

Haute cuisine

Its extreme altitude and vast salt flats have long captivated travellers. Now, thanks to a trailblazing restaurant project in La Paz, Bolivia is rivalling its Latin neighbours in the kitchen too. Ed Stocker pays a visit

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GARY LATHAM

GOURMET TRAVELLER
BOLIVIA

Light gleams off the Salar de Uyuni –
the largest salt flats in the world





GOURMET TRAVELLER BOLIVIA

A local takes a rest in an Altiplano village – the high plains in which La Paz sits are thousands of metres above sea level. Opposite page: tuntas and potatoes from Rodríguez Market; the sought-after crop quinoa

'It's Saturday morning and the market is a sea of people. Breakfast diners sit on plastic stools, slurping on an energy-packed morning broth; dried fruit is weighed out on scales. The kiosks are tended by *cholitas* in colourful dresses and black bowler hats'

Fly into La Paz and you barely clear the clouds before the plane touches down on the tarmac. The international airport sits to the north, in the satellite settlement of El Alto, high on the Andean plateau at a gravity-defying 4,100m above sea level.

La Paz is a city of immense views. Heading downtown, every corner of the winding road reveals another sun-tinged vista of defiant dwellings clinging to the cliffs, the snow-capped mountains framing the background. The centre is as chaotic as any South American city, a buzz of cars and people, and a hotchpotch of nondescript modernity mixed with stunning Spanish colonial architecture, not least the 16th-century San Francisco basilica. Keep going south (we're now a more lung-forgiving 3,100m above sea level) and you arrive in the district of Calacoto, an ordered and quietly wealthy neighbourhood favoured by expats and upwardly mobile Bolivians.

It's here that you'll find a remarkable restaurant venture, launched earlier this year by one of the world's most lauded restaurateurs. Opening a fine-dining restaurant in La Paz is no easy feat, first and foremost for reasons of science. Water boils at a different temperature (88°C) here, air humidity is low, so it's hard to get yeast to ferment, and food needs more seasoning than at sea level. Visitors have less appetite at altitude and react more quickly to alcohol. Add to that the fact that Bolivia has never been fêted as a foodie destination. The poorest country in South America has tended to attract backpackers and adventurers, lured by the scenery and affordability. But that wasn't enough to dissuade Claus Meyer, co-founder of Noma – the multi-award-winning Copenhagen restaurant specialising in wild food – opening Gustu back in April.

So why Bolivia? 'I strongly believe that a wide biological diversity is the prerequisite for any great cuisine,' says Meyer. 'And the country may have the most interesting and unexplored biodiversity in the world.' He also wants to back a gastronomic sea change in the country, and help people find employment in the sector by proving that Bolivia has as much to offer as neighbouring Peru, current darling of the international food scene. The Melting Pot

Foundation has been set up alongside the restaurant, an organisation co-run with Danish NGO Ibis, to promote food education and improve the lives of local people. The foundation runs a school for Bolivians offering restaurant apprenticeships, trying to encourage not just an interest in cooking but offshoots such as restaurant management and nutrition.

Like Noma, Gustu focuses on unusual, often experimental products. Keen to see some of the raw produce at the restaurant's disposal, I manage to convince sous-chef Mauricio López to take me to Rodríguez Market, a short car climb back towards the centre. It's Saturday morning and the market is a sea of people. At one stall, breakfast diners sit on plastic stools, slurping on an energy-packed morning broth; at another, dried fruit is weighed out on scales. The kiosks are tended by *cholitas*, indigenous Aymara women, in their traditional, colourful dresses and black bowler hats.

There are scores of different potatoes and root vegetables on display and Mauricio proudly tells me that the country has more varieties than Peru. The most eye-catching is the *papalisa*, a spud-like root vegetable with fluorescent yellow skin and pink spots. Nearby is a table laid out with potatoes that look like they're covered with icing sugar. These are, in fact, *tuntas*; normally made during winter, these spuds are freeze-dried overnight in the Altiplano (high plain) before being washed, sun-dried and peeled. Once the process is complete, they can be stored for months or even years. A similar variant, the *chuño*, has its skin intact, and is a black colour. Among the other offerings, we stop and taste the *ajipa* – a fruit shaped a bit like a pear, with the texture of an apple. The inside is sinewy white and the flavour is subtle, so it works well with more robust flavours. I'd later encounter it at Villaserena restaurant, a bohemian eatery and cultural centre nearby whose walls are packed with artwork, and is run by Juan Pablo Villalobos, a ponytailed chef who moonlights as a rock musician by night. He mixes the fruit with the sweet kick of raisins, blueberries and herbs, tops it with olive oil and salt, and serves it as a starter.

Mauricio also points out a green fruit, similar to a prickly pear, called the *noni*, a superfood thanks to its antioxidants. —————➔





Left: La Paz crouches beneath jagged peaks; burried amid its downtown streets is the Witches' Market, home to purveyors of fabrics and votive offerings. Right: Gustu head chef Kamilla Seidler – her kitchen turns out creative dishes from chocolate crisps to Andean beetroot with rare-variety potato



'The centre of La Paz is as chaotic as that of any South American city – a buzz of cars and people and a hotchpotch of nondescript modernity mixed with stunning Spanish colonial architecture'



And then the *pacay*, another fruit, shaped a bit like a banana with a thick green husk and individual white fruits with giant black seeds. 'It's delicate and sweet isn't it?' offers Mauricio. 'I ask people to try to describe it and they compare the texture to cotton candy.'

Gustu serves up a wealth of fresh fruit and vegetables – and its products are far from uniquely Andean. A common misconception is that Bolivia's sole identity is the cordillera, or mountains. But the eastern part of the country is another world, from the Amazon Basin region of Beni to the tropical cattle lowlands of Santa Cruz, offering high-quality beef and *surubí* (catfish).

The day I visit Gustu, executive head chef Kamilla Seidler, a 30-year-old Dane, explains that the restaurant is 'still in nappies' because they're constantly learning about new products they can use. 'We are working on locating products that no one outside or even inside Bolivia knows, and playing around with the colours, tastes and textures in our humble lab,' she says. 'But at the same time, we're looking into original cooking techniques – most

apparent once you get outside the urban centres – so that we respect how things are still done.'

Stepping through the door of Gustu, the walls are a muted grey, and a series of low-hanging light bulbs dangle down, exposed, from the ceiling. It feels like a minimalist eatery in Europe or the US. Only the Andean-influenced striped cushion covers and the mountainous scenery peeping through the window next to my table give a clue as to the real destination. The clientele is a mixture of tourists, diplomats and the Bolivian elite.

The dining experience doesn't disappoint. The service is top-notch, with the dishes arriving on locally made ceramic dishes and slate plates, bursting with colour: the aforementioned *papalisa* comes with strips of beetroot and a subtle hibiscus flavouring; shredded rabbit, far from a Bolivian staple, is served with fat white corn and a corn purée; pink and rich llama loin comes with fermented carrots and coa, a local herb that has a minty, fragrant taste. The food is best described as fusion – a mixture

Travel information

Bolivia's currency is the boliviano and the country is four hours behind GMT. Situated in western central South America, the landlocked territory borders Peru, Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Chile. Terrain is varied, ranging from the Amazon Basin to salt flats and the Andes. December sees an average high temperature of 14°C and an average low of 3°C.

GETTING THERE

Air Europa (aireuropa.com), the Latin American specialist, flies from London Gatwick to La Paz via Madrid and Santa Cruz three times a week, with the final leg provided by Amazonas (amazonas.com).

American Airlines (americanairlines.co.uk) operates a regular service from London Heathrow to La Paz via Miami.

RESOURCES

High Lives (highlives.co.uk) is a tour operator specialising in travel

to Bolivia and South America. The company offers a 13-day tour of Bolivia that costs from £1,850, excluding flights, and a seven-day gourmet tour that costs £3,000, including flights.

Bolivia Tourism (bolivia.travel) this official website has information and ideas on the country's various destinations, activities, events and more.

FURTHER READING

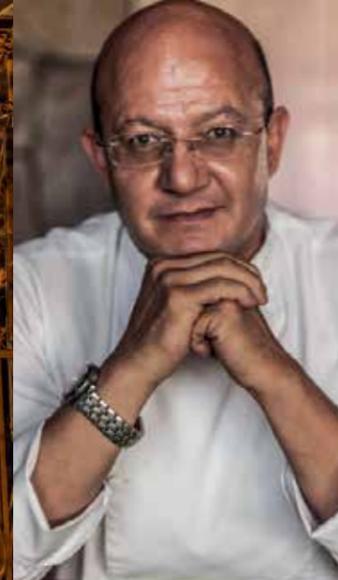
My Mother's Bolivian Kitchen: Recipes and Recollections by Jose Sanchez-H (Hippocrene Books, £20.99). 150 recipes showcasing the dishes and ingredients that distinguish Bolivian cuisine from the rest of Latin America. A handy reference to the country's typical meals, as well as a culinary memoir.

For 91 Days in Bolivia by Michael Powell and Juergen Horn (£5 for Kindle Edition). Packed with impartial tips on where to eat, what to do and how to do it, and accompanied by real-life anecdotes and entertaining stories from the authors' 91 days exploring the country.



'Empanadas salteñas, pasties made with golden pastry, are surprisingly sweet, contrasting with the salty beef or chicken filling, swimming in their own delicious sauce'

Left to right: contemporary classic Villaserena; a pastel proliferation of root vegetables at the market; *empanadas salteñas*, a baked snack made here with chicken and veg, are devoured on the street



Where to eat

Prices are for three courses excluding wine, unless otherwise stated.

Chicharrones de Irapavi Great spit 'n' sawdust joint in the southern part of town, famous for deep-fried pork served with scratchings and corn. You can watch the meat being diced and flame-treated before being thrown into massive vats, heated by wood fires. Wash down with a glass of *garapiña*, a fermented drink that is definitely an acquired taste. About £4 per dish. *Avenida Altamirano, Calle 10, Irapavi, La Paz.*

Duke's The in-house restaurant at the Ritz Apart Hotel is a little old-school but it does excellent, flavoursome traditional dishes such as *menudito* (a soup originating from Sucre with chicken, beef and pork) and a breaded trout and *pejerrey* (local white fish) served with a spicy salsa. £15. *Plaza Isabel La Católica 2478, La Paz, 00 591 2243 3131, ritzbolivia.com*

El Vagón del Sur Chef Jorge Montesinos works out of an intimate restaurant in the southern part of town that used to be his home. His cuisine is a mix of traditional dishes and his own fusion inventions. £14. *Avenida Julio C Patiño 1295, La Paz, 00 591 2279 3700.*

Gustu The hot ticket for gastronomes in La Paz. A sleek showcase for modern Bolivian cuisine and all its diversity. It's far better value than a similar experience in Europe or the US. £36. *Calle 10 300, La Paz, 00 591 2211 7491, restaurantgustu.com*

Madame Ulupica One of the newest restaurants on the scene (it opened in May), the eatery combines fast food with Bolivian ingredients. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. The *charque* pizza – that's llama jerky – doesn't. But the pork cooked in black beer does. £14. *Avenida Montenegro 906, Calacoto, La Paz, 00 591 2214 8436, madameulupica.com*

Oberland A tranquil heaven at the start of the spectacular Moon Valley. The chef may be Swiss German but he knows a thing or two about preparing Bolivian dishes with a contemporary European twist. The trout resting on a bed of vegetables with lemon cream and coriander comes highly recommended. £12. *Calle El Agrario 3118, Mallasa, La Paz, 00 591 2274 5040, h-oberland.com*

Villaserena Unpretentious, bohemian fine dining with an emphasis on promoting daring combinations that work surprisingly well. Try the *ajipa* salad with tomatoes, raisins, blueberries, basil and coriander. Also worth checking out for the cultural centre downstairs. £14. *Avenida Ecuador 2582, Sopocachi, La Paz, 00 591 2241 8151.*

of the head chefs' international influences, yes, but also a great showcase for everything Bolivia has to offer. And, best of all, Gustu is not the only one doing it either.

At Villaserena, Juan Pablo Villalobos talks me through his particular twist on Bolivian food, before heading off to play with his rock band at his bar next door. 'The first local dish I tried to make was *ispi* [a whitebait-sized fried fish from Lake Titicaca], which is traditionally eaten by the poorer people here,' he says. 'But when I brought it to my restaurant, diners were curious and were prepared to try it.' Another intriguing interpretation of a Bolivian classic is his *sajita de pollo*, chicken leg pan-fried with red chillies. It's normally served with a *sarza* (a garnish of red onions and tomatoes). Juan Pablo's version sees the sweet tomatoes replaced with strawberries – and it works surprisingly well.

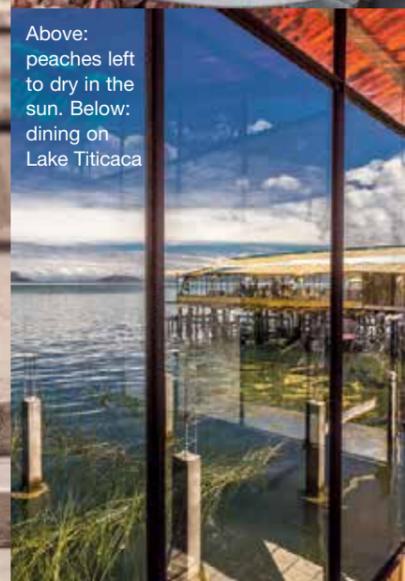
Another local chef, Jorge Montesinos from El Vagón del Sur – a family eatery not far from Gustu with contemporary takes on age-old Bolivian dishes – combines *fritanga*, a mildly spicy pork stew, with *chicharrones*, deep-fried pork nuggets served with chuño potatoes and *mote* (white corn). For Montesinos, things are changing both internally and externally. 'There wasn't a consumer middle class before,' he says, in reference to the stable economic growth in recent years. 'We're on our way to becoming a gastronomic destination, alongside traditional tourism.'

Foreigners have added their own interpretations too, such as laid-back Swiss German chef Walter Schmid, who came to Bolivia over two decades ago and never left. His Oberland restaurant is a tranquil haven with a large outdoor garden space. It's on the southern edge of town at the start of Moon Valley, a stone's throw from the eroded lunar landscape – another world after the bustle of downtown. For him, fusion is an old idea. 'I'm simply updating Bolivian food – it's an artform that is very much alive, like music.' His quinoa tabbouleh, a Bolivia-meets-the-Middle-East dish, is particularly good, the nutty grains blending with *yerba buena* (wild mint) and diced white cheese made by a local Belgian.

Of all Bolivia's produce, quinoa – an Andean foodstuff eaten by Bolivians for the past 7,000 years – has the most international fame. For years a health food shopper's favourite, it has now crossed into the mainstream. Bolivia, the largest producer in the world, looks set to benefit, although some concerns have been raised about domestic price increases in the wake of its global



Left: buildings jostle for space in downtown La Paz. Above: ice-cold peach cider, the mocoichinchi



Above: peaches left to dry in the sun. Below: dining on Lake Titicaca



Left to right: Villaserena; Jorge Montesinos; the chef's dish of trout with prawn and squid ink



'Uyuni is famed for its vast salt flat: a stunning, empty landscape of shimmering desert stretching for some 12,000 sq km, visible from space, whose crust is up to 10m thick'



popularity. Quinoa's heartland is Uyuni, a small settlement in the south-west of the country, a short flight away. The region is famed for its vast salt flat: a stunning, empty landscape of shimmering desert stretching for some 12,000 sq km, visible from space, whose crust is in some places 10m thick. Tens of thousands of years ago it was a giant lake. In the distance is the snow-capped dormant volcano Mount Tunupa and surrounding the flat are some of the most important quinoa plantations in the country.

The nearby Luna Salada Hotel, including my bedroom walls and the frame of the bed, is made almost entirely of salt, carved from the *salar* (flat). Gravel-like crystals crunch under my feet as I tiptoe about. Despite the warm days, at night the temperature dips to well below freezing. And the hotel hasn't missed a trick; I lose count at the number of duvets and throws, sitting atop fleece-like sheets. I jump in and let myself be buried by the bedcovers. The restaurant here is excellent too, with huge windows looking onto the snow-like surface of the salt flat. Many of its dishes use the area's famous ingredient: breakfast biscuits are made with quinoa, lunchtime trout comes with a quinoa crust, and cheesecake has a quinoa topping and a dollop of wickedly sweet dulce de leche ice cream.

My final destination is the town of Chantani, an hour's dash across the crystalline flat in a 4x4. The village's entrance is marked by two white tyres, guiding beacons in a landscape that can overwhelm with its vastness. Santos Quispe Cayo is a quinoa grower who lives in this settlement of crumbling stone houses and looks much younger than his 67 years. Quinoa has been championed by NASA for its life-sustaining qualities, a crop that contains almost double the protein of rice and is rich in vitamins, minerals and amino acids. Indeed, the UN has been promoting 2013 as International Year of Quinoa in a bid to widen its appeal. 'Along with lama meat, quinoa is a unique food source for us here,' says the producer, whose mother died just a few months ago, aged 100.

Beside the tourist draw of its spooky landscape – and the chance to see quite simply the most spectacular sunset of your life, a psychedelic paint wheel of pinks, oranges and yellows – the other main industry around Uyuni is, of course, salt, and here you can visit a workshop to witness the artisan process. Landlocked Bolivia's table salt comes entirely from the region's salt flats. Workers toil away extracting it to sell around the country for just \$b2 (19p) a kilo.

The salt is used domestically, in places like Tarija, where Serrano-style ham is cured with salt. Tarija is also the origin of about 80 per cent of the country's wine – still a tiny market – covering everything from merlot and malbec to riesling and torrontés, all grown in some of the highest vineyards in the world, stretching up to

This page and opposite: the vast Uyuni salt flats overwhelm visitors with their beauty – but they are also an important industry for Bolivians, the salt bagged up and sold around the country



Where to shop

Witches' Market Located in the centre of La Paz, the street market sells everything from Pachamama amulets to alpaca wool clothing. There are a few street food stalls too – and it's not a bad place to buy *mate de coca* (coca leaf tea), which is good for the altitude. *Calle Linares, La Paz*
Relleno de papa stand If you want a no-nonsense snack that does the job, then this popular stall is the place to head to. The *relleno de papa* is a large, battered ball of mashed potato filled with either beef mince or cheese (about 30p each). Choose from a range of about 15 accompanying sauces. *Avenida Mariscal Santa Cruz, between Loayza and Colón, La Paz*

Rodríguez Market One of the best places to browse and purchase fresh fruit, vegetables and fish from all over the country. There are also plenty of street food stalls, including one selling *caldo de karachi*, a heady broth eaten at breakfast containing trout, potatoes and the coa herb. *Calle Rodríguez, San Pedro, La Paz (open Friday to Sunday, 8am to 4pm)*
Salteñería Romero Quite simply the greatest street food in the city – juicy pasties (50p each) filled with chicken or beef. The yellow pastry gets its colour from butter made with seeds from *achiote*, a small tropical tree. *Calle Belisario Salinas, between Avenida 20 de Octubre and Sánchez Lima, La Paz*





'Up there with the best meals was the Los Andes spit 'n' sawdust joint on the edge of Lake Titicaca – a vast body of water on the border with Peru, fringed with colourful boats'



Clockwise from right: a weaver practises her craft at Lake Titicaca; llamas in the hills; Moon Valley's formidable formations; boats bob on Lake Titicaca; the varied terrain of Bolivia often surprises

Where to stay

Camino Real Large suites-only, business-friendly hotel with a spa, gym and indoor swimming pool. Doubles from £175. *Avenida Ballivián 369, corner of Calle 10, Calacoto, La Paz, 00 591 2 279 2323, caminoreal.com.bo*

Hostal Naira A decent mid-range option in the historic centre of the city that serves a good breakfast in the adjoining café. Doubles from £32. *Calle Sagamaga 161, near Plaza San Francisco, La Paz, 00 591 2 235 5645, hostalnaira.com*

La Casona This boutique hotel in a colonial-style building dates back to the 17th century and is conveniently situated close to some of the city's best tourist sites. Doubles from £68. *Avenida Mariscal Santa Cruz 938, La Paz, 00 591 2 290 0505, lacionahotelboutique.com*

Luna Salada Hotel Spectacular hotel on the edge of the salt flats made entirely out of salt. One of several themed hotels of its type, this is the best, with epic views across the shimmering surface. Doubles from £87. *Uyuni Salt Flat, 7km from Colchani town, 00 591 7 616 9888, lunasalahotel.com.bo*

Ritz Apart Hotel Extremely comfortable, slightly old-fashioned hotel in a central location. All rooms are suites and the food is excellent (see Where to Eat). Doubles from £87. *Plaza Isabel La Católica 2478, La Paz, 00 591 2 243 3131, ritzbolivia.com*

3,000m above sea level. Yet for all the oak-aged wine and high-end cuisine, sometimes the simplest things are best – and nothing comes simpler than Bolivian street food. Just make sure you know what you're looking for: unless you're into extreme eating, the *caldo de cardán* (bull's penis soup) or *ranga ranga* (a stew made from cow's stomach and yellow chilli) are probably ones to miss.

A comforting Tarija speciality is *saice*, which mixes mince, peas and potatoes and is served with rice. Or you could try *empanadas salteñas*, little pasties made with golden pastry (thicker than the flaky Argentinean variety). They are surprisingly sweet, contrasting with the salty beef or chicken filling, swimming in their own delicious sauce. The latter I gobbled up at a corner store in central La Paz, quite possibly the perfect snack food.

No-nonsense food is something the country knows how to do. Up there with the best meals we had was the Los Andes spit 'n' sawdust joint on the edge of Lake Titicaca – a vast body of water on the border with Peru, fringed with colourful boats – that offered the chance to try freshly fished trout from the local waters. The three-hour drive from La Paz was spectacular; the flat Altiplano with its pampas grass and a strange, intense light that, with its enhanced colours, felt like looking at life through a lens. At the end, a simple piece of fish with chilli – perfection on a plate.

Bolivia has a long way to go, with social issues and infrastructure development to overcome. But eating here is an experience, from street food to top-end dining – a cultural insight into an often undersold and misunderstood nation. One that maybe, just maybe, could become South America's next big gourmet destination.

Ed Stocker and Gary Latham travelled to Bolivia courtesy of HighLives (highlives.co.uk) and AirEuropa (aireuropa.com). Internal flights were provided by Amazonas (amazonas.com).





‘Quinoa has been championed by Nasa for its life-sustaining qualities – a crop that contains almost twice the protein of rice’

Above: daily life in La Paz, a city flanked by brooding mountains. Right: sweet potato and broad bean, and quinoa sorbet and quinoa flapjack, both at Luna Salada Hotel; black quinoa



Food glossary

- Api** A hot drink normally taken at breakfast made with purple corn.
- Batido de huevo con bicervecina** A street-food favourite – black beer with whipped egg white.
- Chairo** A hearty stew particularly popular among the Aymara indigenous population featuring ingredients such as beef, wheat, potatoes and vegetables.
- Chicharrón de cerdo** A Bolivian staple – deep-fried chunks of pork with the rind left on, often served with rice.
- Chufly** The favourite way to serve *singani*, with a lemon-flavoured fizzy drink. It is poured into a tall glass over ice and is best served with a slice of lime.

- Llajua** Bolivia’s national chilli sauce, which also contains onions and local herb wacataya. Expect to find a home-made version on all restaurant tables.
- Marraqueta** A Bolivian bread that, when made well, is not dissimilar to Italian ciabatta.
- Saice** Minced meat with onions and peas served with rice, particularly popular in the southern city of Tarija.
- Sajta de pollo** Traditional dish of jointed chicken served in a mild yellow chilli sauce.
- Singani** The country’s most popular spirit, a brandy made from grapes that is often triple-distilled.

