

DESERT *of* PLENTY





A SURPRISING CULINARY SCENE BLOSSOMS IN THE ATACAMA.

BY MARK JOHANSON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAURA MACÍAS ACUÑA

The world's third-largest geyser field, El Tatio, and (opposite) cactus ice cream at Heladería Babalú.

EPHEDRA



FEW LANDSCAPES can test the boundaries of life like northern Chile's Atacama Desert, where, at times, Venus-level solar radiation bakes the ground and NASA tests instruments for Mars. It's the last place you'd expect to find a burgeoning food scene. And yet, the desert's extreme conditions have sparked radical creativity in oases such as the adventure-travel hub of San Pedro de Atacama. I recently dropped in on what felt like another planet – but was really just the world's driest nonpolar desert – not only to trek up volcanoes and float in salt lagoons, but to taste its baffling larder.

First up: chef Sergio Armella's Ephedra. The 31-year-old grew up in San Pedro, studied to be a lawyer in Santiago, and then pivoted during the pandemic to chase a new dream: training under chef Rasmus Kofoed at Copenhagen's three-Michelin-starred Geranium. After stints at El Chato in Bogotá and Santiago's Boragó, Armella returned in 2024 to focus on the foods he grew up with, opening Ephedra in the Indigenous Licán Antai *ayllu* (community) of Poconche, five miles outside San Pedro.

"This part of Chile has been somewhat left behind gastronomically, even though it's very touristic," Armella told me from one of the 12 tables at his stone-and-adobe restaurant. So the young chef began his research, asking elders about traditional foods and processes. "This knowledge isn't written in books," he said. "If nobody documents it now, it could be lost forever."

Armella scours the Atacama's many layers – from lowland salt flats to Andean lagoons – to craft multicourse tasting menus featuring hardy ingredients such as *suiko* (a high-altitude herb with aromas of citrus and menthol) and *pingo-pingo* (whose reddish fruit, ephedra, gives the restaurant its name). My favorite dish transformed *chañar*, a fruit with notes of honey and caramel, into a Mexican-style mole. Outside, the Licancabur volcano (a sacred site to the Licán

Antai, who call it “the people’s mountain”) loomed on the eastern horizon.

“One of the reasons I dedicate myself to this, and why I’m so interested in working with local products, is that it’s a way of filling certain gaps in my identity,” Armella shared. “Before, I was somewhat reluctant toward my culture. And that’s tragic. Through this, I’ve been able to revalue it and what I belong to.”

Ephedra is emblematic of a larger transformation underway in San Pedro. Home to roughly 5,000 people, the town has long been a cushy base for jet-setters exploring lunarlike valleys, wheezing geysers, and pre-Inca ruins, not to mention shiny observatories under coal-black skies. Now, it’s become a surprisingly diverse culinary destination too, with locavore dining complementing the surreal outdoor experiences.

Back at my hotel, Tierra Atacama, I sat by the infinity pool sipping pisco sours spiked with *rica-rica*, a floral herb that’s somewhere between mint and rosemary. An alfresco lunch the next day featured pan-seared trout with Parmesan foam and sliced *locos* (an abalone from the Atacama coast). For the hotel’s famed “fire night,” chef Daniel Gajardo barbecued a guanaco, the wild cousin of the llama, which was lean and reminiscent of venison.

“One might think that the word ‘desert’ means absolute nothingness,” said Gajardo, who trained under Fernanda Fuentes Cárdenas at Michelin-starred Nub in Tenerife. “But there’s endemic flora and fauna here that allow us to innovate and create.”

One day, I strolled San Pedro’s dusty downtown streets licking an ice-cream cone from Heladería Babalú. The magenta scoop on top was infused with the fruit of the acidic cactus *airampo*; the tan scoop below with pounded *algarrobo* pods, which tasted of graham crackers. Other visitors walked around with cones of milky quinoa or bitter coca leaves (a key ingredient in both



Dining



Poolside at Tierra Atacama.

Coca-Cola and cocaine) – flavors that could only exist here in the Andes.

I didn't have time to try ethnogastronomist Leonelo Cuevas' new dinner-beneath-the-stars meal at Ckelar, nor the ancestral cuisines of Antai, which opened in a traditional thatched-roof adobe home last February. Instead, I ate my final meal at the *ayllu* of Solor, four miles south of town, where Juan Pablo Mardones and Maureen Jones had just launched the tasting-menu restaurant Unai.

Mardones came to Unai after 17 years as the head chef at Awasi Atacama, the swanky Relais & Châteaux property down the road. His plates looked familiar but took wild detours: cappelletti filled with *humita* (a pre-Hispanic corn paste), scallop *aguachile* with crunchy *ficoide* (a local succulent), a *chañar*-infused crème brûlée that I'm still fantasizing about.

"Using local products doesn't only mean that they're endemic to the area," Mardones said, as llamas grazed on alfalfa beyond the restaurant's window. "It can also be the case that a producer has adapted products and managed to grow them here."

He pointed to Viña Ayllu, a vineyard in the nearby town of Toconao (elevation: 8,000 feet) run by a Licán Antai co-op. Unai frequently pairs plates with Ayllu's red and white blends, as well as its funky orange wine (Mardones' favorite). In theory, none of this wine and food grown in the desert makes sense. But in the Atacama, it's the improbable that's ordinary.

Sunny Days Ahead

Tierra Atacama reopened last April following a complete renovation by its new owner, Baillie Lodges. The original architect and interior designer returned to revamp the 28-room property, working with more than three dozen local artists on pieces inspired by the sun and moon. Its front-row volcano views and extensive spa are the best in town. *Virtuoso travelers receive all meals and a \$100 resort credit.*

Awasi Atacama stands out among San Pedro's top all-inclusive resorts for its size (just 12 adobe suites) and ultra-tailored excursions – each room comes with a dedicated guide and private four-wheel-drive vehicle. *Virtuoso travelers receive all meals and a special eight-course tasting menu.*

Secluded, 42-room Nayara Alto Atacama has its own on-site observatory with a 16-inch telescope for guided clifftop stargazing. Meanwhile, the kitchen's "zero-kilometer" philosophy supports local farmers and producers. *Virtuoso travelers receive breakfast daily and a \$100 resort credit.*

Guests at the 50-room Explora Atacama have access to stargazing in a private observatory, horseback riding, and challenging guided excursions such as volcano trekking, but also a spa and four interconnected pools. The best perk: exclusive access to the Puritama Hot Springs in Explora's 17,300-acre conservation reserve. *Virtuoso travelers receive all meals and a \$100 resort credit.* 📍