

TRAVEL



Fly into Santiago from the Pacific and you'll see a wall of mountains on either side of the Chilean capital that stretches off into the distance as far as the eye can see. On one end the mountains soar ever skyward into the driest desert on earth, while on the other they creep into the Patagonian fjords like the spine of a giant stegosaurus swimming towards Antarctica. In the myriad valleys and rugged cool-water coasts that lie between you'll find an astounding array of endemic produce that chefs in Santiago have only just begun to explore.

The Forager-in-Chief of this new food movement is undoubtedly Rodolfo Guzmán, a professional water-skier who traded his swim vest for an apron more than a decade ago and is now the global face of Chilean cuisine. Guzmán's restaurant Boragó in the upscale Vitacura neighbourhood is listed at No. 36 on the prestigious World's 50 Best Restaurants list, and it has single-handedly revived the dormant cuisine of Chile's indigenous inhabitants.

"Our food is very much based in the now, but we dig deep into the culture of our native Mapuche people and use many of the same cooking methods and ingredients they used for hundreds of years," the 38-year-old tells me as we



## DINING AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD

*Mark Johanson* VISITS THE CHILEAN CAPITAL SANTIAGO AND DISCOVERS AN EVOLVING DINING SCENE MIXING TRADITION WITH MODERN TECHNIQUE.

survey the larder of his laboratory-cum-test kitchen. There are 30 shelves filled with exotic Chilean goods like rica rica (a citrusy desert herb), tola (an edible moss) and merkén (a smoked chilli pepper). Guzman and a team of researchers from a local university are constantly experimenting with these ingredients, and the happy results of their studies are evident in the 18-course endémica tasting menu in the restaurant downstairs.

Guzmán tells me as we head into the dining room that he's convinced Chile is a "culinary multi-millionaire" – it just doesn't know it yet.

If Guzmán put Santiago on the food map, a new generation is lining up to take over the throne.

At the top of the pack is 31-year-old Sergio Barroso. At the chef's newly opened Restaurante 040, located in the Tinto Boutique Hotel in bohemian Bellavista, you'll find the happy marriage of European techniques and local ingredients. Barroso, who moved to Chile from Spain four years ago after a stint at the world famous El Bulli restaurant, tells me he has a particular fondness for the flavours of Chile's 4,700km Pacific Coast, like picoroco (giant barnacles) and locos (large sea snails).

"For a cook it's exciting when you encounter so many new resources to play with," says Barroso. "The only problem is, gastronomically speaking, Chile is very new. Our job as chefs is to discover the recipes."

The majority of the pint-sized morsels on Barroso's 12-course tasting menu are meant as finger foods. There's an oyster with aji pepper ice cream, urchins in a Bloody Mary foam, and a mackerel "ravioli" wrapped not in pasta but avocado. The most visually arresting of the pack is a piece of brioche bread that's topped with silverside and crowned in the fish's edible spine.

The culinary whirlwind ends abruptly when a woman in a red Jessica Rabbit dress ushers me through a trap door and into a rickety elevator. It clinks up three floors until we reach a rooftop speakeasy called Room 09. When I exit the elevator I enter into a Chilean time warp where speakers blare 1930s jazz bands and lanterns shine down on walls filled with memorabilia. The heavily bearded bartenders shake me up a sour made with the beloved Chilean brandy pisco and it comes to my table in the boot of a tin truck toy.

Room 09 may be Santiago's only true speakeasy, but the city is awash in clandestine dining experiences. There's the unmarked "kitchen studio" of Motemei, where chef Patricio Cáceres cooks an eight-course market-focused meal right before your eyes. Or El Club, the monthly meat-heavy bonanzas from Chile's Chef of the Year-winner

Rolando Ortega, which are served at a communal table in his beloved lunch spot, Salvador Cocina y Café.

The most ambitious, however, may be the cenas escondidas (hidden dinners) at Silvestre Bistro in Santiago's boho-chic Barrio Italia neighbourhood. Held each weekend in a room overstuffed with antiques (no doubt from the dealers across the street), the cenas escondidas might as well symbolize the entire food movement in the capital right now: They champion local ingredients, explore uncharted culinary frontiers and nobody on the outside seems to have any clue they're happening.

My hidden dinner begins with an explosion of flavours, including bread infused with the antioxidant-packed maqui berry (from Chile's Valdivian rainforests), pickled sea asparagus (plucked from the Central Coast) and cured boar (from the Chiloé Archipelago). The journey continues with a fleshy conger eel in a camomile stew and finishes with a light and spongy rosehip bavarois topped with edible flowers from the Atacama Desert.

"What we're trying to do here is investigate the roots of Chilean food and offer a different perspective," explains chef Néstor Ayala, who launched the cenas escondidas in 2015 with his frequently foraging co-chef Patricio Pichuante. "Little

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by little there has been a crop of new chefs who are in search of a fresh identity for Chilean restaurants. Some are recovering classic recipes and others do something more avant-garde, but the idea is the same: to give new respect to the local products."

Of course, all of this matters because Chile finally has a cuisine worthy to match its silky carmeneres and crisp sauvignon blancs. Known everywhere for its wines, there wasn't a single wine bar in the Chilean capital until 2012. Now there are a half-dozen. The pioneering vinobar, Bocanariz, remains the standard.

"Chile is the sixth most important wine producer in the world so we wanted to create a

place immersed in the city where you can learn about the various regions and styles," co-founder Katherine Hidalgo says as we sample a rare Portugais Bleu from Viña Carmen. "All of our waiters are sommeliers and their goal is to help showcase the diversity of Chilean wine and explain why a shiraz from the coastal Casablanca Valley might taste vastly different from a shiraz grown at altitude in Elqui Valley."

Bocanariz is a bastion of the pint-sized Lastarria neighbourhood and serves 36 top-shelf bottles by the glass, pairing them with tapas. Hidalgo says she changes the wine list each year to reflect the latest trends. In 2016 that means natural wines, VIGNO-labelled carignans, and old-vine pais (one of Chile's original grapes that was, until recently, destined for the goon box).

My final stop in Santiago is a fuente de soda. You'll find these old-fashioned "soda fountains" on nearly every city block, but Las Cabras is further proof of Santiago's culinary rebirth. It has all the classic diner elements (waxy napkins, neon lights, paper placemats), but there's craft beer from Patagonia pouring out and top-quality meats from the Central Valley on every plate. In Santiago now, even humble fast food offers a journey into the Chilean wilds **men's style**



### WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Magnolia opened this July after two years of meticulous renovations to re-fashion a 1920s heritage building as a boutique hotel. The 42-room property ingeniously intertwinces old with new as harlequin tiles, marble staircases and reconstructed stained-glass windows pop alongside ultramodern light fixtures, geometric furnishings and vertigo-inducing glass floors. Best of all: You're steps from Santiago's top restaurants.

Top, left to right: Las Cabras diner; chef Rodolfo Guzmán; silverside at Restaurante 040; cenas escondidas; shrimps in rice pillow at Restaurante 040; Sergio Barroso at work at Restaurante 040.

Pictures by MARK JOHANSON