

Ecuador (Food)

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Beautifully presented *ceviche*, raw seafood marinated in citrus and accompanied by the traditional Ecuadorian handful of popcorn. (Photo courtesy of La Mirage Restaurant)

Exploring the Foods of Ecuador

By Claire Walter

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It takes a quick geography lesson to understand the foods of Ecuador, the smallest of the Andean countries. Roughly the size of Colorado, it encompasses life zones as varied as any on the planet. Tropical waters and coastal lowlands fringing the Pacific form the country's curvy coastline and the lush coastal plain that Ecuadorians refer to as the *Costa*. Guayaquil, the second-largest city, is the country's seafood capital.

East of the *Costa*, the land rises dramatically to form the *Sierra*, the highlands rising to the spine of the soaring, snow-capped Andes. Guayaquil, the largest, is a lowland city and Ecuador's seafood capital. Quito is the capital and second-largest city. Cuenca, a pleasing university town, is the third-largest. These two and other smaller, lesser-known cities are in the high mountains. Rural communities and farms occupy valleys. On the east side of Andes stretches the *Oriente*, a vast, sparsely populated rainforest plain. Rivers with headwaters in the Andes flow through it and ultimately join the Amazon in neighboring Brazil.

Even discounting Ecuador's Galapagos Islands, 600 miles away in the Pacific Ocean, the varied growing conditions in this small land make for exceptionally diverse cuisine. With the Andes as a formidable barrier, many Ecuadorian dishes are culturally related to Peruvian and Bolivian specialties, often descendants of food eaten by the Incas.

Choices today range from simple and inexpensive street food, including some only for the most adventurous American palates, to sophisticated urban cuisine that meets international standards. Many main dishes are based on meat or chicken plus a starch. Rice is eaten in the lowlands or potatoes in the high country. Yucca, quinoa and *menestra*, a mix of rice and beans, and yucca are also popular. In fact, quinoa, a high-protein grain, was a staple in Inca times.

Such fresh, high-quality seafood is available along the *Costa* and in major interior cities that *ceviche*, marinated raw fish, is the national dish. In Ecuador, *ceviche de pescado* (fish), *de camarones* (shrimp), *de concha* (shellfish), *de calamari* (squid) or *mixta* (a combination) is traditionally prepared with lemon juice and onion. The northern coast spawned a specialty called *encocados*, signifying that it is seafood stewed in coconut. It is now found in virtually every city.

Shrimp is delicious, but there are some real concerns regarding the aquaculture used to produce it in such abundance. Particularly true around the Gulf of Guayaquil and along the Muisne River, companies have replaced mangroves, a water-loving tree species nicknamed "the ocean's nursery," with shrimp ponds that have a devastating effect on the coastal and riparian environment and ultimately terrible social consequences as well.

Except at market stalls or from street vendors, expect both lunch and dinner to begin with soup – and Ecuador's are invariably interesting. There is fish soup, of course, appearing on menus as *chupe de pescado*. This combination of seafood and vegetables is usually very tasty. *Locro* is a soup of potato, cheese and avocado. The main course is usually beef, pork, goat or chicken and rice or another starch. *Seco de pollo* is chicken stew with sliced avocado; *lomo salteado* is thinly sliced beef smothered in tomatoes and onions, and *seco de chivo* is goat stew.

In addition to starches, look for *chifles* (green bananas that have been sliced and fried) and *patacones* (fried mashed green bananas) as side dishes or sometimes snacks.

Smalls salad usually come with lunch and dinner at restaurants, but except at those that regularly cater to North American and European guests, it is wise to avoid salads -- and also any fruit that cannot be peeled.

Informal restaurants and street vendors sell barbecued Andean corn called *choclo*, *tortillas de maiz* (corn tortillas), *llapingachos* (pancakes filled with mashed potato and cheese), *humitas* (sweet corn tamales or steamed cornbread) and various *empanadas* (crisp savory pastries filled with meat, cheese or rice).

Wherever you eat, expect to find *aji*, a spicy sauce that Ecuadorians use the way we use ketchup or mustard. It derives its name from the pepper that is its main ingredient. The *aji* pepper can be yellow, orange, red or purple. It is very hot, so many of the sauce recipes include *queso fresco* (a fresh white cheese), heavy cream and oil, sometimes with sugar or garlic added. Other styles include tomatoes and onions; peppers, fried onions, oil, parsley and water, or cooked onions, lemon or lime juice and salt.

Some condiments seem curious to North American diners but turn out to be delicious. Sliced avocado appears in soups and entrees. Popcorn accompanies *ceviche* and sometimes other dishes. Fried egg may top a lunch or dinner entree.

Ecuador grows enough produce for export. Bananas, hearts of palm, asparagus, rice, broccoli, corn, *habas* and other beans, cocoa and coffee are familiar crops. In addition to familiar passion fruit, papaya, and the ubiquitous avocado, Ecuador proffers several unfamiliar sweet tropical fruits that are eaten raw or squeezed into juice.

Naranjilla tastes like a cross between orange and tomato. *Chirimoya*, a jungle fruit resembling a sweet potato, has salmon-colored flesh with a soft, custard-like consistency and an avocado-size seed. The flesh of *mamey* or *mammee sapote* is red. *Pepinos* resemble cucumbers, but with purple and white stripes. Aromatic *guanabana* has a white pulp. *Mora* is Ecuador's blackberry. Ecuadorians also love sweets, whether from a bakery, a street vendor or in a fancy restaurant.

There's also what, for most Americans, is a gross-out factor to some Ecuadorian food. *Cuy* (roasted guinea pig) has been a delicacy since Inca times. *Yaguar locro*, a potato soup, is flavored with a soupcon of cow's blood. *Tronquito* is a soup made with bull's penis. Hunks of cattle hooves are the operative ingredient in a soupy stew called *caldo de pata*. Most of us avoid these dishes, but they do give adventurous eaters bragging rights. Still, so many palatable Ecuadorian specialties please even fussy palates -- especially when accompanied by interesting fruit juices, local Pilsner beer or fine Chilean wine.

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