

SOUTH AMERICA. South America is a continent composed of twelve countries and one French colony. The Spanish-speaking countries are: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela. (Portuguese-speaking Brazil is treated separately in this encyclopedia.) The former colonies of Guyana and Suriname use English and Dutch, respectively, as their official languages, although many in their populations speak indigenous languages. The same can be said for the French colony of Guiana, the home of the cayenne pepper, where French is the official language. The geography of South America is even more varied than that of North America, with long coastlines, lowlands, highlands and mountains, and tropical rain forests. The climate varies from tropical, lying as the continent does across the Equator, to alpine in the high Andes, the backbone of the continent.

The cookery of South America reflects this rich diversity of culture and geography. The indigenous cookeries of pre-Columbian South America have gradually merged with imported cuisines from Europe and Asia. While the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors introduced their own culinary traditions to the native peoples of South America, indigenous ingredients changed the cuisines of the Old World. The South American contributions included chocolate, vanilla, maize (corn), hot peppers (called *aji* in South America), guavas, sweet potatoes, manioc (cassava), tomatoes, potatoes, avocados, beans, squash (particularly the ancestor of zucchini), peanuts, quinine, and papayas, as well as turkeys.

Maize plays a key role in the cuisine of South America, and it is genetically different from the maize now grown in the Old World, manifested most obviously in its characteristically large kernels. The potato is another vegetable indigenous to South America that has played an important role in cooking worldwide. There are also many vegetables in South America largely unknown beyond the continent, including *ahipa*, *arracacha*, *maca*, *yacon*, *olluco*, and *oca*.

The demographics of South America are critical for understanding the diversity of its cuisines. In countries like Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru, the indigenous populations predominate, and their foods and foodways are the most important cuisines. In contrast, Argentina's cookery was heavily influenced by a large European immigration dominated by Spaniards and Italians. Throughout South America, there is also an African influence due to the slave trade, which has added to the culinary mix.

Venezuela

Venezuela was discovered in 1498 by Columbus when he found the mouth of the Orinoco River. In 1499 the Venezuelan coast was explored by Alonzo de Ojeda and Amerigo Vespucci. Vespucci, coming upon an island in the Gulf of Maracaibo, called it Venezuela because, according to legend, the native villages were built above the water on stilts. Venezuela rises from lowlands to highlands with coffee plantations ascending to the white-capped Andean peaks. It has a mild climate due to its proximity to the Caribbean. Caracas, Venezuela's capital, is the cultural, commercial, and industrial hub.

Local dishes. Venezuelan cuisine relies heavily on maize. The two most important preparations are *hallacas* and *arepas*. *Hallacas*—traditionally eaten during holidays, especially Christmas—are boiled dumplings wrapped in banana leaves, but there are innumerable variations, depending on region and family tradition. *Hallacas* are made with a dough made of maize flour mixed with water, which is then filled with meat, vegetables, and spices. *Arepas* are versatile flatbreads, also made of maize flour, that can be baked, grilled, fried, or steamed and served either sweet or savory.

Black beans, called *caviar criollo*, are a Venezuelan favorite. They are served with *arepas* and are also part of the national dish, *pabellón caraqueño*. A hearty dish, it is said to resemble the national flag (*pabellón*), because of the colors of the beef, beans, rice, and plantains in it.

The most popular fish in Venezuela is *pargo*, a red snapper found in semitropical waters, which is a member of the family Lutjanidae. Imported salt cod, brought to the region by the conquistadors, is also important in the cuisine. A favorite dish throughout South America is chicken with rice, but in Venezuela cooks add olives, raisins, and capers to the rice.

Arequipe, milk pudding (milk cooked with sugar until very thick), is a favorite dessert in Venezuela, as it is throughout South America. It has different names in different places, but is perhaps best known in the United States as *dulce de leche*.

The traditional beverages of Venezuela are *chicha*, made of fermented maize, and *masato*.

Colombia

Colombia has two coastlines, one on the Pacific and the other on the Caribbean, that provide the country with a large choice of seafood. Colombia rises from the Pacific coast through a series of plateaus to the capital, Bogotá. Colombian cooks have a wide range of foods to choose from, including bananas and plantains, papayas, sugarcane, avocados, potatoes (especially in the Andes), and such tropical root vegetables as the sweet potato, taro, cassava (manioc), and *arracacha*. Apricots, pears, grapes, apples, and peaches all grow in Colombia as well.

Local dishes. In Colombia, coconut milk is used with great imagination in cooking fish, for example, herring simmered in coconut milk. One very popular soup is *sancocho de pescado*, a fish stew consisting of a variety of ingredients such as plantains, manioc (cassava), herbs, and coconut milk. Stews, usually served with rice, are the preferred way to cook meat, usually beef, especially with vegetables and fruits. Another traditional dish is *gallineta en barro*, an unplucked guinea fowl marinated in spices and lime juice and wrapped in an envelope of clay. It is then buried in hot coals and baked for approximately two hours. When the clay shell is broken, the skin is clean and golden brown and the meat is tender and flavorful.

During colonial times, sugarcane was introduced in Cartagena, one of the most important port cities in the Spanish empire. Due to its wealth as a mercantile city, Cartagena became a center of luxury cookery in which sugar figured as the main ingredient. Modern Colombia has inherited this rich confectionery tradition.

Ecuador

Ecuador, as the name implies, straddles the equator, which can be reached from the capital, Quito, in about half an hour. Home to two ranges of the Andes, Ecuador is quite mountainous, although the hot and humid Pacific coast lies to the west of the Andes and the rain forest falls largely to the east. Quito (elevation ten thousand feet) is known all over the world for its architectural beauty and cultural refinement. Unfortunately, for outsiders the elevation can cause discomfort. The city lies within a short distance of the extinct volcano, Pichincha. On clear days, a ring of eight volcanoes can be seen from Quito, among them the fabled Chimborazo and Cotopaxi.

Local dishes. Ecuador has two cuisines: a highland cuisine of the Andes and a lowland cuisine of the coast. Potatoes, indigenous to the Andes, play a central role in Ecuadorian highland cooking, and its magnificent vegetables and fruits are used liberally in recipes. *Locro*, a thick potato and cheese soup, is sometimes served with avocado slices. Another popular soup, *sopa de maní*, is made from peanuts. Peanuts also figure in *salsa de maní*, a dip consisting of unsweetened peanut butter, hot peppers (*ají*), achiote (annatto), tomatoes, lime juice, garlic, and onions. The paste is also used to flavor meats and vegetables.

Fish is plentiful and most commonly prepared as seviche. One popular seviche from the coastal city of Guayaquil consists of shrimp, *ají*, and vegetables marinated in lime juice. Once the shrimp are ready to serve, they are garnished with toasted corn kernels (*cancha*), which add an interesting texture and flavor. Stews are popular in the highlands. The spicy and flavorful pork stew, *seco de chanco*, is colored with achiote oil and cooked with beer.

Although the people of Ecuador mainly eat fruit as dessert, a richly flavored pumpkin (or winter squash) cake is very popular.

Bolivia

Bolivia, a high landlocked country in central South America, is bordered by Argentina, Brazil, and Peru. The famous Lake Titicaca, between Bolivia and Peru, lies at 12,500 feet. Legend has it that an island in the lake is the ancestral home of the Incas. Near the lake's southeastern end are the ruins of Tiahuanaco, a pre-Incan city. After the conquest, Bolivia became part of Peru and was known as El Alto Peru, highland Peru. With independence, the name was changed to Bolivia to honor the liberator, Simón Bolívar.

Local dishes. Bolivians like their food hot, and *ajíes* (hot peppers) are widely used. In addition to familiar grains like wheat and corn, quinoa, an indigenous grain that the Incas

called "sacred mother grain," is still commonly consumed. The Spanish prohibited the cultivation of quinoa, but it never entirely lost its appeal to the native population. It is hardy and well suited to poor conditions, such as cold weather and high altitudes. Beef and pork, introduced by the Spaniards, are important foods, as are farm-raised guinea pigs (*cuys*), a native dish popular in Bolivia and Peru. In the native culture of Bolivia, the potato played such a significant role that it was used for predicting the future, among other things. In fact, Bolivians categorized potatoes as male or female, depending on their shape, and were used accordingly in their cuisine.

In Bolivia, many food traditions remain from pre-Columbian times. One of the relics of the Inca empire is *chicha*, a popular alcoholic drink made from fermented maize.

Argentina

The second largest nation in South America, Argentina extends from the subtropics to Tierra del Fuego. Although now a separate country, Argentina was once part of the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata (River Plate) with Uruguay. The pampas are primarily cattle country and famous for ranching and farming, but this fertile land also produces good crops and fine wine.

Local dishes. Finger foods are very popular and are served in cafés, called *whiskerías*, that evolved from tea shops. Empanadas, stuffed pies, are popular throughout South America, and in Argentina they come in various sizes and are eaten as hors d'oeuvres, for light lunches, or with cocktails. One popular filling combines meat and fruit.

Meat is grilled or prepared in stews (*carbonadas*). The Argentines are fond of combining meat and fruit in their stews, but the most famous meat dish is *churrasco* (barbecue), beef, with large salt crystals embedded in it for flavor, is marinated in spices and lime juice and grilled on spits over an open fire. *Viscacha*, a large wild rabbit or hare, is also appreciated on the pampas. Although the focus is on meat in Argentina, excellent fish are harvested from the waters off the coast and prepared in all the usual ways, including seviche and *escabeche* (pickled fish).

Dulce de leche (milk pudding) is particularly popular in Argentina and throughout neighboring Chile and Uruguay.

Maté, also called *yerba maté*, a popular tea in Argentina, is made from the dried leaves of the evergreen, *Ilex paraguariensis*, which is indigenous to South America. The name comes from the Inca word for the calabash that was used as a container. *Maté* can be served either hot or cold.

Chile

A long, narrow country stretching down between the Andes and the Pacific Ocean, Chile is noted for its copper mines as well as for its wines. The cold Humboldt Current gives Chile the most unusual seafood in the world, including the *erizo de mar* (sea urchin) and

locos (abalone). The middle third of the country, where table and wine grapes and other fruits and vegetables are raised, enjoys a temperate climate and is very fertile. Seafood and vegetables and fruits are more important in the diet than meat because of the relative lack of land for grazing. Because the seasons in the Southern Hemisphere are the reverse of those in the Northern Hemisphere, so-called winter fruits—apples, pears, and grapes—are exported to North America.

Local dishes. Empanadas, often served with the local wine, are popular. Chileans like soups, and, since their fruits and vegetables are plentiful and particularly good, and are enjoyed raw or cooked, many are used for soup—cabbage, for example, and tomatoes. Fish and shellfish are plentiful along the coast and are cooked every conceivable way. One of the finest fish is *congrío*, the conger eel, unique to Chilean waters. Chicken and guinea pig, both raised at home, are family fare. Meat is not so popular, though Chilean meatballs, made with veal rather than beef, are very special.

The fertile soil produces beautiful fruits, which make admirable desserts. *Pisco*, a powerful brandy made from grapes, is served both as an aperitif and as an afterdinner drink.

Uruguay

A wedge of a nation tucked between Brazil and Argentina on the Atlantic coast, Uruguay is one of the smallest countries in South America and, after Ecuador, the most densely populated. The climate is generally warm, with an even distribution of rainfall throughout the seasons. Rolling grasslands of black, potash-rich soil make raising cattle and sheep the lifeblood of the nation's economy, and roads are edged with fenced driveways for livestock. The capital, Montevideo, is home to a large percentage of Uruguay's population. Much of its industry is centered on processing wool, meat, and hides.

Local dishes. Like other South Americans, Uruguayans favor soups and stews. The Atlantic supplies some seafood, and the River Plate (Río de la Plata) is a source of freshwater fish and large frogs, both often used for soup. Meat remains paramount, however. Beef and lamb are grilled as well as braised. *Albóndigas*, fishballs or meatballs, are very popular, particularly when served with a barbecue sauce enriched with wine. *Humitas*, a seasoned corn puree, is sometimes steamed in corn husks, like tamales.

Fresh fruit is abundant and popular for dessert, especially *feijoa* (also called "pineapple guava"), an eggshaped fruit with a wonderful perfume.

Gin Fizz (pronounced "jeen feez"), as made in Montevideo, has been described as the great glory of Uruguayan drinks. The secret probably lies in the delicate flavor of the local lemons and limes.

Paraguay

A small landlocked country, bordered by Bolivia, Brazil, and Argentina, Paraguay is known as much for its arts and culture as for its food. Asunción, the capital and by far the largest city in Paraguay, is also the cultural center of the country. The landscape is quite diverse, with lush grasslands, rolling hills, and dense forests, as well as the Chaco prairie in the west. Cattle raising and the industries associated with it are economically significant. Guaraní, the local Indian language, and Spanish are the primary languages of the country, although most Paraguayans learn Guaraní before Spanish.

Local dishes. In Paraguay, manioc (cassava), the staple food, is consumed at least twice a day, but maize is also important in the diet. Soups and stews, whether vegetable-, beef-, or fish-based, are quite popular. *So'oyosopy* (*sopa de carne* or beef soup) is more of a stew than a soup; it is so robust that little more is needed than a light dessert to make a complete meal. It is usually accompanied with *sopa paraguaya*, which is not a soup at all but a cheese cornbread that is also served with grilled meats. Very good fish are harvested from the Paraguay River, particularly *dorado*, a firm-fleshed white fish.

Bananas are widely used in Paraguay, fresh and cooked in desserts. *Tereré* is a refreshing tea mixed with cold water and aromatic herbs such as mint, traditionally drunk during the midmorning or early afternoon break for relief from the heat. *Maté* (also *yerba maté*), which has a great deal of caffeine, is pleasantly stimulating and traditionally drunk in the morning.

Peru

The Andes, which rise from sea level on the Pacific coast to 22,500 feet, dominate this country. Peru was once the center of the Inca Empire, which extended more than 2,500 miles along the Pacific coast of South America. The capital, Lima, is on the coast. Most of the people of the empire were Quechuas. Although the term "Inca" is commonly used to describe the people of the empire, "Inca" originally referred only to the emperor. The Incas terraced and irrigated a difficult terrain, and built roads to link the parts of the empire, enabling farmers to come to town with their produce. The architecture of the Incas is known for its great size and skillful construction. Machu Picchu, one of their most famous cities, stands on a heavily forested mountaintop in the Andes. The Incas were also well known for their administrative skills.

The Incas cultivated thousands of varieties of potatoes many thousands of years ago, and figured out ways to preserve them at high altitudes, either by drying or freeze-drying. The Quechuas also raised quinoa, a hardy plant that thrives where corn cannot grow. The Quechuas had few animals except for the cameloids (the llama and the alpaca) and the *cuy* (guinea pig). The *cuy* is an excellent food animal, and the llama provides wool, leather, fat, and dung for fertilizer, fuel, and building material, as well as meat. Llama meat is made into ham, and *charqui*, or dried llama meat, has remained popular among the native population.

Local dishes. Peru has a real food culture. Peruvians like to eat at home and on the street. For example, in Lima the best place to buy *anticuchos* (skewered beef heart) is from

stalls outside the *plaza de toros*, built in the 1700s. At home, they make an excellent hors d'oeuvre. Fish and shellfish are enormously popular on the coast and are prepared in myriad ways, including seviche. Along the shore, *cebicherias* serve fresh seviche night and day. Fowl have been known since pre-Columbian days, and the Quechuas knew how to freeze-dry duck. Turkey is very popular, especially for special occasions. The Europeans brought their domestic animals with them, and these have had enormous impact in Peru and elsewhere in South America. Besides grilled meats, Peruvian city folk are fond of *chicharrones*, pork rinds fried in lard, sold by street vendors.

In addition to potatoes and the local large-kernel maize, Peruvians cultivate many other vegetables, including a number of special hot peppers (*ajíes*), which they use in soups and stews, often serving them alone as well. Although Peruvians like sweets—homemade puddings and cakes, store-bought pastries, and convent sweets (although that tradition is dying out in Peru)—they are generally prepared and eaten outside the home, as they are in Europe. Dessert at the end of a meal is more likely to be fresh fruit. *Pisco*, the potent Peruvian brandy, is enjoyed straight or in a *pisco* sour.

