

Finally, Peru!

Classic, Delicious Peruvian Puts a “Suburbs-Only” Myth to Rest

BY ALEX MACLENNAN,
PHOTOS BY ANDREW LIGHTMAN

Las Canteras
2307 18th St. NW (At Belmont)
202-265-1780
www.lascañterasdc.com
Lunch: 11-3 p.m.
Dinner: 5-11 p.m.
Brunch: Sat/Sun 11-4
Closed Mondays

There are as many kinds of “foodies” in DC as there are restaurants and kinds of cuisine. And in the past few months, the city (and by that I mean the city proper, no bridges, tunnels, or Annapolises required) has added a surge of high-profile Peruvian right here in town. So in an attempt to steer each diner to his or her ideal perch, we’re diving right into 18th Street NW, with a slight detour onto Columbia Road.

You don’t expect a heavy, engraved wooden door when you climb a short flight of steps in Adams Morgan, and that surprising portal, at 2307

18th St. will indeed transport you to another world. Deep, earthy red walls and heavy iron and wood materials give the space a modern, sexy gravitas. It’s an intentional blend of earthy, cultural and worldly – las canteras means “the quarries,” and the owners, Gary and Eddy, chose the name for two reasons. First, according to Gary, “a couple of the artifacts in the restaurant are made from the whitish, crushed volcanic rock that originated in quarries in southern Peru,” and second, a quarry is “the source of many treasures of the earth including potatoes and other staples we use in our kitchen.”



Gorgeous Camarones, sizzling and plump. The Perfect Garlic Shrimp?



Green Quiche: Smooth, rich and moist, Las Canteras’ Causa de Pollo stands tall.

Honoring that spirit, we sampled a number of Peru's "staples," starting with the world-famous Pisco Sour – a blended mix of Pisco (clear grape brandy), lime juice, sugar and egg whites. (Las Canteras' bartender told us he added some honey so the sweet would be smooth as well.) Imagine a tartly sweet, utterly crisp margarita with a frothy meringue top. There are a number of varieties of Pisco, with regional flavors and differing quality grades, but most were originally shipped to Lima from the port at Pisco, hence the name. Take a risk and try it: the impertinent lime and strong pisco are balanced by the honey's heavy sweetness, and the egg-white froth, scattered with cinnamon, lifts the Pisco Sour into a heavenly realm.

We also sampled the traditional margarita: sweet, limey, delicious, but just a tad too sweet for our taste. There is a basic bar downstairs, where the crowd gathers to wait for tables or slip in, as we did, for a quiet drink.

Our meal took off with the Camarones a la Li-mena, or sautéed shrimp in garlic, butter and white wine. Oh lordy, the shrimp were amazing – plump, sizzling with garlic in their small metal dish.

We also shared the Causa de Pollo, another standard with layers of the nearly omnipresent Peruvian ingredients: potatoes, chicken and corn. Served cold, the cake was quite good, moist and savory, the texture of the shredded chicken almost indistinguishable from the main dish. Eight strokes of bright green cilantro sauce brought the gentle flavors high into crisp, we're-on-vacation-in-the-Andes air.

On the "classic" front, Las Canteras, of course, offers numerous cebiches – fresh fish marinated in

a kind of citrus salsa, each as clean, fresh and bright as the last. Splurge on the Duo de Cebiches, with both the original white fish classic version and one featuring plump, sweet shrimp.

The appetizers did feel a tad small and pricey, but we ended up grateful for Las Canteras' restraint. Each dish was delicious, and we all maintained our appetites going into the main meal.

Which was a good thing. Our bright, funny and intuitive server described each dish in detail, and when one friend ordered the Seco de Carne (a beef stew slow-cooked in a sauce of peppers, paprika, onion and cilantro), he said "my favorite," and then, unprompted, joked that each progressive request was his second, third, or fourth favorite in turn.

And while the beef stew was as rich and hearty as promised, our table's universal favorite was that staple of staples, Arroz con Pollo. Good old-fashioned chicken and rice. Oh, but what a thrilling take Las Canteras provides! The chicken is infused with the essence of sharp beer and a palette-ranging family of spices and roasted flavor, and even more joyous was the eye-popping mound of moist rice, fragrant and energetic from plentiful cilantro. If you fear cilantro, I'd avoid this dish, but for those who love it, Chef Eddy Ancasi's rice is a pillowy dream.

Strangely, the well-known and beloved Lomo Saltado didn't provide the same thrill. All the ingredients were there – a hot tumble of prime beef, onions, tomatoes and French fries tossed in a soy/red wine sauce. Perfection, right? Well, in this case, not quite. Although the Saltado was good, it wasn't great. And at Las Canteras "great" is what we'd al-

ready come to expect.

Luckily, great does describe the Trio De Anticuchos, a painterly array of grilled beef, chicken and heart of beef, all moistened in a citrusy-spiced marinade for 24 hours. As my server promised, the meat gave up every minute of juiciness and every nuance from the grill.

I was a bit nervous about trying beef heart, but our server assured me I'd enjoy it, and I did. Frankly, the only difference I noted between tender, grill-striped beef and tender, grill-striped beef "heart" was the small holes in the heart that – once pointed out – did make me think a bit too viscerally of ventricles and aorta. A small side of onions and ensalada criolla finished the plate.

Downstairs, on a cool Tuesday evening when the restaurant was full, we descended to the "Andes" Bar for a repeat drink (the Pisco Sours are that good). A few staff members, their work completed for the evening, chatted at the bar. Easing into our seats, we sipped our drinks and fell into conversation with part-owner Gary. It was quiet, we were alone, and he had time to chat. As Eddy cooked behind a row of mounded loaves of fragrant bread, Gary told us about opening a restaurant in DC, their commitment to real, classic Peruvian cooking, and his estimate that their clientele is about 15 percent Peruvian or from South America. (A Peruvian friend confirms his claim.)

He also told us that Eddy had recently been in Lima interviewing "gastronomy school" students about doing fellowships at Las Canteras, so they can be sure to have the freshest ideas in Peruvian cooking and most inventive techniques of Peruvian cuisine. Something to return for, for sure.



Chef and Co-Owner Eddy Ancasi proudly displays Las Canteras' signature Pisco Sour.

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The classic Peruvian cebiche "Classico," given a welcome Las Canteras twist.

Some Other Venues for Peruvian Cuisine

Inti
1825 18th St. NW
202-797-0744

Inti's small, three-steps-down dining room doesn't have the panache – or buzz – of its cousin up the street. That might be because it is homey rather than stylish; one Peruvian friend claims he wept upon eating food like his mother and grandmother cooked at home.

Bright and cheery, Inti is named for the Peruvian sun god, and it is the kind of place locals flock to for takeout and everyone else looks like they discovered on NPR. The lights are up a bit too bright. The takeout counter is bustling. There's a cozy patio out back with just enough room to feel properly outdoors. And then there's the puffy llama, composed of what appears to be cotton balls, peering from a framed bas-relief mountain range on the wall.

Unfortunately, Inti's still working on their liquor license, but fear not, their Chicha Morada (another classic) is happy insanity on the tongue. Elmo-purple, this corn-based, fruity soft drink (again, trust me) tastes of fruit and nutmeg, yet has a crisp energy. Our table only ordered one, but every single person went back for multiple sips. "Like a sweet cinnamon red hot," said one friend, and he was right. Inti has numerous Chifa dishes influenced by Chinese cooking. Although the fried rice with seafood was just OK, the Pollo

Saltado, a chicken-take on the classic was an improvement on Las Canteras' version. And to that DC-suburb-staple Peruvian roasted chicken – Inti acquits itself well. Big picture, Inti feels autentico. Order take out, sit on the back patio, or share a dining room that feels like the dining room of someone's home. You'll feel welcome, and like you've already been there a while.

La Granja de Oro
1832 Columbia Road
202-232-8888

Another quick note. If Las Canteras is a "night out," and Inti is a homey meal in a sweet space, then La Granja de Oro on Columbia Road is good, fast Peruvian food to pick up at the counter, eat on the porch, or take home. The small, mostly carryout restaurant has a full menu, but I'd go with their world famous chicken sandwich. Called the "Granja de Oro" with good reason, the mound of succulent chicken sits on golden, pillowy, buttered garlic bread, smothered in savory queso blanco, and mixed with onions, lettuce and tomato. Kind of like a chicken cheese steak, Peruvian-style. Something you'd eat down on the farm. If you're feeling less sandwichy, down the Anticucho de Carne, served on halved potatoes, which evokes both Peruvian tradition and down-home barbeque. Take it all in as you watch Adams Morgan's joggers, lovers, drinkers and diners go by.

Alex MacLennan is a local writer and editor. His first novel, "The Zookeeper," was published May 2006. ■