

# Lima's boulevard of treats

The people of Lima have always had a soft spot for their city's street-food vendors. Numbering in the thousands, these savvy and fiercely independent entrepreneurs are a part of the national consciousness, and their food — tamales, skewered beef hearts (anticuchos), corn on the cob with fresh cheese, squash fritters doused in rich brown loaf sugar syrup (picarones) — is the iconic stuff of childhood memories.

This freewheeling commerce was not without its downside. On a trip to Lima in the late 1980s, I remember spending hours wending my way through streets blocked by peddlers and food carts to reach the Church of St. Francis, one of the most beautiful in the old city center.

In the 1990s, the late Mayor Alberto Andrade Carmona undertook a campaign to bring order and higher standards to this cherished but chaotic sector. On subsequent visits, I was able to admire Lima's baroque splendor through clean, unclogged streets and to enjoy a gastronomic boulevard of sorts on the edge of the Rimac River, which had been set aside for the street-food vendors.

Vendors in many of Lima's municipalities are now compelled to attend food-handling classes; don uniforms and purchase carts that are easy to clean and maintain — welcome changes in this age of pandemic that have served to elevate the status of the street-food sellers.

A curious new breed of cart, the *carrito choclero*, sells a favorite street food, boiled corn on the cob and fresh cheese. Now circulating through Lima and five other prov-



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inces, the whimsical carts, operated by women, consist of a plastic box shaped like a fat Andean corn cob propped over the two-wheeled front end of a tricycle. Inside the corn cob are separate insulated chambers to keep the boiled corn warm and the fresh cheese cool.

As I mingled with the throngs at Lima's annual Mistura food fair in September, I watched hungry customers line up for a snack of piping hot Andean corn flanked by fat slices of delicious fresh cheese served on a fresh corn husk.

The wait was at least an hour for the anticuchos prepared by Grimanesa Vargas Araujo, a soft-spoken woman affectionately known as La Tía Grima or simply La Grimanesa. She is Lima's most famous anticucho maker with more than 35 years of experience plying her craft on the same corner of Miraflores, a middle-class district in Lima.

Proudly wearing a well-fitted chef's uniform, she tended a lively charcoal fire built on a grill attached to her small cart, basting luscious chunks of beef heart with



the mixture of ground panca pepper, cumin, garlic and red wine vinegar in which they had marinated. Two of her grown children handed out paper plates loaded with three perfectly grilled anticuchos, smoky and charred on the edges, nestled between fat slices of starchy boiled potato on a fiery rocoto pepper sauce.

By the end of the fair, La Tía Grima had served 11,000 anticucho skewers to her adoring fans. Later that day in a ceremony on the festival's main stage, she received an *Aji de Plata* (Silver Pepper Award) from the government's tourism commission, PromPeru, for outstanding culinary performance.

While some critics regret the loss of freewheeling independence or dislike the visual uniformity imposed by government control, many vendors, as well as consumers, applaud the changes. The food is as tasty as ever, and the women now consider themselves not just vendors but true chefs de la calle, chefs of the street.

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## SNACK

### ANDEAN CORN WITH FRESH CHEESE

In the Bolivian, Ecuadorean and Peruvian Andes, farmers grow a type of white corn with fat short cobs and kernels as big as toenails. It is mealy and starchy, without a trace of sweetness, a far cry from the tender, supersweet hybrid North Americans



PHOTOS BY MARICEL E. PRESILLA / FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

**FAVORITE SNACK:** Street vendors at Lima's Mistura Fair sell boiled corn (choclo) and fresh cheese from a typical street cart shaped like an ear of Andean corn. Below, Grimanesa Vargas Araujo (La Tía Grima) bastes her famous anticuchos (skewered beef hearts).

favor for corn on the cob. Boiled Andean corn accompanied by fat slices of fresh cheese and a dollop of spicy sauce is a favorite street food in Peru. At my kitchen market, Ultramarinos, I embellish this simple treat with a bit of butter, ground hot pepper and a squeeze of lime. Andean corn is available frozen at Latin markets. It should not be thawed before boiling.

- 1 or 2 ears frozen Andean corn
- Salt and sugar to taste
- 4 tablespoons salted butter, melted
- ½ to 1 teaspoon ground dried mirasol pepper (available at Latin markets) or ¼ teaspoon ground cayenne
- Coarse sea salt to taste
- Dash of freshly ground pepper
- A squeeze of fresh lime
- 2 to 4 thick slices queso

### blanco (fresh Latin cheese)

- Dried corn husk to serve (optional)

Bring 1 quart water to boil over high heat, adding salt and sugar to taste. Add the frozen corn and boil until tender, about 10 minutes. Place the butter, ground hot pepper, salt and pepper in a medium bowl. Lift out the corn, place in the bowl and toss until well-coated with the butter and seasonings. Serve whole or cut into 1½- to 2-inch pinwheels drizzled with a squeeze of lime and accompanied by the cheese slices on an appetizer plate or over a dried corn husk. Makes 1 serving.

**Per serving:** 475 calories (62 percent from fat), 35.3 g fat (21.1 g saturated, 4.7 g monounsaturated), 106 mg cholesterol, 20.3 g protein, 29.5 g carbohydrates, 3.5 g fiber, 489 mg sodium.