

## A WALK IN THE CLOUDS

BY ADAM SACHS

ON A HIKE TO MACHU PICCHU ALONG THE STUNNING ANCASQOCHA TRAIL, A YOUNG PERUVIAN-BORN CHEF BARBECUES A LAMB, DIGS WILD POTATOES AND GETS IDEAS FOR THE MENU AT HIS GROUNDBREAKING OREGON RESTAURANT.

“Aquisito,” Doris Rodriguez de Platt told me, motioning in the air as we climbed upward. “In Peru we are always saying ‘aquisito,’ which is a sweet way of saying ‘Just over here, just a little bit farther,’ even though what we’re talking about is never really that close.” We’d hiked for nearly four hours that morning and we were, at least in theory, approaching the highest point of our five-day trek through the Andes — 15,250 feet above sea level — and well on our way to the lost city of the Incas, Machu Picchu.

Doris, co-owner of the restaurant Andina in Portland, Oregon, was accompanying Emmanuel Piqueras, Andina’s talented young chef, on this journey to Machu Picchu — the sacred stone city built by the Incas sometime between the late 14th and early 15th centuries and rediscovered by Yale archeologist Hiram Bingham in 1911. Emmanuel was there to find inspiration for his *novoandina* — new Andean — cuisine. For me, the trip was a chance to learn about Peruvian food from one of its passionate ambassadors, and to test my physical endurance as we hiked six to eight hours a day in the thin air.

Most people who trek to Machu Picchu take the Inca Trail, but we chose a more adventurous and less crowded option: the Ancascocha Trail, named for a beautiful Andean lake. Walking along this route, which goes over high mountain passes and descends into green canyons, hikers encounter only a scattering of thatched-roof, mud-brick houses and see virtually no other tourists — only condors circling way up in the sky.

Our outfitter was Cox & Kings, a tour operator that recently started offering luxury treks (complete with masseurs) along the Ancascocha Trail. For the five members in our trekking party, Cox & Kings supplied a 17-man crew of cooks, guides and porters, who carried bags, kitchen supplies and tents on horseback and rode ahead to set up camp. Emmanuel was excited to prepare a few meals with the expedition’s chef, Carlos Salas.

After spending two days adjusting to the altitude in Cuzco, which was the capital of the Inca empire, we drove an hour and a half north to the town of Parpichu to begin the hike. Along the way we stopped in Huarcocondo, a town known for its lechón, or suckling pig.

As we ate our snack of crispy-skinned pork, we talked about the food of Peru. Though we know it mostly for *seviche*, Peru has an incredibly diverse cuisine, thanks to the varied ingredients available in a

country that has 84 of the earth’s 104 ecosystems. Here in the Andes, cooks depend on corn, aji chiles, quinoa and thousands of potato varieties. Lamb and alpaca are stewed and roasted, though *cuy* (guinea pig) holds a special place in Andeans’ hearts. (In Cuzco’s main church there’s a painting of *The Last Supper* with *cuy* as the main course. “If it’s good enough for Jesus,” Emmanuel says, “it’s good enough for us.”) On the coast, seafood is used in *seviche* and soups like *parihuela*, which resembles *bouillabaisse*, while in the Amazon, the staples are roasted wild boar, tamales and jungle fruits.

### Eating like the Incas

On the first day of the hike, we walked from Parpichu toward a mountain pass. Emmanuel, a boyish 33-year-old, tromped ahead, listening to Pink Floyd on headphones.

Born in Lima to a prominent family — his father is a renowned sociologist and his mother is a human-rights advocate — Emmanuel arrived at Andina two years ago after training at the Michelin three-star *Restaurante Arzak* in San Sebastián, Spain. At Andina he draws from Peru’s oldest culinary traditions to create innovative dishes, which are helping to spark a new interest in Peruvian cuisine in America. “After the Spanish came to South America, we started to eat maybe 70 percent Spanish, only 30 percent Peruvian,” Emmanuel told me when I caught up with him. “Even 10 years ago nobody would eat quinoa,” he said of the nutty-tasting staple the Incas called the mother grain. “*Novoandina* takes the native products and



ancestral traditions to make a modern cuisine.” Novoandina also weaves in Peru’s many ethnic influences: Japanese, Chinese, African, Italian and French. At Andina, that means foie gras brushed with a Peruvian pepper marinade called anticucho, for instance, or monkfish confit paired with a purple-potato tortilla.

That night, Emmanuel and Carlos grilled a trout they’d bought in Cuzco. Emmanuel explained that in the Andes, trout is traditionally cooked with lots of garlic, but at Andina he likes to vary the preparation, sometimes by stuffing the fish with a deeply flavored blend of smoky ham, mint and parsley.

### **Takes a village to roast a lamb**

“The Incas were masters of preservation,” Emmanuel told me on the second day of the trek, as we hiked to the top of the Chilipahua Mountain Pass; at 14,900 feet it’s the second-highest peak of the trip. The Incas, who governed Peru from about 1200 a.d. until their defeat by the Spanish in the 1570s, had to feed an empire that was spread out over 2,500 mountainous miles — so they were forced to become experts in food management. They carved terraced farmland into the mountainsides and learned how to preserve potatoes, corn, grains and meats.

As we gained altitude, the vegetation thinned to almost nothing. Distant mountains seemed to be covered in a blanket of green that ended at peaks of naked granite and ice. On the side of a hill, our guide pointed out a high-mountain root vegetable called maca that’s similar to a potato and is apparently known as Andean Viagra.

We camped overnight next to a stream fed by the Ancascocha lake. One of our horse wranglers lived near our campsite, and a relative of his brought out a welcome platter of two local delicacies. One was chuño, small mountain potatoes that had been left for a few days to dry in the sun and freeze in the night frost. They looked a bit like burnt stones and had a pleasing, chewy quality. The other was cuy, guinea pig roasted whole. I liked the taste of the sinewy meat, though in the animals-roasted-whole department, I much prefer suckling pig. Emmanuel said that at Andina he makes a dish inspired by a guinea-pig preparation, but (in deference to American tastes) he substitutes quail, marinated in an ancho-chile vinaigrette and paired with a quinoa risotto — “quinotto.”

The morning of the third day, after a long hike, we walked past the emerald green Ancascocha lake. Emmanuel picked muña, a fragrant highland mint that the Incas used to wrap their dead. It rained during lunch as the cooks served a warming soup made from quinoa. We’d been eating quinoa throughout our trek, in fact — not just in soups but also in porridges and puddings.

At breakfast on the fourth day, Emmanuel and the cooks decided to barbecue a lamb that night; they climbed the hill above our camp and negotiated a price with the woman who tended sheep there. At the side of a stream, some of the horsemen, a few cooks and a couple of children who lived nearby cooperated in the swift killing, bleeding and butchering of the lamb.

From that somber scene, we hiked toward the Inca Trail, which we followed for a stretch before camping by the Urubamba River overlooking the Incan ruins of Llactapata, built at the same time as Machu Picchu but only uncovered a few years ago.

That night, in a variation on an Andean barbecue called pachamanca, the cooks dug a pit and made a fire under a pile of rocks they’d gathered. They threw potatoes and chunks of lamb on the stones and covered them with rocks and some soil, then left the food to cook for a few hours until it emerged, well-charred and good.

### **Finding the lost city**

The fifth day was a cakewalk. We had a quick hike to a railroad stop, then a short train trip and bus ride to Machu Picchu. Being disgorged at the site with the first crowd we’d seen in days did nothing to lessen the wonder of the ruins and the views. We each went our separate way to explore the temples and houses, and to contemplate the mystery and ingenuity of this place. We stayed that night at Machu Picchu Sanctuary Lodge, the only hotel at the peak.

We returned to Cuzco in luxury. Pisco sours in the formal bar car of the Hiram Bingham, a two-year-old Orient Express train, helped take our minds off our still-aching limbs. We had one afternoon left in Peru, and Emmanuel didn’t want to waste it. In his old neighborhood of Chorillos in Lima, he and I ate seviche of conchas negras, the remarkable jet-black scallops from the north coast. At Naylamp, his friend Santiago Solari’s restaurant, we ate sliced concha pala, a giant scallop with the tenderness of toro. “Oh, man” Emmanuel said, buoyed by the food and all the oxygen at sea level. “Next time, no hiking. Next time we come to eat seviche.”

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