

HOW FOOD CAN UNITE A FRACTURED COUNTRY

Food has historically played a role in maintaining the social boundaries between ethnic groups^{1 2}, social classes³ and castes⁴. In addition to these forms of social organization or structure, food has played a role in shaping social identity.

Peru is a useful example of how the cuisine has made it possible to move from fractured and shattered country to a unified country with food as the leading aspect in its new social identity. The move from terror to culinary destination has been key to reposition Peru, and according to many people, to unite Peruvians and to create a strong social identity. A new sense of pride among the Peruvians arose and it was shown to the outside world. Nowadays, as a next step in this evolution, the shift has been made to focus on locality only. This writing will have a look whether it is still expedient to focus on locality or whether it would be a logical step to expand the sense of locality pride by creation and letting new influences in and evolving next to maintaining that sense.

Between 1980 and 2000 a political conflict between the guerrilla movement “the Shining Path” and the state led to economic crisis, terrorism, including at least 70,000 deaths, numerous people were tortured and disappeared, bombings and food shortage. Although most of the impacted people were indigenous, it heavily affected the whole nation. As one of the people from the Generation without Cause, Arlette Eulert, says: “There was no sense of pride. If it was French, it was good. If it was Peruvian, it was not good.” Peru has an enormous wealth in biodiversity and culture, but what was local was not appreciated and what was foreign was fully embraced. Early in the century the realization came that this was the case and that it was time to regain Peruvian pride.

A good example of the shift in societal change from terror to culinary is the fact that nowadays throughout Peru there are culinary schools for youngsters from marginalized areas. Celebrity chef Gastón Acurio opened the first school in the suburbs of Lima. In his opinion education is the most powerful tool to fix inequalities of life and it is a mean for young people to make their dreams come true.

There’s also the movement “La Generación con Causa”⁵, the Generation with a Cause, a wave of fifty young Peruvian chefs from Lima and the provinces, who see cooking as a social revolution and reconciliation. As one of the frontmen, Palmiro Campo says: “Our country has moved from a time when Peru was “terrorism” to a country reimagined as a place of possibilities, where culinary dreams can become true and to a global leading culinary destination”.

Today, Peru has risen from what many for example describe as “chaos” and, thanks to efforts of various generations of chefs, reimagined itself through a thriving gastronomic culture. Gastón Acurio, Peru’s most famous chef) started to bring everybody who was involved in gastronomy together, because he wanted to investigate and let’s analyse what Peru really was, because they didn’t know”. He made many Peruvians fall in love again with their country. Peru re-constituted

¹ Mary Douglas, ‘Food in the Social Order’, Routledge, London, 1984 re-print 2013

² Jack Goody, ‘Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology’, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982

³ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste’, Routledge, London, 1979 re-print 2010

⁴ Arjun Appadurai, ‘How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India’, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988

⁵ <https://peru.info/es-pe/generacionconcausa/que-es>

itself as a country of cooks and gastronomy and its cuisine as the engine for national unification. As he claimed in a Facebook post in 2012: "Peru is the only country in the whole world where food is the most important thing. If you go to Brazil, it's soccer. If you go to Colombia, it's music. But in Peru, the most important source of pride is food." Besides the biggest food festival in Latin America, currently over 100,000 students are being trained at the culinary schools. These new chefs are potential innovators who embody the engagement level of the Peruvian people and their cuisine.



The *Generation with a Cause* aims to continue with the consolidation of the foundations of Peruvian gastronomy. Their manifesto⁶ describes how they want to work more on unification of the country via the cuisine. Main focus areas are as hunger, values and traditions, appellation of origin, education and decent work, the sea, Amazonas and Andes and the new generation. The chefs from the movement, all from the cities, collaborate with rural and indigenous farmers and producers. Gastronomy is used as a social instrument. Moreover, history has shown that the strong sense of pride of heritage, values and appellation of origin in Peru can go hand in hand with evolution and creativity.

One of the reasons of existence of such a rich Peruvian cuisine are fusion cuisines brought since decades by immigrants, such as the Chifa cuisine (Peruvian-Chinese) or the Nikkei cuisine (Peruvian-Japanese). Fusion is fundamentally change and these influences from the outside now are appellation of origin and part of Peruvian history and cuisine. These immigrants used Peruvian products and their own techniques and out if this mix new fusion cuisines were born. A critical note to the mission of the Generation with a Cause is that accepting change to food Ways takes time. A concrete example in this area is the Nikkei cuisine. The first immigrants arrived in 1899 and it took about a century to really integrate and have the Peruvians accept the Nikkei cuisine as a part of the Peruvian gastronomy. Any profound change requires behaviour change and therewith lasting change rather over drastic transformation⁷.

The initial aim to create social cohesion and pride via food is on its way, Peru is increasingly acknowledged by the world as a leading culinary destination (World Travel Awards) and the Peruvian cuisine with all of its aspects gives a strong sense of pride. Now is it still expedient to

⁶ PromPerú 2019: <https://peru.info/es-pe/generacionconcausa/manifiesto>

⁷ Very Well Mind 2021: <https://www.verywellmind.com/the-stages-of-change-2794868>

focus on locality only? Would it be a logical step to expand the sense of locality pride by creation and letting new influences in and evolving next to maintaining that sense? It is like the example of the potato: if a Peruvian lives abroad and cannot get hold of a Peruvian potato, what can he do? Would cooking with a local potato mean denial of the Peruvian cuisine and therewith the sense of pride of Peru? Or would not cooking at all because of the lack of the Peruvian potato mean denial of the Peruvian cuisines and therewith the sense of pride of Peru? This debate is an on-going one as there is not one answer, the answer lies in the eye of the beholder.

Many Peruvians have great curiosity of re-discovery and re-invention of its cuisines, and always have had the great ability to evolve, but also are very proud and almost rigid about authenticity. This authenticity and traditional values did push for the new social identity. But in this different era, it might be interesting to re-discover, to re-invent and to evolve by having a close look at the heritage of those traditional values. In the end the Peruvian gastronomy always has been on the move and the reason of existence is the openness and ability to evolve and create.