



Daniel Chavez on Canchita and His Ambitions for Peruvian Cuisine

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Canchita is Daniel Chavez's latest venture, which opened in May of this year. Located at Dempsey, the backdrop of lush greenery provides the perfect accompaniment to the vibrant plates presented. The Peruvian restaurant pays homage to Daniel's Peruvian roots and offers up a menu that is concise as it is inclusive.

Naturally, traditional Peruvian dishes such as ceviche feature heavily on the menu, but other Latin American influences can also be found, such as the delicious Mexican tacos that is a nod to wife and head chef Tamara Chavez's Mexican heritage. Said Daniel, 'When we used to run TONO Cevicheria, people would naturally ask her for tacos even if they were not in the menu. We decided to include them as they have become quite popular even though they are not strictly Peruvian cuisine.'

Speaking about the deliberate attempt to create a menu that would offer varied options, Daniel astutely points out, 'In a sense this is a must in Singapore, as the city hosts people from many different parts of the world who have very different requirements, religions and food preferences. Every region of the world has a unique way of eating, yet at the same time guests want to eat something authentic from far away. The job is to produce a menu that caters to both needs.'

Drawing on his past experiences, Canchita also aims to use ingredients that are in season, and can be locally sourced in Singapore. Said Daniel, 'This is quite interesting and fun, as you can find produce from almost all over the world that we end up using to cook Peruvian dishes. This brings a lot of opportunities for creativity in the kitchen.'



Daniel is no stranger to the industry, having previously opened three other establishments in Singapore – Spanish restaurant Ola Cocina Del Mar, Peruvian eatery TONO Cevicheria and Tonito, a casual Latin American joint. He has also worked at Michelin-starred restaurants around the world, including Can Fabes in Catalonia and Ossiano in Dubai. With such an impressive resume, one would think Daniel had an inkling for the craft at an early age. However, unlike most of his peers who had an early interest in cooking, Daniel Chavez fell into his career as a chef almost by accident.

Originally a business student, Daniel decided to make a change after realizing he had no passion for what he was studying. He enrolled as a culinary student at the Florida Culinary Institute after his family relocated from Peru to the United States, a decision that his family supported. Said Daniel, 'I was immediately hooked, motivated like I have felt in my life before. From that moment on, it has been an incredible journey.'

We sit down with Daniel Chavez to discover where his passion for cooking has taken him, his love for Peruvian cuisine and how he feels about the Singapore food scene.

As a chef, where do you get your inspiration from. Has there been any particular type of cuisine that has influenced your style?

This is quite funny since when I first moved to the US, I started to become curious about European food, so I went to Valencia, Spain. When I got there, I became interested in Asian cuisine, so I went to Singapore but ended up working in a French fine-dining restaurant before moving on to Dubai. I guess for a long period of time, I can say I was very curious.

Now that I look back, I would say Spain was a turning point in my life. I started to look at things very differently and was able to understand a cuisine from its base, especially with the time that I spent in Valencia and Barcelona working for Chef Santi Santamaria.

I worked in Spanish fine dining restaurants in many different cities for a very long period, only to start cooking Peruvian food in a much later stage of my career. This is very uncommon as normally you start your culinary career learning what your country's cuisine is all about yet in my case it was the opposite. I would say that Peruvian food influenced most of the different restaurants that I worked before.

Having worked all over the world, were there any specific experiences that has shaped who you are as a chef today?



While all my experiences have shaped the way I look at the industry today, the most important experience I had was in 2015. The most prominent Peruvian chefs (Gaston Acurio, Virgilio Martinez, Mitsuharu Tsumura and Rafael Piqueras) joined hands as the 'Tiger's Milk Gang. They collaborated with us during the Asia's 50 Best Restaurant awards in Singapore, and during this event Peruvian food was introduced to Singapore. We also organized a series of events that aimed to promote ceviche and Peruvian gastronomy in Singapore.

The Tiger's Milk Gang had traveled to many fine restaurants around the world with great success and had Singapore as their last stop. It was very meaningful as the reaction of the guests, and interest from the media was incredible.

Needless to say, this experience has shaped the way I now think. I felt a sense of purpose and decided to focus our efforts in promoting Peruvian food and culture.

You've been in Singapore for over a decade now. Do you think the food scene in Singapore has evolved during your time here, and how so?

I arrived in Singapore in 2006 and of course the city was very much different then. Singapore in my opinion is the fastest evolving food city in the world. Not to be biased, but when I arrived, there were at most 3 to 5 fine dining restaurants and now what the country has in terms of variety is quite unbelievable. Most cities take many decades to build a gastronomic scene. This is not necessarily a bad thing though, as meaningful things do take time. After spending more than 15 years here I would say that I have witnessed a very important part of the development of the Singapore F&B scene.



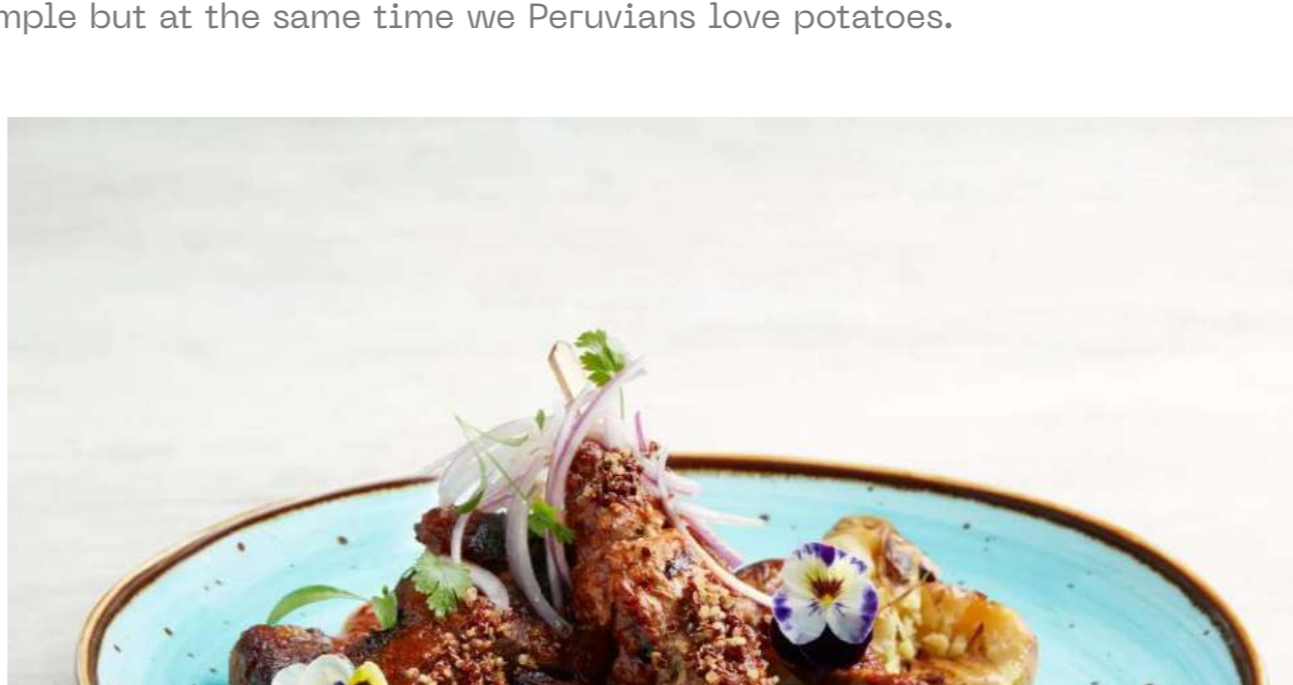
What do you love about the Singapore food scene?

Singapore food is in many ways very similar to Peruvian food as we are a mixed culture. The combination of influences such as Cantonese, Hokkien, Indian, Malay etc tend to bring about a much better end product compared to a cuisine that just remains pure. We have something similar to *Jaksa* in Peru that we call *chupe* and also a version of *bak kuh teh* made with beef that we call *sancochado*.

The hawker centre culture here is what I love the most. To me, there is a great opportunity to bring this abroad. When my friends come from overseas they also go crazy when we eat wonton mee and black pepper crab. Some of my favourite local eateries here are Keng Eng Kee in Alexandria and Sin Huat in Geylang.

What to you, is a quintessential Peruvian dish?

The dish that I can eat every day is ceviche, but if you asked me what would I eat on my last day on earth, I would have a boiled potato with chilies, salt and olive oil. This is very simple but at the same time we Peruvians love potatoes.



While still relatively new, Peruvian cuisine is now gaining traction in Singapore thanks to Peruvian restaurants like Canchita. As a Peruvian chef, what are your ambitions for the restaurant to be represented in Singapore, and some things you would like people to know about Peruvian food?

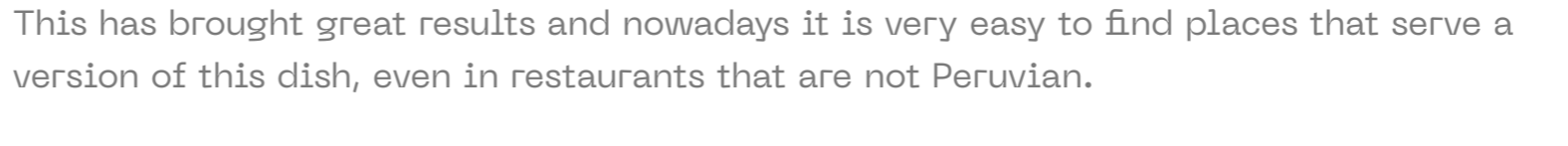
Peruvian food has great opportunity in the culinary world as it is influenced by many cultures – Inka, a Peruvian ancestral culture more than 5000 years old , as well as Spanish, Arabic, African, Cantonese, Italian, and Japanese flavors. No other cuisine in the world has this versatility. It is not something that any chef has created, but what we have inherited. The Peruvian cuisine is a result of 500 years of cultures from all over the world, living together in the same country

A big misconception is that all of our cuisine is acidic and spicy. This is not the case as we have so much more to offer, but at the same time , I don't see this as a big problem. Taking Japanese cuisine as an example – in the beginning Japanese food was popularised by sushi and sashimi, but later the rest came. As time goes by, I believe people will feel more attracted to eat other Peruvian dishes, it has to follow a natural process.

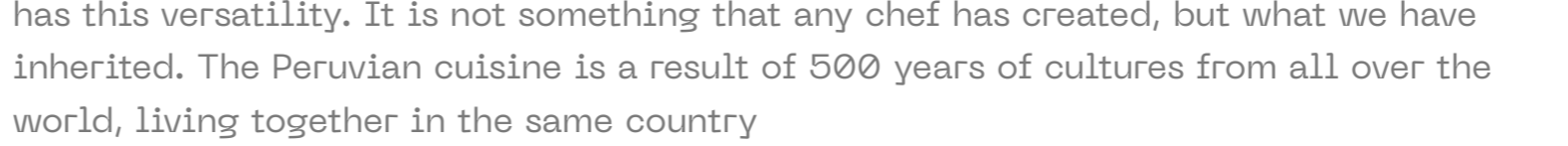
**This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

Canchita is located at Dempsey Rd, 9A 9B, Singapore 247698. For more information, go to canchita.sg.

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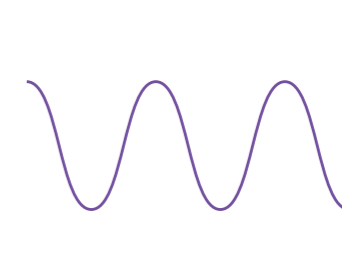
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