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INDULGE

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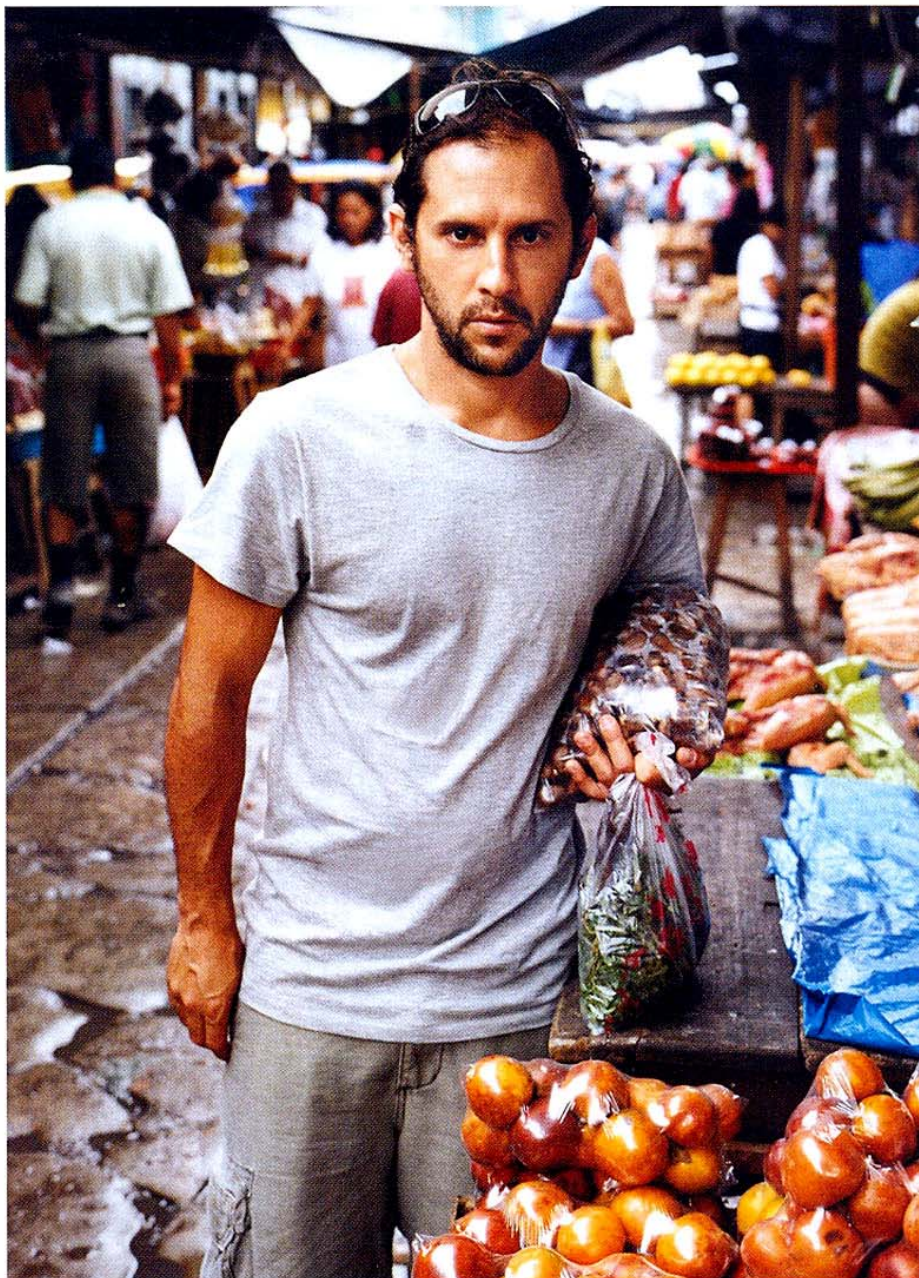
The Jungle Cook

ON THE BANKS OF THE AMAZON, CHEF PEDRO SCHIAFFINO IS REINVENTING PERUVIAN CUISINE WITH FOREST FLAVORS

IT'S JUST PAST SUNRISE IN THE Peruvian city of Iquitos, and chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino has been working for hours. Scouring the stalls of the Belén market, he is hunting for ingredients for the evening's dinner on the M/V *Aqua*, a new luxury cruiser that plies the Amazon. Schiaffino moonlights as executive chef on the ship when he's not at the stoves of his haute Lima eatery, Malabar. Suddenly, Schiaffino's smile turns to a scowl as he strolls past a table piled with alligators, often served locally as either steaks or kebabs. "They're babies," he laments. "Way too young for the market."

Despite his urban upbringing and cosmopolitan career, Schiaffino knows the waterfront market—and its unusual butchery—well. A maze of muddy alleyways leads to ramshackle houses perched on stilts over the Amazon, along which drift massive barges heaving with banana bushels, native hardwoods, and, increasingly, oil. Over the past decade, the market—and Iquitos itself—has become a second home for Schiaffino. Using the town as a base to study the region's indigenous ingredients, Schiaffino is pairing his unfamiliar jungle finds with European culinary methods to give a new face to Peruvian cuisine.

Schiaffino first came to Iquitos six years ago. He'd recently returned to Peru after ten years in the U.S. and Europe, first studying at the Culinary Institute of America in upstate New York before training at a trio of Michelin-star restaurants in Northern Italy. "I learned the basics of how to cook in America and how to run a restaurant in



Europe, but I always knew that I wanted to cook Peruvian food," says the 31-year-old. Initially, he took a head-chef position at La Huaca Pucllana, renowned for its traditional Peruvian cuisine. The menu was based mainly on Incan and Andean ingredients, but the occasional Amazonian items that arrived intrigued Schiaffino. "I was encountering foods from my own country that I never knew existed," he recalls. "Hearts of palm, scarlet camu camu fruits, fragrant achiote seeds."

Not ready to open his own restaurant, Schiaffino decided to explore his interest in the Amazon. "I saw so much potential there," recalls the chef, who rented a room in Iquitos, a city of some 400,000 accessible by airplane or a four-day boat ride. "The Amazon is 60 percent of Peru, but we only look to the ocean and never to the forest."

SHOPPING AT THE REAL AMAZON
Schiaffino scours the Belén market for rare Amazonian fruits and vegetables to feature in his forest-based Peruvian fare.

Over the next 18 months, the curious chef ingratiated himself with jungle farmers, fishermen, and families to learn just what Peru's 60 percent really had to offer. Schiaffino found Iquitos a revelation, its rhythms and rituals a lens on a little-explored region of the country. "I felt like I was living in another world," he says as he walks the Belén market, stopping to point out a pan full of writhing *suri*, live beetle larvae destined for grilling.

Suri are among the few items unlikely to actually wind up on Schiaffino's shopping list, which can include everything from smoked *cecina* chorizo and herby, plump black river snails to velvety yellow *arazá* fruit and even *paiche*, the 450-pound fish known as the king of the Amazon. Schiaffino concedes his *Aqua* menus are not "100 percent" Amazonian. Rather, he says, the jungle informs, inspires, and supplies the raw materials for his culinary repertoire. For instance, hearts of palm, which usually wrap local tamales, emerge whipped into a savory soufflé under Schiaffino's care. The apple-like cocona fruit—sometimes eaten straight from the vine—is reduced to a purée, then layered in a shot glass between cubes of raw tuna, capped with a sugar crust, and torched into a brûlée. "I am able to communicate an entire culture through these foods," Schiaffino says.

Today, at four-year-old Malabar, Schiaffino's pan-Peruvian menu is one of the few in town to feature rainforest ingredients. Yet he returns often to the Amazon for inspiration, as well as to evolve the cuisine on the 12-cabin *Aqua*, which launched last winter with itineraries through northern Peru's Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve. The chef says he especially loves the challenge of devising unconventional Peruvian dishes for the boat, intended to test guests' intellect as much as their appetites. "This is part of our mission," he says. "We want people to feel in touch with the region's inhabitants and ingredients."

Twelve hours after our market tour, as the *Aqua*'s guests sip frothy pisco sours, many of Schiaffino's finds reappear on plates. The snails swim in their shells, drenched in garlic butter; the catfish arrive filleted into a ceviche spiked with forest cilantro and fresh fruits; the Amazonian yams are whipped into a creamy puree and topped with dorado. As with the entire menu, nearly everything is locally sourced from partners Schiaffino developed through his Iquitos connections.

"Our goal is to constantly elevate the cuisine while helping local people improve the standards of their businesses," says Schiaffino, now known affectionately in Peru as the Jungle Chef. "This will take some time," he adds, with classic Latin patience. "You have to get to know the seasons, know the people, know the place." ☺

BRAISED DONCELLA & YUCA

- > 2 tbs olive oil
- > 2 lbs doncella fish (substitute any catfish)
- > ¼ lb pork sausage
- > 1 cup onions, chopped
- > 3 cloves garlic, minced
- > ¼ cup roasted sweet pepper chili paste
- > 1 tsp turmeric, grated
- > ½ cup dry white wine
- > fish stock
- > 1 tsp charapita chili pepper, chopped
- > 1 tbsp culantro, chopped
- > salt and pepper
- > 2/3 lb yuca, steamed

- 1 Heat oil in a skillet. Salt doncella and sausage, then sear. Remove fish.
- 2 In the same skillet, add onions, garlic, chili paste, and turmeric. Cook to light brown.
- 3 Add white wine and reduce. Add fish stock, boil, reduce the heat, and simmer for 10 minutes. Strain into a pot.
- 4 Bring sauce to boil, then add sausage and fish, and braise until cooked. Remove both meats.
- 5 Add chili pepper and culantro, then season with salt and pepper. Return the doncella to the pot; add the yuca.
- 6 Serve topped with sausage and fresh hearts of palm.



LUNCH BY THE RIVER
From top, M/V *Aqua*, the most stylish way to experience the Amazon; one of Schiaffino's Malabar creations, Huevos en Camisa; deep in the jungle with local Yagua tribesmen