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**Still waters** A canoe on the Rio Dorado, a blackwater tributary of the Ucayali river, which merges with the Marañón to form the Amazon. Inset: Nobu Matsuhisa, and *choriza* (palm heart), as served on the M/V Aria





# EATING UP THE AMAZON

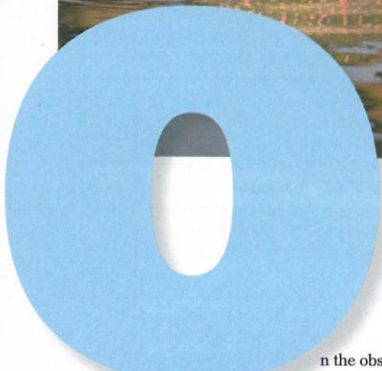
*with Nobu*

Peruvian cuisine has gone global, with new restaurants springing up everywhere from Santiago to Soho. On an Amazonian cruise, **Andrew Purvis** meets the Japanese superchef whose experiments with Asian-Peruvian fusion began in Lima nearly 40 years ago





NO ONE CAN SAY  
FOOD ON BOARD  
THE ARIA ISN'T  
FRESH AND LOCAL



On the observation deck of the M/V Aria, the most opulently-appointed cruise ship on the Amazon, there is less appetite than usual for the communal Jacuzzi. Passengers would normally be immersing themselves in the cool, clear water to soak away the heat and humidity of this spot, close to the equator, where the Marañon and Ucayali rivers meet. Today they have formed a huddle round the tub, but no one has ventured in and, on closer inspection, I can see why.

Not only is it filled with muddy river water that smells faintly of methane, but the surface is broken every few minutes by a gargantuan fish. "It's a *paiche*," says Victor Coelho, one of four naturalist guides on board, leaping into the Jacuzzi in his shorts to wrestle with the prehistoric leviathan and to present it for a photo opportunity. "The *paiche* is at the top of the food chain and has a bony tongue to rake in smaller fish. Like a mammal, it has to surface every five or 10 minutes for oxygen. A large fish could feed a family for a week."

This one will feed 32 passengers at a dinner showcasing the talents of five top chefs, among them Nobu Matsuhisa – owner of more than 30 restaurants worldwide, including two in London with a Michelin star each – and Yoshihiro Murata, arguably the most influential chef in Japan. His Kikunoi restaurant in Kyoto has three Michelin stars while Roan Kikunoi (also in Kyoto) and Akasaka Kikunoi (in Tokyo) have two stars each. In Peru for a conference, they have been invited to cook on board by Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, the Aria's executive chef, himself dubbed "South America's Heston Blumenthal" for his use of esoteric ingredients both here and at Malabar, his acclaimed restaurant in Lima.

On the 147ft-long Aria and its sister ship the Aqua, both operated by Aqua Expeditions, gastronomy is high on the agenda. Last September the Aria hosted Ferran Adrià, of El Bulli fame, with Gastón Acurio – the chef who, seven years ago, took Peruvian cuisine to new heights and has promoted it worldwide in his 33 restaurants. Both were in Lima for Mistura, South America's biggest food festival, along with René Redzepi of Noma in Copenhagen. Book a cruise on the Aria, and there is a strong chance of a culinary happening in addition to the gourmet meals that come as standard.

In the mornings and afternoons, passengers set out on motorised skiffs with the Aria's naturalist guides – all local – to fish for piranhas and spot pink river-dolphins, caimans, iguanas, monkeys, bats, sloths and a bewildering variety of birds in the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve west of Iquitos, the main city in the Peruvian rainforest. One day they might release baby turtles back into the wild, the next they might visit a sanctuary for manatees, seal-like river mammals. They arrive back in time for a rain shower in their air-conditioned, Italian-styled suite,

followed by a pisco sour (grape brandy, lime juice, sugar, egg white), elegantly mixed by Robinson the bartender, and a sumptuous Peruvian feast.

Over a chilled Cusqueña beer on the night of the five-chef showdown, I ask Nobu about the *paiche* in the Jacuzzi. Is it already sushi? "We slaughtered it out there, then I tenderised it with vegetables," he says. "I used broccoli, ginger, celery, tomato, garlic, chilli, kombu [kelp], wakame [sweet seaweed] and two others... 10 vegetables, all finely chopped to produce the enzymes that make the *paiche* soft. You marinade it for one hour only and the enzymes do their work. There's no oil, no sugar, just salt and all those vegetable flavours."

When I cut into the fish later, it does indeed have a soft, fluffy texture and is virtually boneless, unlike chef Murata's dish of *gamitana* – a fruit-eating piranha with an earthy taste, like trout – coated in a paste of *mocambo*, a subtly sweet jungle fruit the colour of butternut squash. Cross-stitched with small bones, this fish is not a great joy to eat, but the combination of flavours rewards the senses. Also on the menu is "dangerous manioc": grated wild



**Catch and cook** Pedro Miguel Schiaffino (top), the executive chef on the M/V Aria (left), grapples with a giant *paiche* – the river fish later prepared by Nobu

cassava that is strained, boiled for hours to remove toxins, then made into a gelatinous soup with fish, manioc flour and *jambu*, a mildly anaesthetic Amazonian herb that numbs the tongue but is spicy and pleasantly warming.

Other dishes during my four-day cruise include tagliatelle of *chonta* (palm heart) in a clear stock flavoured with smoked pork and, floating in it, a nugget of catfish and some freshwater shrimps the size of grains of rice; a free-range hen with black quinoa, similar to mung beans in texture, from the High Andes; a leg of chicken standing upright, with quartered hard-boiled eggs and rice packed around it, wrapped in a jungle leaf; catfish skewers; the chopped, spicy meat of an Amazon snail in its huge shell; and *pacamoto*, fish cooked inside a bamboo tube, traditionally over coals but, on the *Aria*, grilled.

It's a little off-piste for some diners, but you can't say the food isn't fresh and local. Regional produce is close to the heart of Schiaffino, though his menu rotates from Amazonian to Japanese to Italian (because the *Aria*'s owner, Francesco Galli Zugaro, is Italian) to "Chifa", the curious Chinese-Peruvian fusion seen in garish Asian-styled restaurants all over Peru.

Created and evolved by Chinese immigrants who came here as free labour after the abolition of slavery in 1854, Chifa sprang from the enforced substitution of traditional Chinese ingredients with local ones. A good example is *lomo saltado* – strips of beef marinated in vinegar and soy sauce, stir-fried with red onions, Peruvian yellow chillis, wild coriander and tomatoes. In similar fashion, Japanese immigrants invented their own fusion style, "Nikkei", when they arrived at the turn of the century to work, mainly in agriculture.

In his restaurants, Nobu puts his own sophisticated spin on Nikkei. At Nobu London, the menu includes ceviche (raw fish marinated in lime juice, garlic, coriander and red chilli, garnished with red onion) and *tiradito* (a subtler version, with the fish sliced more thinly, like a carpaccio, and no onion). Salmon, beef, chicken and vegetables are given a South American kick with *aji panca* and *aji amarillo*, red and yellow hot chilli peppers. Why, I ask Nobu, does he feel such an affinity with Peruvian ingredients, dishes and methods?

"I married my wife in 1972, in Japan," he explains, "and in 1973 we came to Peru and lived here for a few years. Some Japanese-Peruvian friends invited me to open a traditional Japanese restaurant, Matsuei, with

## LEARN THE LINGO, GRINGO

**AJI LIMO** Spicy, aromatic red/orange pepper used in a ceviche.

**AJI PANCA** Milder, fruitier red pepper with a pleasant smoky flavour.

**ANTICUCHOS** Skewers of spicy grilled meat.

**CAUSA** Mashed yellow or sweet potato, sweetened with lime and yellow pepper.

**CEVICHE** Peru's national dish of raw fish marinated with lime juice, garlic, red chilli and coriander.

**CHARAPITA** ("Little turtle") Tiny spherical yellow pepper, very spicy. Served after coffee at Malabar in Lima.

**LECHE DE TIGRE** The sour, zesty liquid left over from a ceviche, added to pisco (fiery grape brandy) to make a potent drink that "brings the dead back to life".

**LOMO SALTADO** A Chifa (Chinese fusion) dish of beef marinated in vinegar, stir-fried with tomato, onion, yellow pepper and soy sauce.

**PAICHE** "Piggy fish" (eats anything), from the Amazon.

**PAPA** Quechua for potato, of which around 3,000 varieties are said to grow in Peru.

**ROCOTO** A hot yellow chilli pepper native to Peru, deseeded and boiled to make it milder.

**TIRADITO** A subtler version of a ceviche, with the fish sliced more thinly (like a carpaccio) and no onion.



them in Lima." Unable to find the ingredients he took for granted in Japan, he too had to improvise, hence his trademark style of transcontinental fusion. "My first daughter was born in Lima," he says, "and we were invited to Iquitos, in the Amazon, by my business partner's family. My wife couldn't go with the baby, of course, so I brought my mother to show her the jungle."

Thirty-eight years later, Nobu is back – a changed man with a Bulgari watch on his wrist and a restaurant empire to his name, rubbing shoulders with the likes of Giorgio Armani and Robert De Niro (who co-owns some Nobu restaurants), a friendship that landed him a part in Martin Scorsese's *Casino*. Other roles followed as Mr Roboto in *Austin Powers: Goldmember* and as a kimono artist in *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Despite his Hollywood lifestyle, he

has not forgotten his time spent in Peru as a young chef and the way the experience influenced his future.

"I remembered the ceviches I'd had," he says, "and I thought, why not do that in my own restaurants?"

More than anything it is the use of raw fish that links the two countries, as Nobu has observed during his frequent visits over the past 15 years. "In Japan we eat a lot of raw fish," he says, "with soy sauce and wasabi always. Here, the raw fish is marinated in lime juice. It's the same product eaten in a completely different way. At one time, Peruvians marinated their fish for four or five hours. Japanese people know that, after that time, it doesn't taste much of fish! I'm not saying I did it, but the Japanese had an influence on how Peruvians prepare raw fish. Now, it's marinated for just three minutes."

It's the healthiest fast food imaginable – an overdose of vitamin C, plus lots of omega 3 – but at an on-board lecture by Victor Coelho about rainforest culture, I learn about deficits in the local diet that are impossible to address. "We eat lots of fish and fruit but very little calcium," he says. "Bone problems such as osteoporosis are very common, especially among pregnant women."

At the noisy, chaotic and malodorous food market in Belén, the third-biggest port city in the Amazon after Belém and Manaus (both in Brazil), an Amerindian woman demonstrates how to make the most of the small amount of calcium there is. Preparing fish for the charcoal grill, she makes dozens of incisions in the skin on both sides to cut the smaller, bristle-like bones into manageable shards that won't get stuck in the throat. Digested, they provide some calcium, but it isn't nearly enough. These are desperate measures.

Elsewhere in these narrow streets lined with stalls and rammed with hooting motorised rickshaws, I see rows of a boneless shark catfish, *mota*, the best for making ceviche; *palometas* (round, saucer-like silver fish), snails, *corvina* (bass) and freshwater crabs, in which Nobu shows a particular interest. "In Japan we use crab to lower the body temperature and ginger to raise it again," he says, pointing to the moist tubers of fresh wild ginger, darker in colour than our dried version, on the stalls around us.

Nobu and Murata are fascinated by a woman making "jungle spaghetti", long strips of palm heart cut by hand from the tree's fibrous core, and Schiaffino introduces them to *mandarina* (a dark green citrus fruit with pale orange flesh) and large knobby limes found only around



### Jungle explorers

Nobu Matsuhisa and his wife, Yoko (far left), on an excursion into the Amazon (left). On the *Aria* river cruiser, the menu switches daily from Italian to Japanese to Peruvian cuisine, which might include finely chopped giant snails (above)

Iquitos. "They have a good balance between sweet and sour, and a wonderful aroma," he says.

As we progress into the market, guarded by what seems like the entire ship's company (there are 24 staff for 32 passengers), as well as the local police, the scene becomes nightmarish. There are turtles turned on their backs, a caiman leg on a grill, the cloven hooves of peccaries (like wild boar), armadillos splayed wide open, the split pelvises of pigs, and chickens with heart, liver, combs and feet packaged and displayed on the outside. In a moment of madness, I agree to taste "Amazonian shish kebab": a fat, creamy caterpillar on a skewer, fried or charcoal-grilled. Known as *suri*, it is the larval stage of the black palm beetle and is traditionally eaten with green banana, perhaps to make it more palatable. To my surprise, it tastes like pork crackling and is delicious.

This is what you might call *bas cuisine*, the counterpoint to Schiaffino's exquisite morsels of haute cuisine, but popular food like this is an important part of Peru's gastronomic renaissance. "You can define it by region," he says, "the Amazon, the Andes and the coast, all with their own cuisines." Layered on top are Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Italian, French and Portuguese influences, making this the most elaborate fusion cuisine in the world. "We have pre-Hispanic cultures, with their cuisines," Schiaffino explains, "and an extraordinary geographical position and climate. We are blessed in what we have, but only in the past six or seven years have we begun to professionalise our popular cuisines and give them value."

Peruvians speak of a time before and after Gastón, meaning Gastón Acurio, whose Lima restaurant, Astrid & Gastón, captures the spirit of the movement and has scions in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Spain, Mexico and Argentina. "Before Gastón, every high-quality restaurant was French- or Italian-driven," Pedro says. "There was a popular cuisine, a Peruvian cuisine, but it was never raised to a professional standard. Seven years ago, Gastón began to change that. He conceptualised what we had on a daily basis, in our homes and in our markets, and took it to another level."

The Peruvian new wave is not to be confused with *Novoandina*, the modern style of Andean cuisine that began 20 years ago, the brainchild of Bernardo Roca Rey. "He travelled and saw produce that had never been seen in Lima, mainly from the Andes," Pedro says. "Chefs started putting things like guinea pig into Lima kitchens, they used quinoa to make *quinotto* [like risotto], different tubers and *papas* [potatoes – of which Peru is said to have 3,000 varieties], chillis, tomatoes and mountain herbs. It never really took off, and Gastón was the successor."

Late last year, Acurio opened a New York outpost, La Mar Cebicheria (an alternative spelling of *cevicheria*), serving Nikkei-influenced ceviches with tuna, red onion, Japanese cucumber, daikon, avocado, nori and sesame in a tamarind "*leche de tigre*" – the zesty, milky liquid left after making a ceviche. Also on the menu are upmarket *anticuchos* (meat skewers) enlivened with spicy peppers. Due to open this month is Ceviche in Soho, London, championing freshly caught sustainable fish "cold-cooked" in lime and chilli in the Peruvian style, and a pisco bar, the first in Britain.

Such is the buzz that a New York consultancy group, Baum + Whiteman, is predicting that this year Peruvian cuisine will be adopted by forward-thinking restaurateurs, with a wave of openings in North America and Europe. They will come a pale second to the experience of champagne at sunset on a skiff navigating the blackwater tributaries of the world's mightiest river, followed by Schiaffino's edible Amazonian adventures in miniature.

*Wexas Travel (020 7838 5892, wexas.com) can arrange a 14-day trip to Peru, combining Lima, Cuzco, Machu Picchu and the Amazon, from £6,750 per person, including four nights full-board on the Aria, two nights at The Country Club Lima Hotel, deluxe hotels elsewhere, return flight from London, domestic flights, transfers, excursions and breakfast.*



## 5 OF THE BEST LIMA RESTAURANTS

Ceviche, Andean lamb and catfish caviar are on the menu in the capital

*Most of the top gastronomic restaurants are located in the Miraflores district, although some are to be found in San Isidro, Surco and Barranco.*

### Astrid & Gastón, Miraflores

Opened in 1994 by Gastón Acurio and his German-born wife, also a chef, this colourful and contemporary cornerstone of his empire (below) continues to delight. Pacific seafood occupies centre stage, in dishes such as "Ceviche of love": raw sea urchin, clam, squid, mussel and shrimp marinated in lime and three types of chilli pepper, served in an oyster shell. Produce from all over Peru is showcased, from Andean lamb and a confit of *paiche* to a Peruvian curry of tubers, vegetables, grains, herbs and spices served with quinoa.

*Calle Cantuarias 175 (00 51 1242 4422, astridygaston.com). Twelve-course tasting menu about £41; three courses à la carte about £38, without drinks.*



### Malabar, San Isidro

Always ranked among the top five in *Summum* (Peru's equivalent of the Michelin guide), Pedro Miguel Schiaffino's minimalist restaurant was the research laboratory for the M/V *Aria*. I began with a tiny square of tofu flavoured with *chonta* (heart of palm) with armoured catfish caviar and a broth of *cecina*

(smoked pork); other stand-out dishes were *tiradito* (a refined ceviche) of sole dyed magenta using a medicinal herb from the Amazon, with *tumbo* juice (from an Andean fruit) in the marinade, served with *tobiko* (flying-fish roe); and freshwater shrimp with *yuyo* (a type of marine algae) and a carpaccio of pig's trotter with Mediterranean flavours: parsley, garlic and olive oil. *Los Eucaliptos 590 (00 51 1611 9000, hotelcountry.com). Three courses à la carte about £42, without drinks.*

### Mesa 18, Miraflores

Designed by Jordi Puig, creator of the nautical interiors for Aqua Expeditions, this quirkily contemporary restaurant (above) at the Miraflores Park Hotel by Orient-Express serves Japanese cuisine made with the best local ingredients. The *gyoza* (pork and shrimp dumplings) were the best I've tasted, followed by ceviche *maki* – a sushi roll of salmon, cream cheese (very Peruvian) and avocado, covered in white fish slices marinated in lime juice and chilli. Next came scallop ceviche with *maca* – an energy-giving herb. The star turn, recommended by the chef himself, Toshiro Konishi, was grouper in a light, sweet soy marinade topped with ginger julienne. *Avenida Malecón de la Reserva 1035 (00 51 1610 4000, mesa18restaurant.com). Three-course tasting menu about £16, six-course tasting menu £23; three courses à la carte £19, excluding drinks.*

### Perroquet, San Isidro

This colonial-style restaurant at the five-star Country Club Lima Hotel – surrounded by embassies and opposite the golf course – introduced me to Peruvian cuisine. Start with sea bass

ceviche (below), or a trio of *causa* (yellow potato mash) with fillings of, respectively, avocado and crab, chilli and shrimp, and sea bass in a spicy pickling mixture. As a main, try *lomo saltado* (stir-fried beef, Chifa-style) or fillet of *chita* (a white fish) on a bed of creamy sliced potatoes, sautéed with onion and white wine. One starter or main will serve two. *Los Eucaliptos 590 (00 51 1611 9000, hotelcountry.com). Three courses à la carte £15, based on two sharing, unless you have the Wagyu beef or lobster.*



### Rafael, Miraflores

Set inside a vivid red 1920s house with a modern interior and Art Deco details, Rafael Osterling's warmly welcoming restaurant serves Peruvian fusion with Mediterranean influences. Pizza, prosciutto, figs, basil and pine nuts jostle on the starter menu with ceviche of sole, scallops and black baby clams, and *tiradito* Nikkei – yellowfin tuna sashimi with *yuzu* (a Japanese citrus fruit), *mirin* (rice wine), guacamole and smoky sesame oil. Mains include a stew of North Peruvian grouper cheeks with vongole, calamari and confit potatoes, and a Peruvian dish of rice and puy lentils with pan-fried foie gras, river shrimp, scallops and roast banana. *Cl San Martín 300 (00 51 1242 4149, rafaelosterling.com). Three courses à la carte about £29, excluding drinks.*