

DESTINATION

La Paz Rising

CHEFS IN BOLIVIA'S CULTURAL HUB BRING THEIR NATION'S INDIGENOUS INGREDIENTS TO NEW HEIGHTS.
BY MARK JOHANSON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARAH PABST

WHILE MOST BOLIVIANS live in the Andes, two-thirds of the nation actually sits within the Amazon Basin, an untamed tropical lowland that, for as long as Marsia Taha can remember, has felt like an entirely different planet. The chef is the creative mind behind Arami, a restaurant 12,000 feet above sea level in La Paz, Bolivia's administrative capital. Her dishes feature fish, fruits, and nuts sourced directly from small rainforest communities in the lowlands.

Taha started her career at nearby Gustu. Founded in 2012 by Claus Meyer, the restaurant became a launchpad for a new generation of chefs. During her tenure there, she partnered with the Wildlife Conservation Society to research the untapped culinary potential of the Bolivian jungle. "My mind completely changed," she tells me over coca tea in the gallery-like lobby of La Paz's MET Hotel. "Every time I went into the Amazon, I'd see at least five things I hadn't seen before. That made me, as a curious person, like a kid in a candy shop."

She then began researching local products like camu camu, whose acidic, cherry-like fruits contain 60 times the vitamin C of oranges. "I was like, 'What the heck are we doing as Bolivian chefs with all of these things we have that we aren't even using,'" she recalls later at Arami, where we nibble on citrus-cured morsels of caiman, a nocturnal alligator cousin that dwells in the nation's wetlands.

That ethos has spread across La Paz, an Indigenous-majority city of 2.2 million people. Many foreigners visit to sample Bolivia's vast larder. The region has given the world everything from potatoes and peanuts to quinoa and cacao. Travelers arriving by air touch down at a breath-robbing 13,000 feet above sea level; to get around, I've been gliding above the city in futuristic gondolas, rubbernecking 20,000-foot peaks.

"Fifteen years ago, we were talking about the potential of the Bolivian kitchen," Taha says. "It's amazing, because that potential is happening now." She and a wave of like-minded local chefs, all in their early to mid 30s, have transformed their country's culinary landscape, remarkably with nearly no government support. That's one reason why while a well-funded culinary renaissance in nearby Lima draws global attention, few have hyped the parallel movement underway in La Paz—until now.

Women stroll
La Paz's Saturday
market, shopping
for herbs, river
fish, and lunch.



EAT

ARAMI

Avenida Aviador 77

“If we don’t consume the rare fruits of the Amazon and create a market for them, then we will lose the rainforest to soy production.” This is the manifesto of chef Marsia Taha, who serves the jungle’s edible flora with river fish like pacu, paiche, and piranha. Co-owner Andrea Moscoso offers natural and low-intervention Bolivian wine pairings as surprising as the eight courses they accompany.

PHAYAWI

Calle 22 de Achumani

Valentina Arteaga reimagines her own family recipes at this sophisticated eatery, which doubles as a gourmet shop. In fact, the chef’s mom works in the kitchen right alongside her, preparing homestyle favorites such as sopa de maní (peanut soup) and picante de lengua (ají-spiced beef tongue). “When I saw Bolivian grandmothers eating here,” Arteaga says, “I knew I was onto something.”



Clockwise, from top left: Chef Marsia Taha at Arami; sopa de maní at Phayawi; piranha with Amazonian chiles and rice at Arami.

POPULAR COCINA BOLIVIANA

Murillo 826

Lunch is the most important meal in Bolivia, and nobody serves a more painterly midday feast than the team at this downtown eatery, located in a colonial-era courtyard home. Three-course meals cost only 99 bolivianos (about \$9), and there are no reservations. Staff let 50 people in from the line at noon and another 50 around 1:30 P.M.

ANCESTRAL

Calle 10 de Achumani Maria F. Goya #135

This handsome, low-lit restaurant resplendent in wood, brick, and leather specializes in belly-warming dishes roasted over a live-fire grill “in the ancestral way,” chef Sebastián Giménez explains. Watch through the open kitchen as he and chef Mauricio López sear Chaco rib eye and Amazonian catfish.



From left: Alexandra Ilse Melèan, Juan Pablo Reyes Aguilar, and Diego Rodas Zurita of Popular Cocina Boliviana; a purple potato appetizer; a guest enters Ancestral.



SÁNDWICH DE CHORIZO DOÑA ELVIRA

Mercado Lanza, 3F, Corredor #14
For just 14 bolivianos (about \$1.30), you can get a green plastic plate holding one of Doña Elvira's heaping choripán sandwiches—homemade chorizo, lettuce, and mustard on a marraqueta roll—which have drawn crowds to the Lanza Market for more than 40 years. Elvira no longer cooks, but she sits with her oxygen tank, greeting fans.

LA RUFINA

Belisario Salinas 572
Bolivian street food gets a glow-up at Dennis Llusco's folksy mural-covered restaurant, which began as a humble two-table takeaway joint. Now there are ten tables and a wide-ranging menu of regional comfort foods such as masaco (mashed plantain topped with peanut sauce, jerked beef, and salty chaqueño cheese) or quesumacha (corn, broad beans, and native potatoes in a cheese and yellow chile sauce).



From left: La Rufina; smoked beef short rib with quinoa risotto.



PRIDE ON A PLATE

“I GREW UP IN THE countryside near Lake Titicaca surrounded by animals and nature. From a young age, I learned the rhythms of when to sow potatoes and how to turn them into chuño (a freeze-drying technique that dates back to the 13th century). I came to La Paz at 16 and turned to cooking. There's a strong desire in me to preserve our culture. In Bolivia, we still have incredible organic products; we're not so industrialized. I'm happy that chefs are now focusing on *our* foods and *our* culture, supporting one another and showing the world who we are. We have a unique identity, but there's still so much left to be said for feeling Bolivian and for being proud of it. More than ever these days, people get to know us through our food. I hope to leave a mark and to give others the same memories I carry when I cook.”

—Chef Dennis Llusco of La Rufina

DRINK

La Costilla de Adan

M. #2974, Prol. Armaza
Owner Roberto Cazorla has filled this museum-like speakeasy with more than 19,000 antiques sourced from La Paz flea markets and estate auctions in Potosí, a onetime boomtown.

Hay Pan

Calle Murillo 764
Bolivia may have some of the best wines you've never heard of; this hole-in-the-wall is the place to remedy that. Hay Pan pairs the sensibility of a listening bar with vino from the main growing regions of Tarija, Cinti, and Samaipata.

El Bestiario

Aspiazu 426
This come-as-you-are art bar, spread across several kitschy rooms of a Sopocachi home, is the brainchild of queer icon Juan Pablo García. Musicians and poets congregate for live cumbia and jazz, plus smoked meats and more than 20 types of home-distilled gin.



STAY

CASA FUSION

Calle Miguel de Cervantes 2725

Tucked into a restored 1950s house in the Sopocachi neighborhood, this stylish spot is the most bohemian mid-ranger in town. An on-site bakery means there are always sweet treats for breakfast.

MET HOTEL

Avenida de la Fuerza Naval 1626

The white and forest-green color palette gives this 76-room design hotel in Zona Sur a light and airy touch; its walls showcase the works of emerging and established Bolivian artists including photographer River Claire.

ATIX

Calle 16 8052

The lobby of this Zona Sur boutique features surreal artwork from Gastón Ugalde, nicknamed “the Andean Warhol.” There’s a sleek rooftop bar and pool, as well as a stylish restaurant with a focus on hyperlocal ingredients.



From left: The Casa Fusion Hotel with works by local artists; the lobby of the MET Hotel.

Café All Day

Bolivian coffee is a hot commodity across South America thanks to its altitude-enhanced aromas, with Arabica plants grown primarily on small farms between 2,500 and 7,500 feet. The country’s main growing region, the Yungas cloud forests, is about three hours down-mountain from La Paz and yields brightly acidic beans that are far removed from mass-market blends. They’re shade-grown, hand-harvested, and almost always organic. Here’s where to sip the finest brews.

1. HB Bronze Coffeebar

Decked out in upcycled bronze and wood, this handsome downtown café sources rare Geisha beans, which have a tea-like elegance and aromas such as lemon verbena and stone fruit.

2. Typica Café

This funky local chain has outposts in Centro, Sopocachi, and Zona Sur. Baristas toast chocolaty Catuai beans from Caranavi, 100 miles northeast of La Paz on the slopes of the Andes.

3. Mugen Coffee Project

There’s a big focus on traceability at this roastery, where the Japanese Bolivian owner runs both an espresso station and a slow bar serving V60, Aeropress, and cold brew.

SHOP

El Ceibo Chocolate

This shop pairs organic Amazon-grown cacao—sourced from 47 cooperatives in the Alto Beni region—with Andean staples like salt crystals from the Uyuni Salt Flat. El Ceibo's 75-percent dark bars are renowned among global chocolatiers.

Find it at: Chocolates El Ceibo

Red Quinoa

In Bolivia, you'll often find this highly nutritious pseudocereal cleaned but not polished to the same degree as export brands, giving it a fuller, nuttier flavor. Once looked down on as a food of the poor, now it's prized.

Find it at: La Huerta

Aranjuez Tannat ▼

This award-winning Tannat put Bolivia on the wine map. Coming from some of the highest vineyards in the world at 5,250 feet above sea level near the Argentine border, this grape's plummy, spicy notes cut through the fat of a rib eye.

Find it at: La Tintorería



Above: A market selling herbal remedies. Facing: View from the MET Hotel.



THE SACRED LEAF

Coca leaves may be best-known abroad as a key flavoring in Coca-Cola and the source of cocaine, but in Andean culture, they are revered for their medicinal properties. In La Paz, the leaves are brewed (or chewed) to combat altitude sickness. Steep a fistful in hot water for a bitter, energizing tea. (Just be sure not to bring any home with you; most countries classify coca as a controlled substance.)