



Peru ON A PLATE

Besides putting his native Peruvian cuisine on the global gastronomic map, chef Virgilio Martinez is keeping busy with a new restaurant and the debut of a cookbook.

By Sasha Gonzales



Here's a little known fact: Virgilio Martinez, the rock-star chef who is putting Peruvian cuisine on the map, once dreamt of becoming a professional skateboarder. It was a good thing he was forced to abandon those plans due to a shoulder injury, or we might not have discovered the wonders of eating clay—yes, it's part of a chocolate dessert he offers at his restaurant.

“When I told my family I wanted to be a chef, they were shocked because nobody thought of cooking as a profession; cooking was just something everyone did,” he confesses.

Martinez has come a long way since the opening of Central Restaurante in Lima circa 2008. The establishment has racked up countless awards, and was recently ranked number one in The World's 50 Best Restaurants in Latin America for the third consecutive year, and 4th Best Restaurant in the World, earlier in April 2016. The 39-year-old chef has also bagged a Michelin star for Lima, his modern Peruvian restaurant in London, in 2014.

IT'S ALL IN THE ALTITUDE

Peru was never known as a gastronomic capital—not until Martinez, along with a new generation of Peruvian chefs, started dazzling palates all over the world with dishes that went beyond ceviches, quinoa, and empanadas.

Central Restaurante is not just a dining destination, it is a showcase of Peru's rich biodiversity. Take the humble potato—over 4,000 varieties grow in the country's Andean highlands. Martinez is also known for taking indigenous ingredients like *arracacha* (a root vegetable from the Andes) and *arapaima* (a fresh water fish from the Amazon River)—and applying modern cooking techniques to them.

Altitude is a key principle to understanding Peru's ecology and ancient agricultural heritage. His menu at Central is structured according to altitude: each dish is listed next to its elevation of origins.

Like the restaurant menu, Martinez's new book *Central* (out last month) is organised in the same way. Each chapter explores a different



altitude of the Peruvian landscape along with its produce, highlighting recipes and including personal essays about Martinez's journey.

No place in and around Peru is off-limits for this talented chef and his team at Mater Iniciativa, a research initiative he founded in 2013 to discover Peru's diverse native ingredients in their original habitats. “I love experimenting with unusual foods that I come across on a foraging trip—these can be anything from leaves and tubers to roots and wild herbs,” says Martinez.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Just last month, Martinez was in town to cook a pop-up dinner at the Shangri-La Hotel Singapore. He is now preparing to relocate Central Restaurante to a new home in Lima's bohemian Barranco neighbourhood come 2017. Occupying an old factory, the new Central will house three distinct spaces including a more casual restaurant where Martinez's wife, Pia León (the restaurant's executive chef), will present her first solo menu.

In April 2017, we can expect a sixth restaurant from Martinez: Mil will be situated at a hypoxic 3,505m above sea level, on the edge of Moray, an archaeological site in the Andes. It will specifically serve local Andean cuisine made from ingredients found at this altitude. The place will also house a food lab where Martinez and his team of foragers, botanists, anthropologists, and artists will research and grow indigenous ingredients.

There's no doubt about it; Martinez is on a roll.

17 Questions

WITH VIRGILIO MARTINEZ

1 WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE BREAKFAST? EGGS, GREENS, CHEESE, AND PLENTY OF COFFEE.



2 WHAT DO YOU EAT ON PLANES?
I just drink a lot of water.

3 IF YOU COULD COOK FOR ANYONE, WHO'D IT BE?
MY WIFE, PIA.



4 FINISH THIS SENTENCE: I CANNOT CONTROL MYSELF AROUND...
Chocolate and coffee.

5 PET PEEVE ABOUT EATING OUT?
Too many people taking photos with their phones.

6 WHAT'S YOUR "SPIRIT" FOOD? OCAS, OR NEW ZEALAND YAMS - THEY'RE IMPERFECTLY SHAPED BUT SO BEAUTIFUL.

7 IN THE KITCHEN YOU SWEAR BY?
Disorganisation.

8 RAMEN OR PASTA?
PASTA.

9 WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE NON-ALCOHOLIC DRINK?
GRANADILLA JUICE.
(TYPE OF PASSION FRUIT)

10 WHAT WOULD YOUR LAST MEAL BE?
Carapulcra, a traditional Peruvian dish that reminds me of my grandmother.



14 YOU'RE DYING TO GO TO...
Iceland.




16 WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU ATE AT MCDONALDS?
When I was 20, I think.

11 WHAT'S YOUR FIRST FOOD MEMORY?
Fresh fish with lime.

13 YOUR FAVOURITE COMFORT FOOD...
Potatoes.

15 THE ONE FOOD YOU MISS WHEN YOU'RE AWAY FROM HOME...
Tiraditos, a raw fish dish with a spicy sauce.

17 WHO IS ONE CHEF, LIVING OR DEAD THAT YOU LOOK UP TO?
My mother.

12 WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU GOT DRUNK AND WHAT DID YOU DRINK?
I can't remember! But I was probably drinking chilcanos (a Peruvian cocktail)