

PERU

UMAMI IN THE AMAZON

Flavour-packed, nutrient-rich *aji negro*, an Amazonian condiment overlooked for generations, has been given a new lease of life in Lima's smartest restaurants

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Tearing off a strip of cassava flatbread, I dip it into the hot, caramel-coloured sauce, and raise it cautiously to my tongue. The first hit is a sour, citrus tang. A moment later, it spreads outwards, warming my mouth with salty, smoky, yeasty flavours, a little like Marmite or miso. It's impossible not to gulp in reaction to the intense umami hit.

This is *aji negro*, a fermented sauce made in the Peruvian Amazon by indigenous women from the Bora and Huitoto communities. Its probiotic qualities are so powerful that it's said to extend the lifespans of those who consume it. Also produced in parts of Brazil, where it's known as *tucupí negro*, the sauce is being touted as a wonder ingredient by top Lima chefs. And yet, outside South America, it's almost completely unknown.

The fact that most of us have never heard of *aji negro* is in large part due to shame and ignorance surrounding indigenous Amazonian cuisine. Until recently, visitors to

the village of Pucaurquillo were more likely to be served spaghetti or canned tuna; women like Milda Quevare, who produces the black sauce, were ashamed of offering their own culinary traditions after years of government efforts to introduce European-influenced foods to the Amazon region. Despite centuries of ancestral knowledge and access to extraordinary tropical produce, they'd turned their back on their own culture.

But when top Peruvian chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino (owner of Malabar and Ámaz restaurants in Lima) visited the village five years ago, he helped Quevare see value in her cuisine. After tasting *aji negro* for the first time, the chef behind Despensa Amazónica (an NGO dedicated to sustainable Amazonian cuisine) was so impressed he helped Quevare set up a collective to produce the condiment and sell it to restaurants in the capital and beyond. As a result, the women of Pucaurquillo gained a valuable source of income, while Schiaffino and other

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Villagers in Pucaurquillo making tapioca with flour leftover after straining the cassava to make *aji negro*; pressing cassava through a sieve in a maloka, Pucaurquillo; stirring a pot of *aji negro*

IMAGES: DESPENSA AMAZONICA

chefs gained access to an ingredient not available elsewhere. Schiaffino soon won over fellow Peruvian chefs, including Mitsuharu Tsumura, who serves it with beef short rib at his Lima restaurant Maido, which has appeared on the World's 50 Best Restaurants' Best Restaurant list for the past three years.

In its 200ml bottled form, *aji negro* looks like any other condiment. But the process behind it is laborious. Quevare takes us out to a field, where two women hack at cassava roots with machetes, pulling up thick, trunk-like tubers. She explains how the leaf identifies whether the cassava is poisonous or not. It's not the sweet, edible cassava we want — it's the poisonous yuca brava, which contains enough cyanide to kill us but also much more flavour than its less potent cousin. Boiled or cooked, this cassava is toxic, but ancestral techniques passed from generation to generation allow Quevare and her colleagues to correctly and safely ferment and transform it.



Women work together to wash and peel the raw cassava, before it's soaked in water for several days. Then, inside a *maloka* (the thatched longhouses found in Amazon villages), they press it through handmade sieves, keeping the leftover pulp to make those gooey cassava flatbreads. The starch is then removed from the sieved liquid, and the broth is reduced for many hours, then left to thicken over several days.

Back in Lima, as Schiaffino serves up doncella catfish with *aji negro* at his jungle-inspired restaurant Ámaz, he waxes lyrical about the potential of Amazonian cuisine. For the chef, the world's biggest rainforest holds the key to our food future, but he also stresses the importance of supporting women like Quevare to help them develop sustainable practices. "For many years, we didn't pay attention to these people. But if we look to them, we can change South American gastronomy." despensamazonica.org

INDIGENOUS EATS

KJOLLE

Chef Pía León's debut restaurant Kjolle, in Lima, serves a rainbow of indigenous ingredients, from assorted tubers to cacao. kjolle.com

ÁMAZ

Named after the Amazon itself, this casual, colourful restaurant in the capital serves produce chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino has sourced from the jungle. Sustainable paiche fish is served in charcuterie form, and the river snails with spicy chorizo are also one of the highlights. amaz.com.pe