

AMAZON PRIME

SEEING THE RAINFOREST FOR THE FOOD

IMAGINE A MEAL where every morsel includes either an ingredient that sounds vaguely familiar but which you can't quite picture in its raw state or one

that is new entirely: macambo, casaba, yuca, açai, memepa, jiquitaia chile, tucupi preto. These foods, drawn from the 13 countries that share the Amazon rainforest in South America, represent more than novelty to foreign palates, though. As



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chefs, producers, and activists in this region believe, gastronomy can help save the rainforest.

This is why four top toques from Brazil, Bolivia, and Peru came to town recently: to share cuisine of the Amazon through "Cumari: From Rainforest to Table," a benefit dinner hosted at the Cooking School of Aspen, and to participate in talks and tastings during the Aspen Ideas Festival Spotlight on Health.

"Cumari means, in Portuguese, the happiness of the taste," noted Brazilian chef Paulo Machado, explaining the title, taken from the name of a piquant Amazonian pepper. "It gives you pleasure."

The Amazon is home to more than 40,000 species of plants, at least 3,000 species of fish, and another 3,000 kinds of fruit. By introducing diners around the world to this vast "Amazon pantry" of nutritious rainforest ingredients—harvested sustainably to support local diets and livelihoods, these award-winning, respected chefs (ambassadors, really) and nonprofit advocacy and research groups such as Forest Trends and Canopy Bridge are turning food production into a tool for forest protection, cultural preservation, and community empowerment.

Their work also serves as an important PSA for improving nutrition and creating sustainable global supply chains for

Amazonian products.

"This could be the cuisine of the future," explained chef Machado, founder of the Paulo Machado Institute for gastronomy research in Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil, and winner of Brazil's 2015 Dólmã Prize for his work advancing the country's cuisine through stints in France, Ethiopia, Thailand, China, and Peru.

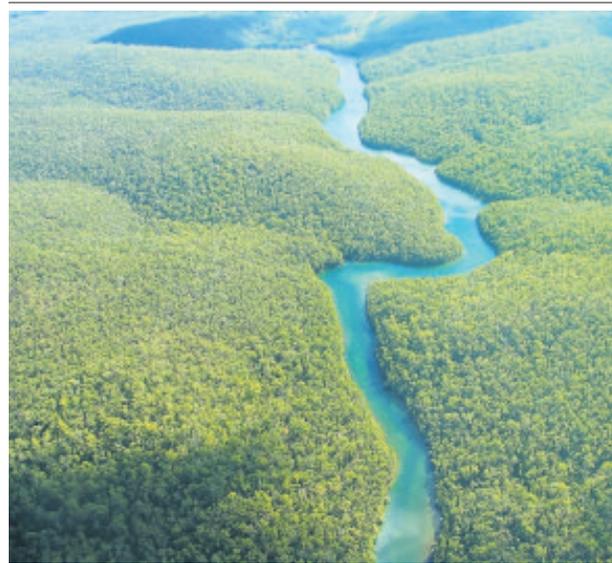
In showcasing biodiversity through indigenous foods, these superstar Latin American chefs are sounding an alarm on the Amazon's rapid deforestation, much of it, ironically, a result of large-scale beef cattle operations, cocoa plantations, and vast acreage of soybeans and oil palm. At risk is water and land in the fertile Amazon, which the entire world depends on for its carbon-trapping forests to help mitigate the climate change crisis.

During the event's cocktail hour, the school's open kitchen was a flurry of movement and conversation as chefs dished out appetizers and fielded questions from some 50 guests in attendance. Machado scooped up spicy crabmeat with roasted manioc flour and pequi oil (find a primer on Amazon ingredients, opposite).

Alongside him, Lima-based chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino (chef-owner of *amaZ* and Malabar) carefully spooned ripe plantain with garlic, mint, and edible flowers into delicate fermented plantain shells. "Plantain taco," he quipped.

Meanwhile, chef Kamilla Seidler was busy pan-frying a Bolivian street-food specialty: cheesy toasted yuca cakes the size of silver dollars, sprinkled with pink peppercorns. One woman draining a *caipirinha*—Brazil's national cocktail, made with the country's MVP spirit, *cachaça*—marveled at the cake's fluffy, creamy texture with subtle tongue-tingling spice. Other folks tried an array of colorful condiments tentatively—lemongrass-scented Brazilian ants, included.

The sit-down dinner that



followed was a parade of plates, each prefaced by a personal story told by their chef-creator as guests munched on chewy breads and crispy crackers made from rice and tapioca flours.

Chef Schiaffino presented duck breast with fermented palm fruit and sticky Brazilian rice made from cassava root. The high-protein macambo nuts on top, he told us, are a relative of the coffee bean—affectionately called "monkey brain" due to their shape and texture. Chef Machado—a pioneer of modern Amazon cooking for 13 years—used a centuries-old technique to smoke river fish: he wrapped it in a banana leaf.

Seidler's artful vegan rendition of a classic Bolivian dish—amaranth "caviar" with açai, and Brazil nut in a pool of warmed Brazil nut milk (fun fact: Bolivia is the largest producer of Brazil nuts)—was inspired by Madidi National Park, the most biodiverse place on earth.

"There are a lot of logistical issues that need to be solved, but we're trying," said Seidler, who moved to Bolivia four years ago from her native Copenhagen to help build a culinary school. Now she's executive chef at Gustu, a La

Paz restaurant opened in 2013 by Noma cofounder Claus Meyer and his Melting Pot Foundation.

"We wanted to try to do the Nordic food movement in a developing country, to see if it can be a model," she continued. "In the municipality of La Paz you can drive 20 minutes and be in the jungle. When you go into a community, sit and talk with them, and make them realize that what they have is a treasure—all of these things need to be taken care of, but in a sustainable, organized way—we can close the circle by working together."

Mara Salles, chef of *Tordesilhas* in São Paulo, Brazil, for 25 years, capped the meal with passion fruit compote, cassava cream, *amazón* cacao, and drizzled with syrup infused with jambu, an herb known for imparting a mouth-numbing sensation.

"To preserve the Amazon is to preserve our inspiration, our knowledge," Salles said. "Using whole ingredients is important. And death has to be worthwhile—whether fruit or an animal."

Interest in food from this region is growing—Food Industry Trends reported in February that Latin

American food is the second fastest growing segment of “ethnic food,” based on a National Restaurant Association survey of 1,600 professional chefs. Advocates say that education about this cuisine and culture is key—concerned citizens might consider planning a trip far south to support the restaurants that are putting this concept into practice.

“These chefs are a window into nutrition...these restaurants are incubators for using these ingredients to broader markets,” said Michael Jenkins, president and CEO of Forest Trends. About the Amazon, he added, “It’s like nature’s richest pantry opened its doors.”

Even the chefs’ Spanish cue for diners to dig in—*buen provecho!*—reinforced the point of the Cumari dinner. Though equivalent to *bon appétit!* the exclamation translates as, “to good benefit.”

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Passion fruit compote dessert capped the Cumari rainforest benefit dinner at the Cooking School of Aspen during the Aspen Ideas Festival; chefs Kamilla Seidler of Gusto in La Paz, Bolivia, and Mara Salles of Tordesilhas in São Paulo, Brazil, finish a batch of sonza cakes made with yuca root and cheese; an array of Amazonian ingredients; chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino of *amaZ* and *Matabar* in Lima, Peru, prepares a fermented “plantain taco.”

RAINFOREST FOOD 101

<p>ACAÍ: A reddish-purple berry stabilizing after the boom and bust of its “superfood” fad in consumer countries outside of Latin America.</p> <p>AMARANTH: An ancient grain, closely related to quinoa, capable of growing in harsh, high-plateau Altiplano regions of the Bolivian and Peruvian Andes. Important to indigenous communities, it’s often prepared as “caviar.”</p> <p>CASABA: A mildly sweet melon with cucumber-like flavor and pale green flesh; relative to honeydew.</p> <p>CASSAVA, MANIOC, YUCA*: A starchy root vegetable boasting some 1,000-plus varieties, ubiquitous throughout the Amazon basin but prepared very differently from country to country. An essential source of carbohydrates in regional diets since long before the arrival of Europeans. Great for communities living without refrigeration because it may be stored underground as a live tuber. <small>*not to be confused with yucca, the ornamental plants.</small></p>	<p>JAMBU: An Amazonian herb that gives Cachaça de Jambú, an infused sugarcane spirit, its characteristic numbing sensation.</p> <p>MACAMBO NUTS: Brain-shaped seeds that grow inside large golden pods found hanging from trees deep in the Peruvian Amazon. A lesser-known cousin to cacao, the high-protein, high-fiber macambo nuts hit US shelves for the first time in late-2014.</p> <p>PEQUI OIL: Extracted from the Brazilian pequi fruit plant (consumed more widely there than Brazil nuts, which are grown in Bolivia), this pale-yellow oil is popular for cooking, as well as in cosmetic applications.</p> <p>TUCUPI PRETO: Also known as <i>aji negro</i>, a condiment derived from reduced cassava juice.</p>
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