



# Bolivia's New Food Revolution

La Paz is the highest capital city in the world, and now it's one of the most inspired, too—thanks to a citywide renaissance sparked by an unlikely source: local chefs. **by MARK JOHANSON**

**E** **VERY COUNTRY** has its street food—banh mi in Vietnam, pierogi in Poland, arepas in Colombia. In Bolivia, it's *anticuchos*, sizzling kebabs of heavily spiced, sliced beef heart. More than once I've chewed my way through a few of these in the capital, La Paz, after a night out. Which is why, last fall, while dining at the city's fanciest restaurant, Gustu, it came as a shock when a server brought me a stick of meat on a cooking stone. Here, anticuchos were elevated to haute cuisine.

Gustu lies in tony Zona Sur, an affluent neighborhood of La Paz. That night, in addition to grilling my own anticuchos, I used a

bone to eat honey-cured lamb, plucked an ant off the top of a pickled harlequin beet, and licked a crunchy Andean grain called *cañahua* off a cow's tail. And these were only the appetizers on the epic 22-course tasting menu. There was also a wonderfully tangy palm heart doused in balsamic vinegar; surprisingly delicious (and strangely chicken-like) caiman meat paired with rutabaga; and a trilogy of quinoa in grain, cream, and miso-paste form that showed off the Bolivian staple's unexpected versatility.

Gustu is the creation of Danish restaurateur Claus Meyer, co-founder of the New Nordic cuisine movement. In 2013, Meyer was on top of the world, after his restaurant in Copen-

▲ The kitchen at Gustu, which inspired a new era of Bolivian cuisine.

hagen, Noma—which he ran alongside chef René Reolzepe—had scored the number one slot on the World's 50 Best Restaurants list for the third consecutive year. He could have done anything, but he shocked the world by opening his second restaurant in La Paz, a city of fewer than a million high in the Andes Mountains. Not only that, Meyer set up a string of culinary programs in the city's poorest neighborhoods to train a new generation of Bolivians about the importance of native ingredients. In an interview at the time, he explained his decision this way: “Bolivia may have the most interesting and unexplored biodiversity in the world.”

When I first visited Gustu, in 2013, La Paz was an overlooked city, largely undeveloped, with no culinary scene to speak of. But the head chef at the time, Kamilla Seidler, also from Denmark, promised me that the young chefs in Gustu's cooking programs would soon

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Clockwise from above: Plaza Murillo and the National Congress building, in La Paz; walking home after school in the capital city; the famous Witches' Market, the place to go for traditional herbal cures; papaya tiradito at Ali Pacha; and Gustu's anticucho meat skewers.



transform the city. “When we see this generation go off and do their own thing, it’s going to be very exciting,” she said.

She was right. Six years later, La Paz is in the midst of a culinary renaissance inspired by Gustu culinary principles and alums. That revival has overlapped with a rejuvenation of the city as a whole—one that has transformed La Paz into one of South America’s most exciting capitals.

“When Gustu opened, many Bolivians didn’t appreciate native products; everything from the outside was better,” says current Gustu head chef Marsia Taha. The 29-year-old Bolivian says the most important thing she learned from the Danes was not technique but pride in their own local cuisine—“even though,” she says, “they have less than 5 percent of the products we have in Bolivia.”

Bolivia may be one of the poorest countries in the Americas, but geographically and biologically speaking, it’s one of the richest. Its endemic ingredients include some 2,000 different types of native potatoes, dozens of

antioxidant-rich palm fruits, and a handful of protein-packed grains.

Proof of Bolivia’s newfound pride is on display at Popular Cocina Boliviana. This new restaurant from chef Diego Rodas lies above the Witches’ Market—the place to go for herbal Viagras, prophetic readings, and other indigenous cures—and puts a gourmet spin on the city’s classic lunch stalls. Rodas explains to me after plates of empanada-like *tucumanas* and fleshy Titicaca trout that “lunch is the most important meal of the day for Bolivians.” By

focusing on the midday crowd, keeping menus simple, and not elevating prices, he envisions Popular as a more inclusive place than Gustu to experience Bolivian gastronomy—one that many locals can actually afford.

Downstairs from Popular is the Andean Culture Distillery, which produces Killa Andean Moonshine. Like the traditional Bolivian drink chicha, it’s made from fermented corn but distilled to 45 percent ABV, so it tastes much smoother, like bourbon. A block away is the *vinobar* Hay Pan, which pairs red wine varietals like tannat, made in the world’s highest-altitude vineyards, near the city of Tarija, with llama sausage. In the corner of the room, there’s a turntable spinning vinyl. There are also dozens of watering holes in the tourist hot spot of Calle Sagarnaga, where you can swig cervezas made with quinoa, amaranth, and coca (of cola and cocaine fame).

Evidence of local pride extends far beyond the food. The culinary revival mirrored a cultural renaissance in the city overall, among designers, musicians, artists, and architects.

Each room at the recently opened boutique hotel Atix, for example, features works by Bolivian artist Gastón Ugalde. Design shops like Mistura and Walisuma are working with indigenous collectives across the nation to sell textiles and handmade alpaca sweaters.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JULIEN CAPRELL (4); COURTESY OF GUSTU



In the satellite city of El Alto, there's a wave of Technicolor "New Andean" mansions from architect Freddy Mamani, which cost up to \$600,000 and look as if they were built during an ayahuasca fever dream. To reach the city, you can glide from downtown La Paz (elevation: 11,940 feet) to uptown El Alto (elevation: 13,615 feet) on one of the eight cable-car lines that crisscross the cities.

"La Paz isn't a pretty city, but it is quite sexy," says Boris Alarcón, as we down cold brews at his gilded coffee bar HB Bronze. His shop is located in a shabby corner of the once glorious Casco Viejo neighborhood, which, a decade ago, was practically deserted. Today, on the surrounding blocks, Alarcón has turned long-abandoned mansions into opulent co-working spaces (Kilometro 0), bookstores (The Writer's Coffee) and hotels (Altu Qala). He now outbids deep-pocketed Europeans to keep the country's best coffee beans, chocolates, and wine inside Bolivia and on the menus at his properties.

Around the corner from HB Bronze is the

▲ Bolivia's endemic ingredients include thousands of fruits and vegetables, sold in stands across La Paz (above); La Artesana, one of the many breweries in and around the city (top right); and lunch at Popular Cocina Boliviana (bottom right).

high-end vegan restaurant Ali Pacha, which is run by Gustu alum Sebastian Quiroga and boasts a strict local-food philosophy: every quinoa grain, cacao nib, and acai berry comes from within Bolivia. After three spectacular courses, I stroll through downtown La Paz to Jallalla, a newly opened *peña* (folk club) on a corner of the cobblestoned Calle Jaén.

Jallalla sits above the gallery of Mamani Mamani and has a veritable Sistine Chapel of the painter's psychedelic Andean art on its ceiling. It's run by Jhon Montoya and Ricardo Iglesias, and serves Bolivian tapas. When I head to the bar for a cocktail, the bartender recommends the Luka Quivo, a mix of locally distilled vodka (1825 brand), fresh orange juice, ginger, and airampo cactus. It arrives in a shoeshine box honoring the *lustrabotas*, who wear ski masks to avoid the stigma of shining shoes for a living. The cocktail is yet another reminder that being unabashedly Bolivian in Bolivia today is, two centuries after independence, suddenly a revolutionary idea. ■



## FOUR CAN'T-MISS MEALS IN LA PAZ

### GUSTU

It's the place that started it all, and you dine on à la carte plates like caiman tail with watermelon rind or hunker down for eight- to 22-course tasting menus.

### ALI PACHA

Ali Pacha is a serene oasis of plant-based fine dining amid the chaos of downtown. It offers three- to seven-course vegan meals that even carnivores will drool over.

### POPULAR COCINA BOLIVIANA

You won't find a cheaper gourmet lunch anywhere in the Americas, with modern twists on staples like *pastel de papas* (potato pie) and *patasca* (a grain-based stew).

### JALLALLA

The vibe is always electric at this eclectic, art-infused folk-music venue. Not a single ingredient used in the tapas or one-of-a-kind cocktails comes from outside Bolivia.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: JULIEN CARMEIL (2); COURTESY OF POPULAR COCINA BOLIVIANA