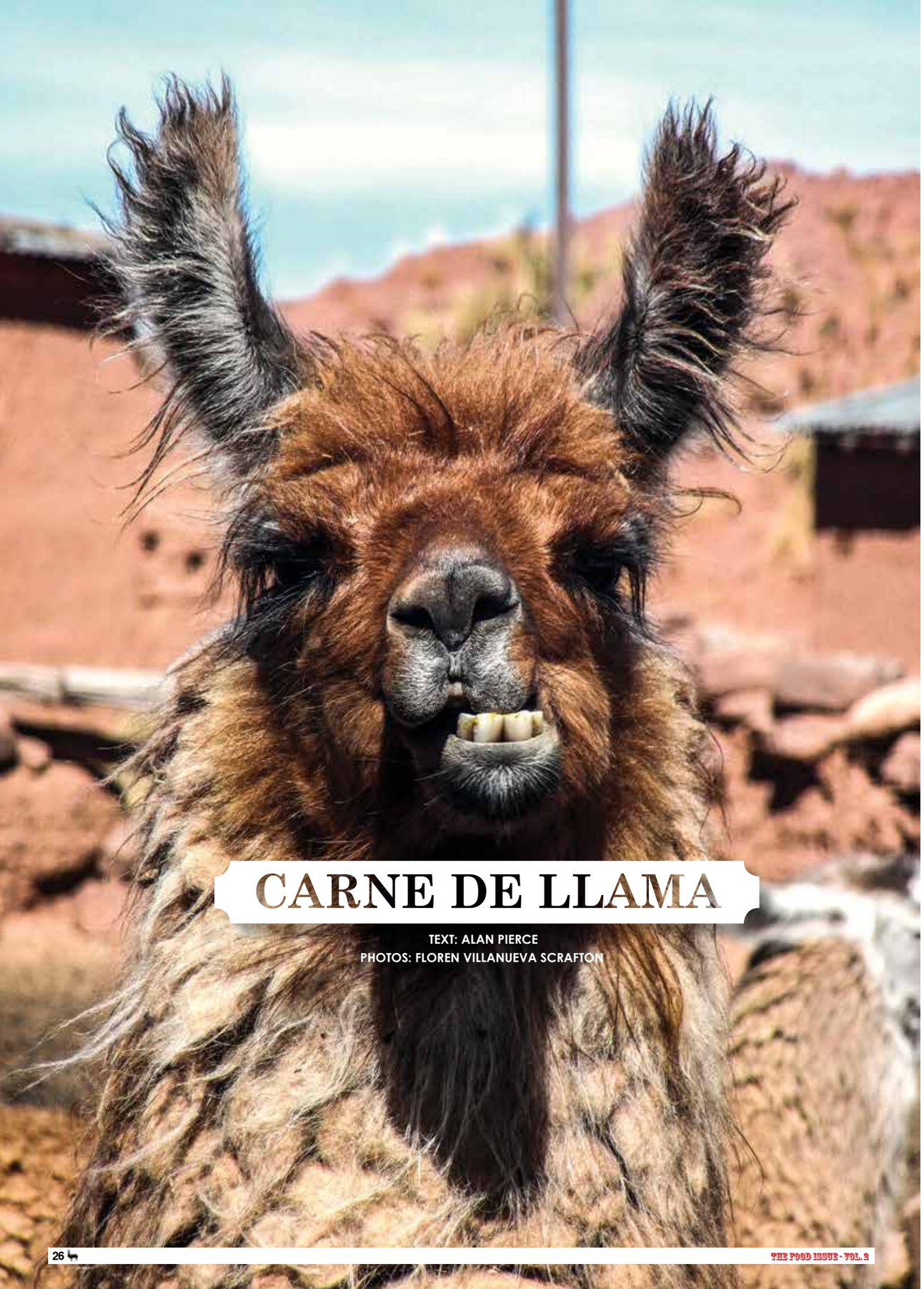
The lack of evidence confirming El Che's supposed employment at Eli's Pizzeria may be enough to dispel Don Max's tale, but rumors endure to this day surrounding el Che and his connection to the restaurant.

Doña Margarita, another employee at Eli's, has been waiting tables at the shop for more than 60 years. She recalls the claims made by Don Max, but denies that Che ever worked at the restaurant. According to Doña Margarita, Don Max greatly embellished his recollections.

What Margarita remembers, though, is that el Che did indeed frequent the pizzeria during his brief time in La Paz, apparently accompanied by several exiled Argentinian Peronists. 'He always had a coffee and apple pie', Margarita recalls. Perhaps this was his choice of food over which to discuss the budding future of the revolution he was spearheading. However, this may well be the stuff of local legend.

The restaurant staff apparently did not realise the significance of Guevara's presence until years later, when a manhunt began throughout the whole of Bolivia in search of the revolutionary leader.

Such is the trail left by a controversial figure who would meet his end in La Higuera. The truth of his passage through La Paz may never be known, even if we take Doña Margarita's word for all of this, but this hardly matters anymore. After all, legends live on in the minds of the those who believe in them. ×



CARNE DE LLAMA

TEXT: ALAN PIERCE
PHOTOS: FLOREN VILLANUEVA SCRAFTON

The corral of llamas gazed haughtily at me. Their jaws chewed side-to-side, a short row of buckteeth jutting out to form an overall aura of aloof heartiness. I had come to this remote llama farm in the dry unforgiving plains of the Altiplano to learn about the history of llama meat consumption, and these llamas weren't about to give this gringo any love. Maybe they could tell I was thinking about the delicious llama filet I had eaten the week before.

Luckily, two equally hardy but much less haughty women arrived, welcoming us with toothy smiles and wind-weathered wrinkly cheeks. After receiving our gift of a generously sized bag of coca leaves they explained that Bolivia's history of llama husbandry and consumption stretches back to ancient indigenous Aymara and Quechua communities who took advantage of the animal's adaptability to harsh high altitude conditions.

Raising llamas in their natural habitat meant that their daily, meandering, nibbling stroll through the countryside provided their breakfast, lunch and dinner. Today, llama farms still dot the landscape of the otherwise sparse Altiplano, although with decreasing frequency and size.

'Two or three families may use this llama corral', explains one of them. 'We grow them for our own use, although sometimes we sell some to city merchants if they come offering to buy and we need the money.'

While life in the Altiplano remains relatively unchanged for these small llama farms, the dynamics of the commercial llama meat industry have been changing over recent years. The fact that 'city people' would venture to the mountain plains for a llama purchase is a testament to this changing environment and also to the fledgling nature of an industry with limited commercial infrastructure.

The success of Mateo Laura's business, Mayken —which is one of, if not the only, company in Bolivia that makes llama sausages— relies for better or for worse on this shaky infrastructure. Back in the busy bustle of La Paz, I met with Laura, a man of Aymara descent whose family has worked on llama farms for generations.

While raising llamas was a simple necessity of life in the plains of the Altiplano for centuries, for Laura's present-day business, bringing the meat into commercial production has been a challenging process. 'We've had many difficulties trying to maintain our business. There is always a lack of capital, which makes important things like product distribution very difficult to manage.'

He continued, 'We need to get more marketing experts involved in order to spread knowledge of llama meat's nutritional characteristics, and to generate more acceptance of its consumption'. Apparently, llama meat is low in fat and cholesterol, and high in protein — in light of these characteristics it is perhaps one of the healthiest available on the menu of world meats.

Most budding businesses experience growing pains, but why has it been so hard to succeed within a country that has been eating llama meat for centuries? The truth is that culinary llama adaptations available in restaurants, hotels and cafés don't tempt the taste buds of most Bolivians. In our discussion about product distribution Laura made an interesting point, 'We distribute mostly to places like hotels, locations with many foreigners.'

So the majority of llama meat isn't consumed by Bolivians. Instead, it is eagerly thrust down the gullet of gullible tourists like myself. Aside from its obvious exotic attraction as a meat not widely available elsewhere, it offers what foreigners like me believe is a window into *la vida boliviana*. After all, aren't all Bolivians as excited about a llama carpaccio as I am? Apparently not.

One restaurant owner in La Paz tells me that the meat's cultural role in society is perhaps the main reason for this local aversion to its consumption. He also tells me that's exactly why he came to the city to make and sell traditional llama meat dishes.

On a busy street in Miraflores, the signs outside Edwin Mamani's restaurant 'El Fogón' boast *charquekan orureño* for only 15 bolivianos. Dried and shredded, this is a traditional way to prepare and serve llama meat.

Mamani explains his decision to open a restaurant here: 'I studied the market in this area and realized there is little to no *charquekan,* there was great economic incentive to open a restaurant'. Given the cultural history of the meat he was about to share with me, this was also a very risky business decision.

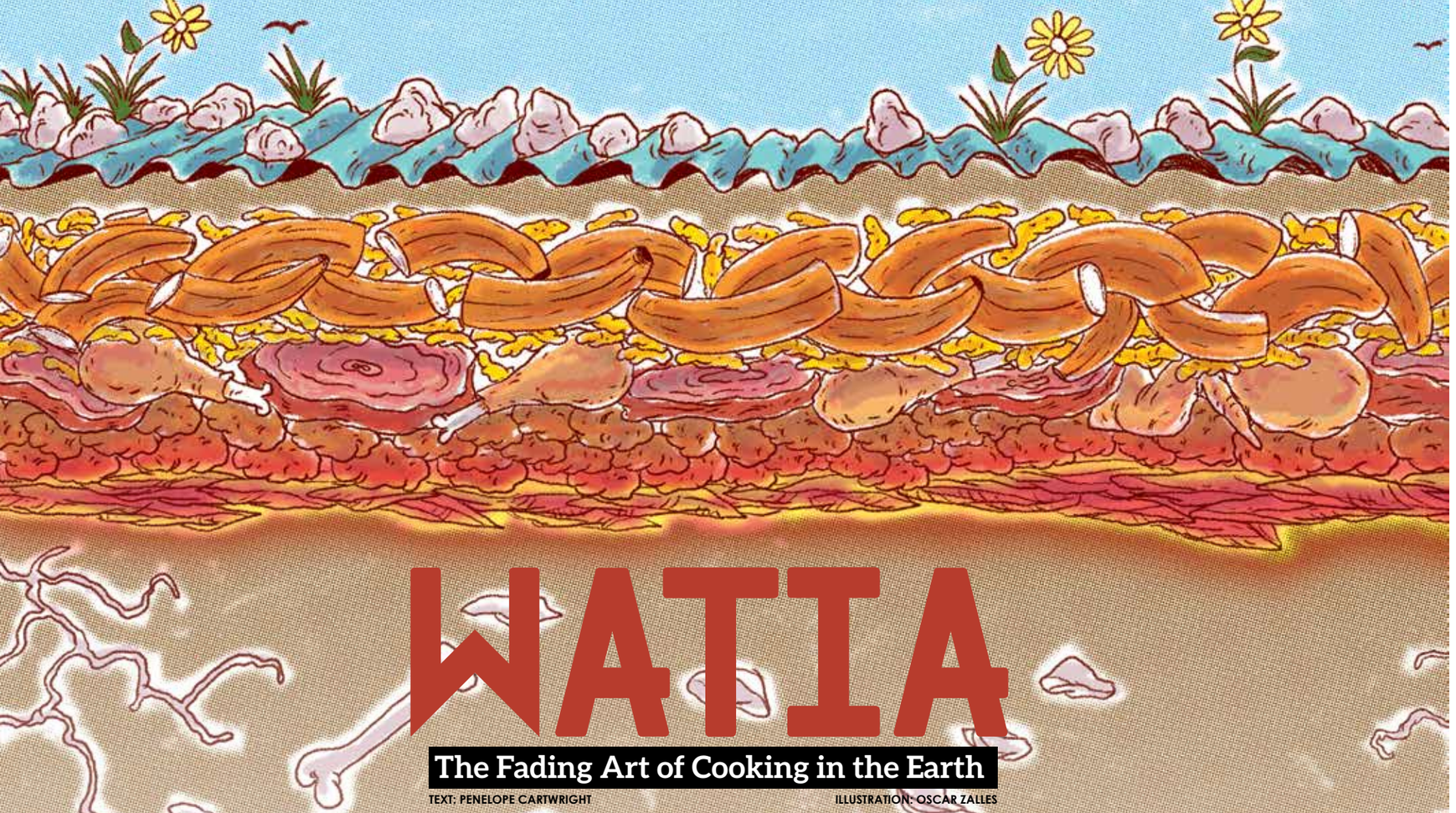
After he had piled the shredded meat onto a plate for me, I sat there in my fake alpaca wool sweater decorated with cheeky llamas and ate his truly authentic Bolivian dish, listening as he explained its history.

'Charquekan's origins lie in mining communities. The miners took coca and food with them into the mines for long shifts and their wives prepared the llama meat – which is a tough meat and was very cheap – in this way so it would last a long time.'

For this reason, like quinoa, llama meat's historical reputation is one of a food for the poor, for country folk. Today, Mamani explains that, unlike quinoa, it is still the middle and lower classes that eat charquekan in Oruro, but that here in La Paz people from a broader range of socioeconomic levels are becoming acquainted with the dish and are becoming better educated about the nutritional qualities of llama meat.

On the llama farm in the Altiplano, I thought about the future of this industry. Llamas are incredibly durable creatures, but would consumption of their meat also endure on a commercial scale? Or, like the foreigners that flock to dine on llama dishes in the cities, is this a product that is simply out of place in such an environment?

The llamas offered no hints through their bucktoothed gyrations and steady stares. Mamani is more optimistic about what lies ahead, 'In the future, it will be a dish for everyone, all classes. Everyone will eat it.'



WATIA

The Fading Art of Cooking in the Earth

TEXT: PENELOPE CARTWRIGHT

ILLUSTRATION: OSCAR ZALLES

Watia, the art of cooking food by burying it in hot earth, is an ancient Bolivian tradition. For Bolivians, cooking this way is to live the rituals and share the tastes of their Inca ancestors, explains Adrian Cachi Inca, a modern-day *watia* practitioner.

For all their emotional significance, however, *watia* dishes are becoming harder and harder to find in today's Bolivia—something I discover only after two minibus rides, two taxis and a total of five hours looking. Adrian's restaurant, El Carretero, lies in the dusty neighbourhood of Huajchilla. With its wide single road, huge horizons and dawdling trucks, Huajchilla is strongly reminiscent of the classic American Midwest, seemingly less a town than a mere tollgate on the road's continuing journey. Like the Midwest, it also has the feel of being out in the sticks—it's a good 25 kilometres from central La Paz. So, having travelled over an hour to get there, it is somewhat crushing to discover that, today, *watia* is not on the menu.

Still, Adrian—a stiff man, whose stern façade occasionally creases with glee (usually at the naïveté of my questions)—obligingly walks me through the process of his **pamparu** (the Quechua tribal name for *watia*). He explains that the embers at the bottom of the earth oven must be started at 6 am, as it takes two hours for the earth to warm up. Another three hours are needed for the meat itself—almost always pork or chicken—to be ready. He uses **greda** soil taken from the local area to seal the lid of the oven, which helps tenderize the meat. We even enjoy an elaborate fake photo shoot, with Adrian lowering some delicious-smelling marinated chicken into the cold pit (and leaving me in no doubt that when the Incas ate, they ate well). But for all our pleading, the oven is not coming on.

The reason for this is the bad weather. In traditional *watia* cooking, rain dampens the earth so that it can never become hot enough to cook with. For Adrian, the reason is more modern: rain scares off customers, and without a full house it is not worth the effort that *watia* demands. This pleasing continuity with the conditions of the past is what, for many, makes *watia* special. Yet it is also what endangers its continued practice today.

Watia is simply a time-intensive labour. The hours involved mean that Adrian can only cook one batch—serving around 30 people—per day, far less than the output of most modern restaurants. At its most authentic, *watia* is even more of a challenge: though Adrian does rely on the heat of the earth (unlike many supposed *watia* restaurants in Huajchilla, which simply use modern ovens), he does have the advantage of a metal lid to seal the hole. Traditional *watia* cooking involved covering the food with earth—and if any steam escaped the whole dish would be ruined. Guessing when the food was ready to be uncovered, then, would have taken considerable intuition and skill.

At its heart, *watia* has a similar idea to old Moroccan tagines or Chinese clay teapots—that the earth absorbs flavour, which it then also imparts onto new dishes. Everything cooked or served in that earth carries the memory of dishes made before it: food becomes history. But cooking this way involves a level of care and patience that's at odds with an increasingly mass-produced world. It is little wonder that, as Adrian tells me, there are only two *watia* restaurants left in Cochabamba, which was once a *watia* stronghold. Indeed, the big question seems to be: Will the next generation of Bolivians get to experience *watia*?

Adrian tells me about his clientele, mostly middle-class families, who often rent out the entire restaurant for special occasions. It seems to me that this might be the way of *watia* in the future. As food generally is produced on an increasingly industrialized scale, those with the money will often fork out for something unique. Of course, this risks turning *watia* into something of a novelty—a fun anomaly in a culture that it no longer fits—and not, as it once was, a glimpse into an older pace of life. But perhaps this is not to be helped—and even if *watia* becomes little more than a source of excellent chicken, that's nothing to be sneered at. After all, when has KFC ever tasted this good?

THE GREEN GHOST OF LA PAZ

Ajenjo, the Bolivian Absinthe

TEXT: NEIL SUCHAK

ILLUSTRATION: PABLO RUIZ

As you walk into Café Etno on Calle Jaen you might be forgiven for thinking that you were no longer in La Paz, but had been transported to a bar in a trendy district of a European city. The cavernous ceilings and dim candle-light are only some of the things that make this a unique spot in Bolivia. The other —its call to fame— is that Café Etno has apparently become the only place in La Paz that serves Ajenjo: a Bolivian variety of absinthe.

Usually made from wormwood and served alight on a sugar cube, European absinthe is largely associated with artists and intellectuals such as Vincent Van Gogh and Charles Baudelaire. Ajenjo is different. It is served straight with a side-glass of drinking water and it is distilled from an eponymous plant, which can take up to 25 years to flower on the banks of Bolivian rivers.

'First, inhale. Then drink. Then exhale', instructs the waiter, as he places a tiny shot of luminescent green liquid down in front of me.

'After that take tiny sips of the water… Don't take large gulps of the water. Otherwise, you might feel the urge to vomit', he warns.

I fear the quantity of water drunk won't make a difference, as I summon the courage to ingest the synthetic-looking liquid. Minutes later, the back of my throat is still smarting from the Ajenjo as it blazes a trail towards my stomach.

The overpowering taste of aniseed which I distinctly associate with European absinthe is not present. Instead, what I can just about discern is a faint grassy flavour, which intensifies as an after-taste once the burning begins to subside.

According to the bar staff, the mythic reputation of absinthe acting as a hallucinogen is maintained by Ajenjo. Apparently the liquid has caused previous drinkers to see spirits and ghosts lurking around on the streets. This is hardly surprising when one considers that the street it's on is reportedly haunted by the ghost of Pedro Domingo Murillo: a notorious figure in the struggle for Bolivia's independence, whose house remains on the street to this day.

Although General Murillo does not make an appearance that evening as I leave the bar, I am struck by the incredible feat that I have accomplished. In two drinks, I managed to consume 50 years worth of Ajenjo. In Europe, absinthe is known as la *fée verte*, the green fairy. But here, as I stare at the spectral green liquid inside my shot glass, it seems to me Ajenjo would be better named the green ghost, if only to reaffirm a curious local legend.

TRADITIONAL BOLIVIAN FAST FOOD

Coming Soon to a Food Court Near You!

TEXT: LAURA VAN ANTWERP
ILLUSTRATION: OSCAR ZALLES

Reflecting on traditional Bolivian cuisine, there are a few staples that immediately come to mind. The *plato paceño* features the unlikely combination of corn, giant lima beans, potato and fried cheese. Then there's the iconic *salteña*: a perfectly baked pastry filled with a savory blend of meat, vegetables and a slightly spicy sauce. And of course the *silpancho*, a hefty platter layered with rice, potatoes, meat, egg and topped with salsa. What unites these dishes, and also sets them apart from others, is the fact they are all based on traditional recipes, a quality which has enabled them to be passed down for generations.

While these foods have survived the passage of time largely unchanged, what does continue to change is the market in which they compete. Away from traditional eateries, demand for fast food in Bolivia continues to escalate, as evidenced by the ever-growing presence of Burger King and KFC franchises. But fast food chains are no longer just selling burgers and fried chicken. Many local initiatives have positioned themselves in this segment, mass producing treats traditionally only found in market stalls and home kitchens. Fast food establishments offering native dishes have sprouted up in shopping malls across the country, and chains are becoming established by opening up outlets on street corners everywhere. Giants in the making include Silpich's, Casa del Camba Express, Api Happy, La Quinta, and Wistupiku.

It was a sunny afternoon in La Paz when I decided to stroll into Api Happy, a restaurant located near the **Monoblock** that specialises in the rapid delivery of traditional Bolivian food from the highlands. The place was highly recommended to me and I'd even heard rumours that the woman who owns the restaurant intends to open franchises outside of Bolivia, thus making it the first Bolivian fast food company to go international.

The interior was, to put it frankly, basic (think mall food court meets high school cafeteria). I gandered upon the menu only to realise I was looking at pictures of unfamiliar foods in combinations I'd have never before imagined. I had no idea what to order.

So I decided to employ a trick I devised long ago for culinary predicaments such as the one I was facing: I ask what the most popular dish is, nod with great interest as the pearls of wisdom are bestowed unto me, pretend to ponder my way through a momentary bout of indecisiveness, and finally order every suggested item. In this case it was the *plato paceño,* which in hindsight was a predictable recommendation. It is, after all, the city's signature dish.

I took a seat at a table and decided to pass the time by flipping through an Api Happy leaflet I picked up on my way in. I learned that Api Happy has four franchises throughout Bolivia, as well as a few facts about their 'healthy' menu options. For example, the company uses whole grain flour for its pastries, which they claim assists in the prevention of diabetes and obesity. I glanced over to see a cook deep-frying one of these cheese-stuffed whole grain pastries, all the time wondering how many people actually buy into this claim.

It was about 11 am. The restaurant wasn't particularly busy, nor particularly dead. Most diners were eating the plato placeño, or presumably fighting off diabetes with one of these fried pastries. Not even a few minutes passed by before I joined in with my own *plato paceño*; my second one this week. I didn't notice a significant difference in this dish from the homemade version I had a few days earlier. In this case, flavour and quality were not compromised for the sake of a quick delivery.

I was, however, able to get the inside scoop on another popular Bolivian fast food franchise: Pollos Panchita. Originally a small fried chicken vendor operated by a married couple in Cochabamba, the operation has since grown to operate in four locations across Bolivia. It has also added a second menu under the name 'Llajta,' which includes a variety of traditional Bolivian favorites.

I arrived to the El Prado Panchita to meet with Sergio, who has managed this location for six years. A hands-on supervisor, Sergio was hard at work mopping the floor when I asked an employee to see the manager. I liked him immediately.

I had recently read that Francesca Dominguez, the owner of Pollos Panchita, has always placed great importance on purchasing all raw materials from domestic suppliers. I asked Sergio about this, and he told me that all their supplies and ingredients are shipped from Cochabamba. I then asked Sergio if the product arrives frozen and pre-made, as it commonly does with fast food establishments in the United States. He told me no. Aside from condiments, everything is prepared fresh each morning. Fresh fast food—now that's a new concept!

But in Bolivia this makes sense. Cochabamba is, after all, the agriculture and livestock farming centre of Bolivia, so ingredients are commonly sourced from this region. And materials travel only roughly 400 kilometers—a distance which pales in comparison to the thousands of kilometers ingredients must travel within the United States. Two other Bolivian fast food locations I visited also said that they source their food domestically, and sometimes even locally. Such a supply chain would be impossible for a big Western chain such as McDonald's to sustain, considering that these companies source from many locations and therefore must rely heavily on preservatives, processing and freezing.

But what about consistency and timeliness? Nobody likes a McNugget that isn't identical to its box mate, and Bolivian fast food is no exception. The key to fast food is being able to provide the exact same product, every time, at every franchise where it's sold—and fast. Sergio said that thanks to Pollos Panchita's ability to reinvent the preparation process, speed and consistency are ensured without a hitch. But what role do GMOs play in Bolivia's fast food?

As it turns out, not a very big one. Evo Morales's administration has recently passed the 'Law of Mother Earth and Integral Development for Living Well', which bans the introduction, production, use and

release of genetically modified seeds in Bolivia. There are certain loopholes, such as the allowance of transgenic varieties for non-native crops. When it comes to native crops, however, GMOs are strictly prohibited. Considering that traditional recipes are based on the use of native ingredients, the likeliness of encountering GMOs is slim.

As far as livestock is concerned, factory farming is not as pervasive in Bolivia as it is in Western nations. Rather, livestock farming, which follow the age-old traditional model, is free range by default.

According to Katrien Van't Hooft, who studies Bolivian farming methods, 'Animal raising is embedded in Andean cultural values, such as solidarity and reciprocity, community organisation and respect for Pachamama—or Mother Earth. Rural families perform, therefore, numerous rituals and festivals related to livestock throughout the agricultural cycle. The subject of livestock rearing by families is also closely connected to those of biodiversity, environment, gender, poverty and migration'. For these reasons, it has been difficult to move towards the industrialization of livestock keeping. It appears locally sourced meat will continue to be free range for quite some time to come.

But how do street vendors feel about this latest development of traditional fast food? Do they feel threatened by this growing form of competition? I've noticed an abundance of *salteña* franchises throughout the city; surely the small fish must be upset by the growing amount of new sharks in the sea. I decide to ask a street vendor, a young woman supervising a salteñería, about her thoughts on this. Surprisingly, she doesn't appear too concerned by it. She informs me that she has regulars who return faithfully each day who purchase her *salteñas* until she sells out. And she sells out every day.

IN THIS CASE, FLAVOUR AND QUALITY WERE NOT COMPROMISED FOR THE SAKE OF A QUICK DELIVERY.

Interestingly enough, Bolivians don't seem to mind the competition, or appear to even view it as such. As long as they get by, that's all that matters. Franchises don't need to worry about receiving any heat from these small vendors—at least not for now.

It appears Bolivian franchises serving up platos paceños and *salteñas* are here to stay. And while these restaurants may not yet compete or operate on same level as that of American fast food heavyweights, they certainly have a hold, and understanding, of a niche that could enable them to grow to that level. As they continue improving upon and developing new processes and new technologies, there's a good chance we could be seeing our first traditional Bolivian fast food franchise outside of Bolivia very soon. So don't be too surprised if you see *salteñas* at your mall food court within the next few years!

LLAJUA

Llajua, the Bolivian hot sauce, is not just popular, but also an essential part of Bolivia's social fabric. It's eaten in every corner of Bolivia, transcending cultural and regional divides, from the one-man burger vans of Plaza España and the polished floors of Burger King, to the houses of Bolivian haute cuisine. It originated on the altiplano, although different regions often have slightly different recipes. The addition of a traditional herb called wacataya comes from Sucre, and in Cochabamba some add **perejil** to the concoction. Its even eaten outside Bolivia, above all in the north of Argentina and parts of Chile, where it's called pebre instead. In 2009, the Bolivian government went as far as to patent the idea!

Ingredients

Ripe medium tomatoes
Red and gree **locotos**, without seeds
Quirquiña
Teaspoon salt

1. Peel the tomatoes, slice the locoto (removing seeds) and add the kirkiña leaves
2. Grind tomatoes, **locoto**, green chile peppers and kirkiña on a traditional **batán** stone
3. Add salt and continue grinding

For those wanting to make it spicier, use less tomato and increase the proportion of quirquiña and **locoto**. When done, the llajua is likely to turn out green or a darker red. (The redness is a sign of the proportion of tomato used; generally the redder it is, the less spicy.)

TEXT: OLLIE VARGAS
PHOTO: MICHAEL DUNN

GLOSSARY

AJO	Garlic
BAÑO	Bathroom
BATÁN	A mortar used for blending and grinding foods and herbs
CALDO	Soup or broth
CAMPESINOS	Rural workers
CHINO RENEGÓN	Grumpy Chinese man
DIABLO	Devil
GREDA	Clay or fuller's earth
LOCOTO	Chili pepper native to the Bolivian andes and valleys
MONOBLOCK	The name given to the iconic orange building which houses the UMSA, La Paz's major state university
MOTE	Corn kernel
PAMPARU	The Quechua word for watia
PEREJIL	Parsley
POTOSINO	A person from Potosí
SALTEÑERIA	An establishment that sells salteñas
SINGANI	Bolivian brandy, similar to Peruvian pisco
TRANQUILO	Calm, tranquil
TUMBO	An elongated variety of passionfruit
WAKATAYA	A tradition fish-based soup
WATIA	Cooking in the earth
WILLKAPARU	Indigenous Bolivian corn


PHOTO: CHRISTIAN CALDERON

PHOTO: MICHAEL DUNN CACERES