

## Peruvian Customs and Cuisine



Located in South America, Peru is divided in three main geographical zones; the Pacific coast, the Andean highlands and the Amazon rainforest.

With its western border on the Pacific Ocean, Peru is bordered on land by Ecuador, Columbia, Brazil, Bolivia and Chile. A multi-ethnic country of Amerindians, Europeans, Africans and Asians, Peru is also home to one of the oldest civilizations in the world, the Notre Chico as well as the Inca Empire. Spanish is the official language, but Quechua and other languages are spoken in Peru as well.

Agriculture is Peru's most important commodity. While most who inhabit the provinces rely solely on their crops, they export almost as much as they keep for themselves. An example is quinoa, where the demand for it from the U.S. has created shortages in their own country.

One of the world's most popular vegetables, *papas* (potatoes), were first grown in Peru, and Peru continues to produce the most potato varieties and has been referred to as the "Potato Capital of the World." In addition it has at least 150 varieties of sweet potato and 35 varieties of corn.

Aji (chili pepper) is a major force in creating spicy Peruvian dishes. Other

herbs like mint, oregano, parsley and cilantro are commonly used.

The variety of climates and landscapes from Peru's three main differing agricultural areas has really helped establish the cuisine as one of the most interesting in South America. From the Pacific Ocean comes a bounty of fish. Cebiche, marinated fish, is considered one of the iconic dishes of Peru. The mountain or highland diet consists of basic staples of potatoes, corn, rice and various meats. And in the Amazonian rainforest you will find a diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetables, bananas, plantains and yucca, along with meat.

Source material:

<http://www.foodbycountry.com/Kazakhstan-to-South-Africa/Peru.html#ixzz3lMAMuuRM>

<http://whatscookinginyourworld.blogspot.com/2011/06/day-141-peru-peruvian-grilled-chicken.html>



### **Chicken and Cilantro Soup (Aguadito de Pollo)**

**Serves 4-6**

This is a comfort food soup served often in Peru.

I've slightly adapted this recipe, left out the corn kernels, cut the potatoes into dice. You could also cut the chicken meat into chunks instead of using whole legs, which makes it easier to eat.

#### **Ingredients**

- 4 chicken legs or equivalent amount of diced raw chicken
- Salt and pepper
- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- ½ cup onion, finely chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, mashed
- 2 fresh aji amarillo, chopped, or 3 tablespoons paste (see note)
- 2 cups cilantro leaves (discard the stems)
- 4 cups chicken stock
- 1 cup dark beer (optional)
- ½ red bell pepper cut in slices
- 1 cup carrot, diced
- ½ cup long grain rice
- 4 medium yellow potatoes, peeled and diced
- ½ cup green peas

## **Directions**

Season the chicken with salt and pepper. Heat the vegetable oil in a saucepan over medium heat, add the chicken pieces, and sear them. Transfer the chicken pieces to a plate and keep warm. In the same saucepan sauté onion and garlic until golden.

Process cilantro leaves and fresh aji amarillo with ¼ cup water in a blender until smooth; add to the onion mixture, along with the chicken stock, beer, if using, chicken, potatoes and carrots. Bring to a boil, turn the heat to low, cover with a lid, and simmer for 20 minutes. Add rice, cover the pot, and simmer until rice is done. Add peas for the last few minutes of cooking time.

Garnish with slivers of red bell pepper.

\*Note: You can find aji amarillo peppers in Latin markets in the freezer section, or in a paste in jars or as a dried powdered spice. If you can't get your hands on any you could use a different type of chile to add some heat; since this soup is green it won't benefit from the yellow color of the pepper anyway.

Adapted from: <http://perudelights.com/aguadito-de-pollo-chicken-soup-to-warm-your-body/>

Photo credit: <http://perudelights.com>



## **Lime-Marinated Raw Fish (Cebiche)**

**Serves 6-8**

If Peru had an official national dish, it would probably be this preparation of raw fish marinated in citrus juice. Here's what Morena Escardo, the author of the blog "Peru Delights" has to say about this iconic dish: "For us, cebiche is not something that has recently become fashionable, following the buzz created by chefs like Nobu, Jamie Oliver and Douglas Rodriguez. Peruvians have been polishing plates of raw fish clean, from dusk till dawn, for many centuries."

Typically this dish is served with boiled sweet potato slices and Peruvian giant kernel corn. I've suggested corn on the cob as a reasonable substitute. If corn on the cob isn't available I think another great way to garnish this dish would be with corn tortilla chips.

The acid in the lime "cooks" the fish, so technically it's not still raw, for those of you who are squeamish about those sorts of things.

### **Ingredients**

1 ½ lbs. sea bass, halibut, flounder, snapper or other firm ocean-going white fish

1 red onion, cut in fine slices  
½ aji amarillo chili pepper, chopped very fine (can substitute jalapeno)  
Salt  
1 garlic clove, chopped very fine  
Juice of 12 limes  
2 tbsp. cilantro leaves, sliced  
1 large sweet potato, boiled, peeled and sliced thickly  
1-2 ears of corn, sliced through about 1-2" thick, boiled  
Lettuce leaves

### **Directions**

Combine fish and onion and wash them together. Drain well.

Place the fish in the serving bowl you wish to use. Season the fish with salt, chili pepper and garlic.

Add the lime juice, and a couple of ice cubes or a couple of tablespoons of iced water.

Let rest for 5 minutes, but no longer than 45 minutes. Discard the ice.

Sprinkle with coriander leaves. Serve immediately with lettuce, corn and sweet potatoes.

Adapted from: <http://perudelights.com/cebiche/>

Photo credit: <http://perudelights.com/cebiche/>



### **Caramel Cookie Sandwiches (Alfajores) (Tested)** **Makes 24 pairs of cookies**

Alfajores are a very popular cookie in Peru and you can bet they are on everybody's dessert table at Christmas. They are a sandwich cookie filled with dulce de leche (caramel) filling. There are many recipes out there for alfajores. Some call for eggs, some want only egg yolks, others use only flour and still others use only cornstarch. I've taken what I think are the best parts of these recipes and done a test run for you, and I think what I came up with was a winner.

I used half flour and half cornstarch because using only cornstarch will definitely make a very delicate and delicious cookie, but one that is harder to work with. I want you to be successful the first time around!

You can purchase dulce de leche, but I've given you extremely simple instructions to make your own. Even though it takes awhile to make, you will not have to run to a specialty store to find it and you'll save a lot of money to boot!

When baked, these cookies should be light brown on the bottom and still white on top. My first tray came out perfect, but I didn't pay attention to my second tray and they came out brown. They were delicious nonetheless. A little crisper than what would be served in Peru, but I

thought a little bit more flavorful due to the caramelization in the cookie dough. So have no fear if your cookies get a bit too brown, they will still be very good!

### **Ingredients**

1 cup cornstarch

1 ¼ cups flour

¾ cup powdered sugar

½ tsp. baking powder

1/8 tsp. sea salt

2 sticks butter, cut into dice

1 13 oz. can sweetened condensed milk, or purchased dulce de leche

### **Directions for the dulce de leche**

Remove the label from a can of sweetened condensed milk and place in a deep pot. Lay the can on its' side and cover with water by two inches. Bring to a boil, covered, and continue to boil for two to three hours. The longer time period will give you a darker caramel. Make sure to check every now and then to see if the can is still covered with water, add more as necessary.

Remove from the pot and allow to cool. This may be made ahead of time. It will keep indefinitely in the refrigerator. Bring to room temperature before using to spread between the cookies.

### **Directions for the cookies**

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Put all the dry ingredients together in a food processor and pulse a few times to combine well. Add the cubed butter and pulse until it starts to come together in a ball. Don't overmix – it should look shaggy – and you will press the rest of the dough together on a counter. Flatten into a disc, wrap in plastic and refrigerate for 30 minutes to firm up a bit.

Roll dough out about ¼" thick and cut out with a small round cookie cutter. The cutter I used was about 2" wide, but a glass works well. Place the rounds on a parchment lined baking sheet and bake for 10-12 minutes, just



until the bottom is lightly brown and the top is still white. Cool completely.

Assemble the cookie sandwiches by spreading 1-2 teaspoons of dulce de leche on one cookie half and top with the other.

Dust with powdered sugar and devour!

Recipe and photo credit: Linda McElroy



### **Spicy Potato Terrine (Causa Rellena)**

Causa is a popular dish cherished all over the country of Peru. It's a fun and creative dish that is easy to make. Chicken salad and tuna salad are the usual suspects in the filling, but home cooks and restaurant cooks are branching out and using whatever suits their fancy. I used a shrimp filling in my version. You can serve it humbly at home or dress it up and bring it to a party with all the fancy toppings.

Causa can be formed many ways. You can do it jelly-roll style, or in a large round as I have done for this presentation. If you want to make individual rounds that would be an elegant way to present this. And for a more informal appetizer you could make individual bite-size ones. Just take a

small ball of potato into the palm of your hand, press your thumb into the middle and push in a bit of filling and press closed. Garnish as desired.

### **Ingredients**

#### **For the potatoes**

2 lbs. Yukon gold potatoes  
½ cup olive oil  
1/3 cup lime juice (about 3)  
1 tsp. aji amarillo powder

#### **For the fillings, choice of:**

Tuna salad  
Chicken salad  
Shrimp salad  
Tomato and avocado

#### **For the toppings**

Sliced hardboiled egg  
Sliced avocado  
Halved cherry tomatoes  
Black olives  
Herbs  
Bell pepper

### **Directions**

Boil the potatoes until pierced easily with a knife. When cool enough to handle, peel the skins and mash smoothly or put through a potato ricer.

Stir the chile powder into the lime juice so that there are no lumps and add to the potatoes along with the olive oil. Add salt to taste, you'll probably need at least one teaspoon.

Line two 9" pans with plastic wrap and let the extra hang over the edge of the pans.

Divide the potato mixture between the two prepared pans and press to flatten and smooth out. Bring the edges of the plastic wrap over the potato

cake and refrigerate until chilled.

**To assemble**

Remove one potato cake from the pan by using the plastic wrap sling, flip and place on a serving platter. Spread with the filling of your choice. Top with the second potato cake.

Now comes the fun part. Decorate your causa rellena by using any of the suggested toppings from the list, or use your imagination and use whatever you have on hand. Serve chilled.

Recipe and photo credit: Linda McElroy