

'You get five countries for the price of one' – how Colombia became a foodie superpower

[Paul Richardson](#)



Colombia has transformed into a foodie capital in recent years Credit: iStock

The menu called it an ensalada. This was hardly your standard Caesar, however, but a *mélange* of manioc root and seared beef with fistfuls of wild coriander, grapes and gooseberries, slivers of fresh paipa cheese, and a vinaigrette made of hauntingly aromatic jungle fruit.

If a dish could have a message, what this salad was saying was a loud “welcome to Colombia”. In the past few years this war-exhausted country has come on stream, both as a diverse travel destination and as a culinary paradise whose moment in the foodie limelight follows that of Peru and, latterly, of Bolivia and Brazil. The complexity and sophistication of the new Colombian cuisine are currently riding high in Bogotá, with Medellín, that city’s grim narco past now only on Netflix, coming up fast behind.

Traditional Colombian food was and is anything but complex and sophisticated. Drawing on indigenous foodways and products, and strongly influenced by the eating habits of the Spanish, who ruled this territory for almost three centuries, old-style *cocina Colombiana* is an honest-to-goodness affair based on pre-European ingredients like beans, maize, plantain and potato (of which hundreds of varieties exist in Colombia). Soups and ribsticking casseroles are the order of the day – as is *bandeja paisa*, a platter groaning with carbs and protein which still provides the daily calorie intake of many Colombians.

I flew into Bogotá on a morning when the overcast skies and cool temperatures reminded me of London – as did the one-storey mock-Tudor houses of uptown Quinta Camacho. But that was where the comfortable old-world references ended. Bogotá was a proper Lat-Am metropolis, noisy and polluted but brimming with energy. On every street corner, like islands in a roaring torrent of traffic, were stalls selling arepas, the traditional maize flatbreads stuffed with fillings, to be eaten while walking briskly on the busy pavements.

If I knew anything about Colombia's food scene before setting foot in the country it was probably thanks to Leonor "Leo" Espinosa. This genial self-taught cook, an economist by trade, opened her first restaurant in Bogotá in 2007 and 10 years later she was named the best female chef in Latin America by Restaurant magazine.



Arepas are traditional maize flatbreads stuffed with fillings Credit: iStock

But if Leo is the standard-bearer, who are the shock troops of this food revolution? To help me find out I called Miraviva, the boutique travel agency that knows Latin America inside out and back to front. I needed a road map of what, for me, I knew, would be largely uncharted foodie territory. There would be strange ingredients, bizarre traditions, challenging flavours and recipes with unpronounceable names. But I needed to slash through the undergrowth to find the roots of the new Colombian food and the young generation of chefs coming up, like fast-growing tropical shoots, in the overarching shadow of Leo Espinosa.

At Casa Medina, a charming brick-and-stone Bogotá town house hotel with a roaring fire in the living room and tropical flowers on the staircase, I was well placed for a first strike on the neighbourhood which, more than any other, encapsulates the excitements of Colombia's contemporary cuisine. In mid-town Chapinero I hit the ground running with a lunch at Mini-mal, Eduardo Martinez's pioneering restaurant and one of the longest-established of the new crew. Serving me a glass of arazá juice ("it's an Amazonian fruit, very hard to get hold of"), Eduardo brought me up to speed on the realities of creative Colombian cooking.

Time was, he said, when if you wanted a slap-up dinner in downtown Bogotá the only options were French or Italian places, often with an old-fashioned formal vibe and service to match. Meanwhile for retro Colombian food, like the chicken-and-potato stew ajiaco, the best place would be your granny's house. The idea of an up-to-date cuisine based on indigenous ingredients had yet to catch the imagination of local diners. But when the spark came, the explosion was immediate. Suddenly the good places were springing up in such profusion that it was hard even for locals to keep a handle on them all.

Mini-mal certainly set the bar high. The zingingly bright flavours of the food here – raw pumpkins in multicoloured dice, with pungent local poleo mint and a juice of pickled tubers, to name just one of Eduardo's thrillingly on-the-nail dishes – cut like a filleting knife through the fug of my jet-lag. But there'd be meals that both equalled and exceeded it in the days to come. Like that evening's dinner at El Chato, a few blocks from Mini-mal along the stop-go traffic artery of Carrera 7, where Álvaro Clavijo holds court at another of Bogotá's forward-thinking restaurants.

Clavijo, 33, has worked at Per Se, Noma and L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon, among global culinary hotspots, but admits to an obsession with the amazing Colombian ingredients beginning to arrive in profusion at his kitchen door. He points out that the peace process and the new gastronomy are closely connected, partly because for years Colombians themselves were unable to travel and so had little idea of the richness of their own culinary traditions, but also because the same logistical obstacles meant that native ingredients were effectively off the menu. Ingredients like the baby sorrel from La Calera, the sesame oil from Santa Marta, and

the heritage potatoes in variegated colours and shapes which, until recently, were shunned by both diners and growers, many of whom preferred the coca plant as an easy cash crop. Or the chontaduro – fruit of a palm tree, whose deliciously unctuous texture and haunting nuttiness form the basis of Clavijo's velvety chontaduro soup.



The chontaduro, or 'peach palm', is native to Central and South America Credit: iStock

Good food is geography plus culture – and Colombia has an awful lot of both. With Colombia you get five countries for the price of one: the Pacific coast, the Andes, the Amazon, the eastern plains, and the Caribbean – each with its own culinary traditions and native ingredients.

The chefs on Bogotá's new-wave food scene know this better than anyone. Tomás Rueda has his restaurant in a little, steep street of colonial houses in the barrio of San Diego, and describes *Tábula* as a "contemporary Colombian grill". When we met next day, Tomás told me he had deliberately set himself apart from European traditions and was "reflecting on what it means, in a culinary sense, to live in this land". I loved his cocido of meats and tubers (typically bogotano), his Andean maize pudding with honey, and his slow-cooked meats like the beef breast braised for hours in a Caribbean spice mix of chillies, cumin and sweet pimentón. "What is the elegance of our food? Biodiversity and generosity," declared the chef.

There is one place in Bogotá where more than anywhere this generous diversity makes total sense – and it isn't a restaurant. One morning at the crack of dawn I met up with Nicolás Rengifo and Ana Maria Méndez, of the hip "secret supper club" Krone, for a trip south to the city's major produce market of Paloquemao.

The posters I'd seen around town promising Paloquemao as "the whole of Colombia in a single place" weren't far wrong. All of the country's major regions, from Caribbean north to Amazonian south, were represented here in a display of quality and dazzling, near-psychedelic variety. You might find some of these fruits, the mangosteens and passion fruit and mangos, at five times the price in the fruit section at Waitrose. Others, though were well beyond my ken. There was the mamoncito, the guanabana or soursop, the pitaya with its weird jellylike interior flecked with black seeds, and my least favourite, the tapering green feijoa, with its peculiar whiff of petrol. And this, said Nicolás, was the gulupa. Now that I did recognise, from the vinaigrette on my first Colombian salad; and the strange wormlike cubios, a potato-like tuber, I had seen at *Tábula*. I was learning fast, but still there were new things to try. We repaired to Doña Cris, a simple open-fronted market eatery, for a breakfast of beef and vegetable soup with sweet achira biscuits and stuffed maize tamales – this last a central-American classic with ancient indigenous roots. The novelty, in part, was the sheer scale of a meal taken at nine o'clock in the morning.



Paloquemao Market is a riot of colour Credit: iStock

I admit to taking things a little easy for the rest of that day. But by nightfall I was ready to tackle another new-wave Colombian restaurant in another prettily restored turn-of-the-20th-century house in Chapinero Alto. Loud, lewd salsa was playing on the PA as I walked in the door at Mesa Franca, and a red neon light glowed behind the bar, where Polish-British barman Tom Hydzik would soon be mixing me a demon cocktail of mescal, smoked pimentón and sweet chillies. Mesa Franca seemed to me like a place where people were having fun on both sides of the service hatch. The prawn, avocado and crunchy rice in a coconut soup, the pork belly with peanut ají and caramelised pear, the yucca doughnuts with smoked trout from an indigenous community in Tajín, showed how the new Colombian cuisine plays with notes of sweetness.

Chef Iván Cardeña, an alumnus of Virgilio Martínez at Central in Lima, came to my table to chat about the rising interest in and demand for good local products – now more easily available as cross-country communications have improved. The new generation of cooks, mostly in their 30s, work together to source organic vegetables from La Calera, fish from artisan fishermen in Buenaventura, or palm hearts from Putumayo. There's also a fascination with Colombian cacao and chocolate, said Iván, and a new emphasis on fine Colombian coffee, with dedicated cafeterias like Cafés San Alberto in the urban village of Usaquén serving the exquisite produce of their own estates. The consequence of all this "locavore" activity, apart from its positive impact on the local economy, is an excited sense of what Colombia might be capable of as a prosperous nation at peace with itself.

The peace dividend is reaping rewards in all walks of Colombian life, and nowhere is this clearer than in Medellín. Once sadly notorious as a world capital of violent drug-related crime, this delightful city in its lush and temperate mountain setting is now arguably more famous for cuisine than cocaine.

Medellín also has a number of the country's hottest restaurants, and its uptown neighbourhood El Poblado positively hums with foodie-ness. El Cielo, whose hugely talented chef Juan Manuel Barrientos, aged 35, now has branches in Bogotá and Miami, is the best-known name, but I also ate divinely at Carmen. Here Rob Pevitts, the Kentucky-born chef, confirmed what I'd been hearing about the new ingredient-driven cuisine and the local demand for tonka bean, chontaduro and arracacha (the Colombian parsnip) that wasn't there before. Rob brought out a plate of hormigas culonas – vulgarly, if correctly translated as "big-assed ants" – for me to try, tipping me off that these insects have become one of the star ingredients of the new cuisine.

I found the ants' oily crunch tastier than expected. Not so the mojoy worms. These grubs, about the size and thickness of your big toe, are a speciality at La Chagra, a Medellín restaurant where the Amazonian tasting menus are "cultural experiences" that include having tobacco powder blown up your nose with a blowpipe. While I struggled to finish my mojoy, chef Juan Santiago Gallego expounded his brave culinary mission at La Chagra: to boldly go into the rainforest, to bring back fascinating edibles, and to preserve and pass on the indigenous food culture of the Colombian Amazon.

Stuffed after five days of eating, I felt and possibly looked a little like one of those big fat jungle worms. But,

back in Bogotá, there was one more meal I couldn't forgo.

The dining room in a colonial house in La Magdalena was airy and high-ceilinged. Leo, when she appeared beside me with her high cheekbones and huge Caribbean smile, was beaming, beneficent, almost regal, and her charismatic food was equally well-presented on locally designed and handmade ceramic plates.

Each of Leo's dishes was the culinary expression of a particular region of Colombia: her signature dish, sea bass steamed in a plantain leaf with coconut rice and a sauce of sea snails, seemed a distillation of her Caribbean roots. But there were also nods to the Amazon in the shape of "lemon ants" (another type) and Kakai nuts, and "truffles" made of kapeshuna beans from the deserts of Guajira. The provenance of everything might not be important if the results in the cooking had not been so wholeheartedly, winningly delicious. I reflected, as I ate and drank in that colonial room, how generous the New World has been with the Old, and how the Colombian cooks of the 21st century are flinging open doors on to a whole new world of flavour.

How to do it

Miraviva (0117 230 0170; miravivatravel.com) offers a 10-day tour in Colombia from £3,775pp based on two travelling, with three nights at Four Seasons Casa Medina in Bogotá, three at The Charlee in Medellín, and three at Bastión Luxury Hotel in Cartagena with transfers, culinary tours, visit to Paloquemao Market, and direct flights with Avianca from London to Bogotá and domestic flights.