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Tales of the Riverbank

Peru's celebrated chef, Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, visited the Amazon for the first time in 2004. Now the expert forager is bringing its exotic cuisine to Asia.

Text by Cynthia Rosenfeld

Growing up in Lima, Peru, Pedro Miguel Schiaffino had decided to become a chef by the tender age of 12. His parents helped him find an apprenticeship at a butcher shop, then an after-school job in a sushi bar. From there he worked his way up, moving from the kitchen of a local French restaurant to one of Lima's top hotels. At age 18, he enrolled at the Culinary Institute of America, earned a scholarship to the Italian Culinary Institute and spent kitchen time at the three-Michelin-starred *Ristorante dal Pescatore* under the renowned Nadia Santini and at Piero Bertinotti's celebrated *Ristorante Pinocchio*. Not once along the way, he says, did he give a thought to his country's native cuisine.

"Coming back from Europe, I wanted to reconnect with Peru after so many years. Our family had a farm so I grew up knowing about the markets, the different types of Peruvian corn, chillies, yuccas and yams, but

I was completely ignorant of more remote ingredients. Many are still unknown," he says.

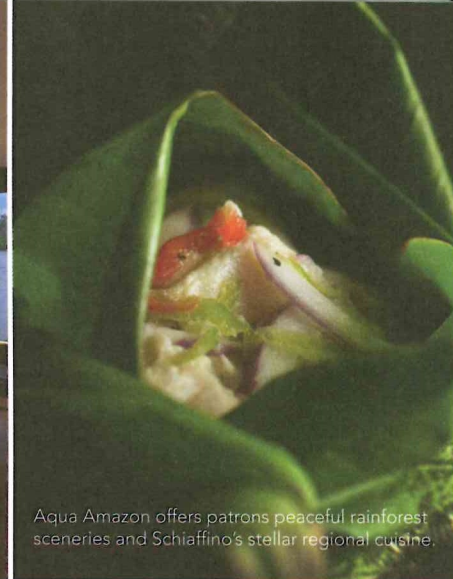
Back in Lima, Schiaffino took charge of the kitchen at *La Huaca Puallana*, named for a sixth-century adobe and clay pyramid. Explorations into native cuisine encouraged the young chef to apply the culinary techniques he mastered in the United States and Europe to local recipes and ingredients such as quinoa and Amazonian caviar as well as indigenous seasonings aguaymanto, cedrón, muña and sachatamate.

Schiaffino decided to strike out on his own, opening *Malabar* restaurant in 2004 and, soon after, travelled to the source of these exotic ingredients for the first time.

"I was 24 years old before I even saw the Amazon River and it was just by chance really that I went. I was as surprised as a tourist that within only eight hours from

Lima you can be on the river. I poked around, searching without any special plan, seeing what I might find."

His early menus at *Malabar* were "unnecessarily complex. I was trying to show off and it was messy," he admits. It was a process to adapt rural Peruvian ingredients to urban tables in an authentic, personal way as he does magnificently on a recent night at *Malabar*. The eight-course tasting menu begins with fresh hearts of palm and roasted Brazilian cashew flour, yucca and plantain crisps, and artisanal unleavened bread served on a hot stone from *Piedra des Huanmanja*, "a very poor area in the Andean highlands". Pacific scallops with wild almonds, grated umari fruit and fresh yogurt follow, then Peruvian potatoes cooked in a traditional huatia oven, and an oily Amazon fish called *escolar* in aji panka chilli pepper adobo with roasted Amazon sweet potatoes. Dessert is an Amazonian custard apple, or *chirimoya*,



Aqua Amazon offers patrons peaceful rainforest sceneries and Schiaffino's stellar regional cuisine.

with shaved banana manzano, then roasted pumpkin in mandarin orange sauce served in a hollowed gourd.

"I continued to return to the Amazon and discovered it's not just a big pantry but a vast region filled with rich, vanishing history and culture. After I became interested in the area as a food source, I started to learn so much more from the people of Amazonia," he says.

In 2007, start-up luxury river-cruising company, Aqua Expeditions, approached Schiaffino to become executive chef of its new 12-cabin cruiser, Aqua Amazon, and in 2011, sister ship Aria Amazon. This year, they launched the 20-cabin Aqua Mekong in Cambodia and Vietnam.

"There were no food purveyors, or quality standards on the Amazon so this new role came with considerable challenges," he says.

Now he sources 70 per cent of ingredients in the Amazon for five-star indigenous dishes such as just-caught river fish, juicy onions and corn kernels the size of South Sea pearls.

While Peruvian cuisine has been taking off around the world, until last year Schiaffino focused domestically, seeking out obscure yet delectable ingredients found only in the Amazon basin. He makes about a dozen visits a year, travelling with anthropologists and environmental scientists.

"First I may hear from friends in the Amazon riverside city of Iquitos, or from villagers, about an unfamiliar dish or ingredient. So I start asking questions. Back in Lima, I dig to learn more and ask experts. Then, knowing my curiosity won't be satisfied without tasting it myself, I plan another visit, sometimes heading off on a speedboat for eight hours or more.

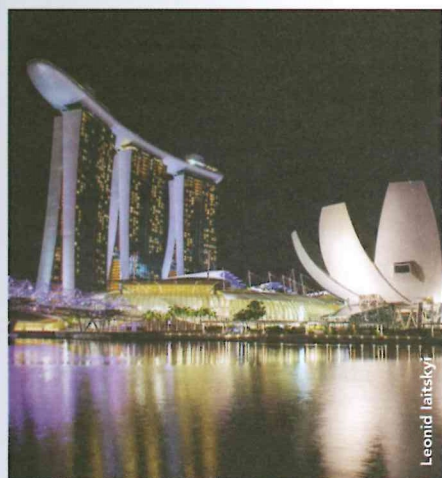
The Amazon constantly offers up tastes and flavours I've never imagined."

Meanwhile, Schiaffino's cuisine began to attract international attention. French investors came calling in early 2013, then there was interest in Australia and finally he signed on to open a 140-seat Peruvian eatery with a ceviche bar, open kitchen and chocolate store in The Patina, Capitol Singapore hotel in December 2014. But the Amazon is where his heart lies.

"Nature is very wise," he says. "The Amazon has taught me to appreciate nature, which in turn helped me to see the importance of sustainability with cuisine. Each time I go, someone takes me to one of these Amazon communities where there may be less than 30 families and only a handful of the people speak Spanish. The most interesting part is laying eyes on a dish I've never tasted before. For me, this moment of discovery, it's the very best part." ■

Pedro Miguel Schiaffino's Favourite Things

1. What is your favourite city for eating?



I really like the Singapore food scene. The people are very open-minded and the quality of their food, even in the street stalls, is simply amazing.

2. Your favourite Peruvian comfort food?

Chocolate. It's not something we are well known for, but I'm really excited to help change that.

3. Other Latin American chefs we should be watching?

Rodolfo Guzmán at Boragó in Santiago is amazing. The food in Bolivia is also getting exciting; it's Andean but with some Amazon influence. Of course, everyone is talking about Gustu in La Paz from Claus Meyer, the co-owner of Noma, but the whole country is a melting pot. I predict Bolivian cuisine will be big in the future.

4. What has been your favourite discovery in Asia?

How we are all connected. In Bali, we ate at Ibu Oka's, which is famous for roast pig.

Instantly, I observed a relationship to the Amazon. A few months earlier, I had travelled to north Peru, to visit the Awajun people. I asked them to prepare dishes they don't usually make anymore. Food came out wrapped in leaves with bricks of fermented raw peanuts, something I'd never seen in Peru before. Then in May, I saw the same dishes in Ubud market.

5. Where can we find you away from the kitchen?

Surfing. Last Spring I took a vacation to surf in the Mentawais, which was awesome, and then to Uluwatu's iconic breaks with some friends. Bali was amazing. I loved it. Indonesian food was a whole new world for me, I feel I need to go back and know more.

6. Your next dream adventure?

I would love to go hunting in the Amazon with a traditional bow and arrow.