

Eating Peru: A Critical Analysis of the Gastronomic Revolution through Food

Alice Wistar

In a Tortoiseshell: *In her junior paper on Peru's "gastronomical revolution," Alice Wistar uses an **unconventional primary source** – food – to discuss the cultural performance of the Peruvian identity. Along the way, she uses the physical layout of these images on the page to illustrate and contribute to her argument. Besides the paper's use of unusual, interdisciplinary set of **sources**, it is also notable for its **orienting** of evidence and methods of **analysis**.*

Excerpt



Photo 15. *Asado a la parrilla* from Yaca.

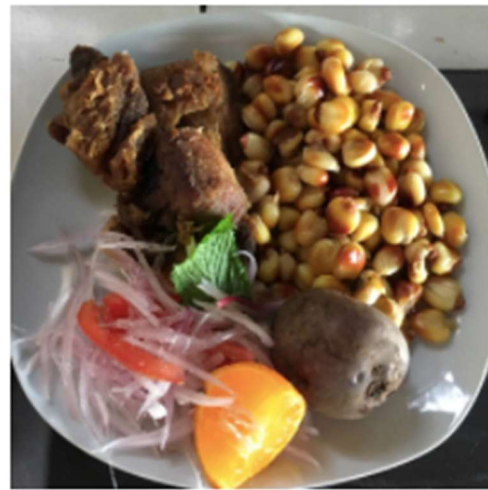


Photo 16. *Chicharrones* from Yaca.



Photo 17. *Gallina dorada* from Yaca.



Photo 18. *Tallarin con gallina* from Yaca.

My analysis begins with a consideration of the dishes from Yaca. When looking at Photos 15-18, the following observations become immediately apparent: there is a *lot* of food on each plate, the plates themselves are quite simple, all the food is on the *same* plate, and each dish is similar, consisting of some veggies (usually sliced red onions and tomatoes or sometimes other greens), a starch (pasta, rice, potato, and/or corn), and meat (chicken, beef, fish, or guinea pig), all of which are arranged in a similar manner within each separate entree (apart from the pasta, where all components are combined). In looking a bit more carefully, one can also see that the food looks like what it actually is – that is, meat is unambiguously meat, fish is unambiguously fish, rice is rice, etc. The overwhelming presence of carbohydrates on the plate – that is, the many inexpensive starches that lack much nutritional value and serve more so as fillers – is, as social anthropologist Mary Douglas suggests, transmitting information about “different degrees of social hierarchy” (qtd. in Garzone 218). In this case, the quantity of rice, corn, and potatoes is representative of a particular socioeconomic class of people: those that need sufficient sustenance to energize their daily lives. In Yaca, food is not meant to serve as a vehicle for something else: food is food, and it is for nourishment.



Photo 19. *Jungle Plains* from Central.



Photo 20. *From the freezing waters of the Pacific* from Astrid y Gastón.



Photo 21. *Poda Cebiche* from Maido.



Photo 22. *Jungle Highlands* from Central.

The same cannot be said for food from Central, Maido, or Astrid y Gastón. In analyzing these dishes (Photos 19-22), a few critical, surface-level differences quickly emerge: there are *many*, often separated components of every dish, the plates (or objects acting as plates) themselves tend to take up the most space, every dish is presented differently than the one before it, and portion sizes are miniscule. Already, at their surface levels, there is a stark contrast between the food from Yaca versus in Lima.

But let's now go a bit deeper. Unlike the food in Yaca, dishes served in upscale restaurants of Lima are intended to “transmit a landscape,” as sociologist Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson suggests, highlighting specific aspects of Peruvian culture (104). I'll outline a few examples. The second of sixteen tasting menu items served at Central, ‘Edge of the Desert’



Photo 23. *Edge of the Desert* from Central.



Photo 24. Salt Ponds in Maras.

(Photo 23), features three main food items: seaweed (left), sea urchin (bottom right), and cactus (middle). Interestingly, the way in which the cactus is prepared and plated is remarkably reminiscent of a place in Peru called Maras, where beautiful salt flats attract many international tourists (Photo 24). The cactus, it seems, is its own miniature salt flat – one that is transporting its consumers directly to the particular landscape in which it belongs.



Photo 25. *Mussel* from Maido.



Photo 26. *Dark Purple Root* from Central.

Though more general, similar comparisons also exist within other dishes. The ‘Mussel’ dish at Maida in Photo 25 with the ‘mucilage foam,’ for example, resembles the Peruvian coast, while the dish in the top right of Photo 26 is reminiscent of the more mountainous and rocky regions of Peru. Another, subtler example involves Photo 27, which features vibrantly colored sand at the base of a small potato. In referring to Moray – which, like Maras, is a tourist destination with ancient Incan ruins (Photo 28) – in the title of the dish and in featuring its dyes in a series of three gradually increasing circular plates which closely resemble Moray’s unique landscape, one can see how this dish is meant to highlight a particular cultural destination. In all of these examples, food functions as a “system of communication” as philosopher Roland Barthes would argue, depicting geographical locations and characteristics of Peru, all of which serve to distinguish Peruvian cuisine “as world class and distinctly Peruvian” (qtd. in Garzone 217; Bannister 140). That is to say, food is not simply a “physiological need” as is suggested in Sormaz et al.’s *Gastronomy in Tourism*, but, rather, possesses “symbolic meaning” that displays a particular country, and home, to others (727). Here, food is a cultural offering.



Photo 27. *Plant Dyes of Moray* from Central.



Photo 28. Moray.

And yet, there is still so much more going on within these dishes. Consider, for instance, the foods that are and are not present. Notably absent is any rice, pasta, corn, or normal potatoes (apart from one, which I will address later on) – foods that were *overwhelmingly present* within the dishes in Yaca. The only potatoes in the dishes from the restaurants in Lima are, quite frankly, not potatoes. The best examples of this are in two dishes from Astrid y Gastón, the first of which (Photos 29-30) is essentially mashed potatoes with a lamb filling reconstructed and somehow colored to look like a fully formed, normal potato, and the second of which (Photos 31-32) is a dessert potato presented on a plate with five other fake potatoes that are part of the plate themselves. This potato is filled with sweet fillings and quite literally explodes when it is cut into. The only other two potatoes across a total of 44 total dishes within the three restaurant tasting menus is a dehydrated sweet potato (the triangular orange in Photo

33) that in no way resembles the natural form of a potato, and the one in an earlier dish (the small brown object shown in the colorful dish in Photo 34) atop the ‘Dyes of Moray.’

Importantly, the very presence of this last potato, which is quite small in comparison to the plate on which it is served, is massively overshadowed by the vibrant blue and pink dyes below it that are meant to



Photo 29. *The indecent bed, the forbidden love* from Astrid y Gastón.



Photo 30. Close-up of stuffed blue potato from Photo 29.



Photo 31. *La Papa* from Astrid y Gastón.



Photo 32. Close up of Photo 31.

transport us to the ancient Incan ruins. In the close analysis of these dishes, one can see how the only four potatoes served in these restaurants are not *just* potatoes, but rather serve as vehicles for something else, whether it be a more upscale and sophisticated type of food such as lamb or kumquat honey manjar blanco (a type of sweet milk custard), or a Peruvian cultural destination. Unlike in Yaca, in upscale restaurants in Lima, there is no room on the plate for commonplace and inexpensive filler foods like rice, pasta, corn, and potatoes— and if there is, it is because they have somehow been complicated into something else entirely. As the goal in this case is not to nourish, but rather to “transmit a landscape” and put on a cultural performance for well-off and well-fed consumers, in their simplest forms, staple foods of the Peruvian diet are made invisible in these dishes (Ferguson 104).

Author Commentary

Alice Wistar

This excerpt is from my first Junior Paper entitled “Eating Peru: Critical Analysis of the Gastronomic Revolution Through Food.” As a foodie and a Spanish concentrator, I decided to write my first JP about Peruvian cuisine. I was able to secure funding (thanks Princeton!) to travel to Peru for a month, where I both ate in some of the best restaurants in the world and worked on a rural guinea pig farm in a town of thirty-six people. I wasn’t sure going into my experience what my research question would be, or even a vague idea of what I might argue. Instead, I traveled to Peru with an open mind and an excitement to see for myself what the so-called “gastronomic revolution” really was, and how it intersected with traditional Peruvian cuisine. While a number of articles, conversations, photos, and observations are ultimately what guided my writing process, the genuine interest I had in the subject was unquestionably the most critical component in my going about this essay.

So how did I go about constructing my archive, exactly? Apart from taking hundreds upon hundreds of photos, after my experiences working as a makeshift waitress for a family farm in Yaca and eating an average of fifteen plates of food in the sixth, seventh, and thirty-ninth best restaurants in the world, I wrote down all my observations, thoughts, questions, and other ideas in a small journal. I wrote until either my brain or my wrist began to hurt from thinking or writing too much. To be honest, it was not until a month after I arrived on campus in the fall and read a variety of articles about different opinions scholars had regarding Peruvian cuisine that I began deciding which of the many questions I had written that I most wanted to pursue, and that my actual outline and argument began taking shape.

At first, I planned on using my photos solely to back up my argument up (i.e. look how different the food is, look how fancy it is, etc.). In my first draft, in fact, I had literally included the photos in the appendix. There were two critical comments from my professor, Germán, in my junior seminar that inspired me to go about my essay in a different way – one that involved an intense and detailed analysis of my many photos. The first was when I had written just three pages of my draft, Germán highlighted the importance of including my photos directly within the frame of the paper itself. The second comment came after I’d written six pages of my draft, and reorganized it such that my photos were all within the paper. Specifically, Germán mentioned the presence versus absence of fish heads in two of my photos – the inedible piranha plate from Central and the three fried fish from Yaca – commenting on how fish heads are not actually edible

so that it was interesting that they *were* included on the plate in Yaca, and *used* as a plate in Central, the sixth best restaurant in the world. For me, this observation was, quite frankly, mind-blowing, and sparked the many detailed analyses to come later in my essay, many of which you can see in the excerpt of my paper above.

The best part about Germán's feedback that day was that, apart from just motivating me to look more closely at all of my images and make comparisons between them, it got me excited and fascinated about my topic in a way that made me genuinely enjoy writing my JP. After that day, I began camping out in the Theological Seminary Library (my favorite and a must-go if you haven't been!) for 5-6 hours at a time on the weekends just staring at my photos and looking for interesting connections between them. And while at first I just focused on the food, it then occurred to me that the ambience and the language used in the restaurants versus in Yaca on the menus were interesting differences to take note of as well. Essentially, I began using my photos and experiences alone to back up whatever scholarly opinion I was trying to argue throughout the course of my essay. Put another way, my writing process was, as I like to call it, a self-motivated avalanche of alluring food observations with a lot of close readings on the side.

Editor Commentary

Leina Thurn

When most scholars think “sources,” they think of journal articles, statistics, poems, or experiment results. Food does not usually make the list, and understandably so: it is something so commonplace that it tends to escape even the hawk-like eyes of scholars hungry for publishable topics. And yet it is precisely because food is so mundane that it can make the best primary source, especially for those studying human societies. What people eat can reflect where and how they live, as well as their traditions, identities, and even beliefs. Food is a microcosm of culture itself. And seeing as Latin American cultures are the subject of Alice Wistar’s scholarly interest, what better source for her research was there but Latin American foods?

In her fall junior paper, she focuses on what has been called the “gastronomic revolution” in Peru, a movement which has introduced foreign cooking styles to the country’s cities and redefined urban Peruvian cuisine as a pinnacle of the culinary world. Alice specifically uses the gastronomic revolution as a lens through which to study the construction and performance of a Peruvian national culture and identity. Not only is her research process itself inspiring – going abroad to taste some of the world’s finest cooking on Princeton’s dollar – but her use of Peruvian food as her primary source is what makes her argument about a Peruvian cultural performance so successful and captivating.

Alice begins her argument with a series of comparative visual analyses of urban Peruvian meals from several Michelin-starred restaurants in Lima. She first compares the high end, urban meals to meals she ate while in the rural town of Yaca. She establishes the meals from rural Yaca as a sort of control or baseline in her analysis, assuming that the culinary experience of Yaca is yet untouched by the gastronomical revolution that impacted Lima. By doing so, she is able to isolate the visual and nutritional characteristics of the high-end food from Lima which are native to traditional Peruvian cuisine and which are products of the gastronomical revolution. Her up-close original photographs help orient the reader to the variety of Peruvian cuisine, the evidence most relevant to her argument, and the method of her analysis – that is, how she is looking at these dishes.

Alice’s important conclusion from these observations is that the high-end meals from Lima are not intended “for nourishment,” as the meals from Yaca are – rather, they aim at “highlighting specific aspects of Peruvian culture.” To elaborate on this claim, Alice then introduces another set of sources – landmarks in Peru – and compares the aesthetic qualities of Peruvian high-end dishes to these iconic landscapes. Her short analyses precisely indicate where

in the photos readers should focus their attention and how they should do so. Most of her success here lies in the way she places the photos of the dishes and landscapes side-by-side on the page. Their juxtaposition on the page is itself an argument about how these sources should be compared. Alice treats the food and landscapes like another would treat quotes or graphs, relating them to her argument verbally while also providing a visual landscape for understanding them.

At the end of the excerpt above, Alice drives home her point that high-end Peruvian cuisine is meant as a “cultural performance for well-off and well-fed customers” (i.e. wealthy tourists). She then returns to her first comparison between the dishes from Yaca and Lima and picks a single point of difference to zoom-in on to make more detailed observations: the disparity in the use of potatoes at each location. This choice gives her evidence a sense of depth as well as breadth; her readers get a sense both of the range of characteristics specific to the food of the gastronomical revolution and how those individual characteristics may manifest in different dishes. Here, Alice’s organization of her visual sources plays a different role, illustrating her shift in focus from the appearance of the food to the experience of consuming the food itself. For example, her photos 31 and 32 show how one “potato” exploded as she began to eat it. Their adjacent layout from left to right mimics how her readers will “read” the images across her page, showing how the experience of eating the dish changes through time. The presentation of the change in the “potato” itself through these photos also clarifies her point to her readers. Although some of the high-end dishes seem to contain potatoes, it is only an illusion to showcase a more sophisticated food.

Alice Wistar’s creative analysis and presentation of Peruvian cuisine in her junior paper presents an excellent opportunity for reflecting upon unconventional source use can contribute to a strong argument, especially when an author orients readers to these sources via careful analysis. It is perhaps a bit ironic that Alice’s use of such a mundane subject – food – as a primary source is exactly what makes her argument captivating and accessible. But that does not make her argument any less brilliant; in fact, it rather seems to make it more so.

Works Cited

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All uncited photos were taken by the author.

Bios

Leina Thurn '20 is a native of Ashburn, Virginia, pursuing a concentration in Classics with certificates in Linguistics, Archaeology, and Hellenic Studies. This year, she works as the Editor-in-Chief of *Tortoise*, a Writing Center Fellow, and a coin cataloger in Princeton's Numismatics Collection. She wrote this as a junior.

Alice Wistar '20 is passionate about nutrition, health, and food policy and at Princeton is concentrating in Spanish (she has always wanted to learn a second language!) and minoring in Global Health and Health Policy. She is the Co-President of Greening Dining, an intern for the food sustainability focused startup abillionveg, student coordinator of the RoMa dining hall, peer health advisor, volunteer for Petey Greene, and a member of 2-D co-op and the running club. She loves traveling, running, eating, and baking, and feels passionately about freshly ground, natural peanut butter. She wrote this as a junior.