

FOOD & WINE

Meet the Mexican Chef Working Her Magic in a Peruvian Kitchen

by Anton D. Javier

Photos courtesy of Canchita Peruvian Cuisine

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Chef Tamara Chávez perfectly
marries Peruvian flavors with her
Mexican background at Canchita

Peruvian Cuisine, resulting in a delicious Latin American food journey



My first encounter with Chef Tamara Chávez, the chef-owner of *Canchita Peruvian Cuisine* (<http://canchita.sg/>) at Dempsey Hill, and her food was a few years ago at TONO Cevicheria, which was perhaps Singapore's first true taste of Peruvian cuisine. I was immediately blown away by its bold, vibrant flavors; a much needed addition to Singapore's ever-evolving F&B landscape. While new to both the country and its cut-throat culinary scene, her fiery Latin spirit and delicious creations soon won people over.



"I would say the biggest challenge in my career in Singapore was when TONO Cevicheria first opened," reveals Chávez. "I was new to the country and had to quickly immerse myself in the local food culture to better understand the preferences here." As the saying goes, Chávez went through a baptism of fire, which was critical in helping her identify Peruvian and Latin American dishes that would work for the Singaporean palate. "The first year was one of rigorous tasting, testing, making mistakes, and learning from them," she adds.

(Related: *Comfort in the familiar*

(<https://www.portfoliomagsg.com/article/taste-comfort-in-the-familiar.html>))

Tell us about the joys of cooking Latin American food in Singapore. What have you learned on your journey so far?

The best thing that has happened to me in Singapore is being able to bring the flavors of Latin America to this country. It has been extremely fulfilling to see our team of local and Malaysia-born chefs — who were unfamiliar with Latin America before joining CANCHITA — grow in their understanding, knowledge, and appreciation for Peruvian and Latin American flavors, textures, and produce; every single day.

Singapore is such a competitive city and truly a country of food lovers, so learning for me is a constant here. But my biggest learning to date, is to be open to surprises every day, and that there are absolutely no limits when it comes to culinary creativity in the kitchen.

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As a Mexican chef, what is your approach to cooking predominantly Peruvian food at Canchita? Can you walk us through the differences and similarities?

I love this question. Being Mexican, I feel very lucky to be able to represent Peruvian cuisine in Singapore with Canchita.

Being Mexican and not having deep-set Peruvian gastronomic memories, I have no limits when it comes to culinary creativity in the kitchen. I maintain an open mind when it comes to exploring with different ingredients, while keeping traditional recipes close to heart.

Mexican and Peruvian food have many similarities, starting with ingredients like corn, avocado, and chili. Both have been influenced by other international cuisines, but the biggest difference is that for Peruvians, they adopt these cuisines as their own through unique mixes such as Chinese-Peruvian "Chifa", Japanese-Peruvian "Nikkei", Italian-Peruvian "Bachiche", Spanish-Peruvian "Criolla", and African-Peruvian "Afro Peruvian".



Canchita's interiors

Can you tell us more about the concept of Canchita and what you want diners to take away after eating a meal there?

Canchita is a bigger and bolder next step of my culinary journey, and a love note to the diverse and vibrant Latin American flavors that I grew up with.

My team and I are grateful for the opportunity to share this passion for Latin American flavors in Singapore. With Canchita, a Peruvian-centric restaurant, we want to share a deeper understanding of Latin American gastronomy and culture with everyone.

Talk to us about your experience as a chef who is running a fairly new restaurant amidst a pandemic. What keeps you going when there are so many challenges?

It has been a unique experience for our team, having to adapt to constant changes. But we've taken it positively and see every challenge as an opportunity to learn. How to better deal with disruptions, how to think more creatively, and be more resilient together as a team.

Just as how we have dealt with all the disruptions and restrictions since opening, we plan to continue doing what we do. Stay committed to offering our customers the best Peruvian and Latin American dining experiences, be it at our restaurant or at home.





Weekend brunch menu highlights at Canchita

You recently launched a weekend brunch menu at Canchita. Is the brunch culture a big thing in Latin American countries too like it is in Singapore? Of course. In Mexico we simply call it "Lunch" and in Latin America, it is the perfect occasion to visit our families, eat together, and enjoy cooking.

Growing up, my grandmothers would cook throughout the week, little by little for when the weekend arrives; to receive my uncles, aunts, cousins, and friends of the family with tables full of traditional dishes. We also have dishes that are mostly consumed on weekends. In Peru for example, these weekend dishes would include the tamales and chicharrones with creole sauce, and huancaína and sweet potato.

What are some of the offerings from the brunch menu that you personally love and that diners should consider ordering?

Definitely the ceviches! They are something that you should not miss at brunch. Canchita offers different options for different tastes. And of course, the taco section too.



Ceviche Mixto

What dish on the Cancita menu best represents Tamara Chavez's style of cooking?

That would be the Ceviche Mixto.

First, it's because ceviche best represents Peruvian food. The Ceviche Mixto also has the spiciness that represents Mexico, and the crunchiness, which is a texture that I notice is popular with many different cuisines in Singapore (e.g. the papadom in Indian food, pork lard in Chinese noodles, the peanuts in Nasi Lemak and more). That is why I think the Ceviche Mixto is a dish that represents the best version of my kitchen in Canchita.

Visit Canchita Peruvian Cuisine at 9A Dempsey Road, Tel: 6232 7895

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