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## Why Seattle's Thinkin' Incan

Food from the far corners of the world typically finds its way onto the American restaurant scene via immigrant groups that flock to this country's shores. Other times, adventurous travelers make a culinary discovery on their own, bring it back to the U.S. and adapt it for restaurant use here. But rarely does a high-end chef transport himself and his country's food to the U.S. to open a successful restaurant that showcases his skills and his otherwise-obscure native cuisine.

Peruvian chef Emmanuel Piqueras has done it twice, most recently at the 110-seat Mixtura in Seattle, which opened last December. From the reception he's gotten, it doesn't look like his native cuisine will remain obscure for long.

Certainly not in Seattle, where patrons immediately swooned over his novo-Andean offerings, although we wonder how many of them knew what to expect before they ate at Mixtura. RH readers may also not be too sure about what Andean cuisine, novo or not, might be.

One thing we can tell you about it is that it's got a shot at being the next hot ethnic cuisine. Even the Peruvian government is giving it a big push. "We want our food to be as well-known as Thai is in the U.S.," Peruvian Embassy official Alejandro Riveros tells the *Washington Post*. "We want 5,000—no 10,000—restaurants in the United States. We want Peruvian restaurants everywhere."

The relative handful of them now open have certainly done well so far. Pre-Mixtura, Piqueras made a big splash serving novo-Andean fare in Portland, OR. He was founding chef at Andina there in 2003, and his two-year tenure saw Andina chosen as the *Portland Oregonian's* 2005 Restaurant of the Year. RESTAURANT HOSPITALITY named him a Rising Star that same year. What diners in both Portland and Seattle have embraced is a cuisine that is different from just about anyone else's. Piqueras takes traditional Peruvian ingredients and applies modern styles and creativity to them. The finished products appear on imaginative plate presentations that feature Technicolor hues.

We can think of another chef from Peru who pulled off something similar in the U.S.: Nobu Matsuhisa. Nobu's a native of Japan, but he spent time cooking in Peru before coming to the U.S. Now his string of restaurants stretches around the globe.

Nobu approached Peruvian food, particularly its seafood, from a Japanese perspective. Piqueras taps into another culinary tradition—Spanish—and comes up with something entirely different.

A look at his background tells you why. Piqueras began his career by spending four years working at Restaurant Pantagruel in Lima. His boss there was chef Don Cucho de la Rosa, the person who invented novo-Andean cuisine. Next came a trip to Spain to work at the three-Michelin-star Arzak in San Sebastian. Now Piqueras uses his skills, both classical and contemporary, to elevate Peruvian ingredients into novo-Andean cuisine.



**NEW PERU:** The 110-seat Mixtura brings the look, feel and taste of South America to the suburbs of Seattle.



**DEEP PURPLE:** Emmanuel Piqueras's novo-Andean cuisine makes the most of a vibrant color palette.



**MIX MASTER:** Emmanuel Piqueras dishes it up in Seattle.



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So how many ingredients in Peru are worth elevating? Lots. The roots of Andean agriculture can be traced back 9,000 years, when Incan food gatherers first learned how to domesticate native plants. Key crops were potatoes, maize, chiles, lima beans, peppers, yucca, squash, pineapples and avocados, plus dozens of others. Of equal importance: the country's lengthy coastline on the Pacific Ocean is home port for an array of commercial fisheries.

Transport this sensibility to Mixtura in Seattle and the result is a restaurant where menu descriptions are a little unfamiliar, but everything that comes out of the kitchen seems to be strikingly presented and delicious. A focused menu format features a 21-item list of "mixturas" (i.e., starters); an eight item "fondos" (entrée) section; and five choices of dessert. Pricing is *a la carte*, and many of the choices on the mixtura menu are available in both tapas—and, at roughly twice the tapas-sized price—appetizersized portions.

The signature offerings are found in Piqueras's ceviche lineup, which makes the most of Seattle's proximity to great seafood, as well as leveraging the fresh bounty of the area's many artisanal producers.

It's a style of food that was greeted with open arms when Andina opened in a hip neighborhood in Portland. So how's it doing in suburban Seattle?

Kirkland, WA, where Mixtura is located, is 10 miles east of downtown. The good news: this location ensures plenty of customers who can handle Mixtura's prices. Piqueras' ceviches and other appetizers run in the low teens and entrées are mostly priced just under \$30.

The critics think it's going to work. "Be still, my beating heart," wrote *Seattle Times* restaurant critic Nancy Leson. "Taking artistic license—and getting away with it—is what makes this kitchen so great." Her final verdict on Mixtura's food: "Unconventional, improvisational, irresistible." Even an organ meat offering found a fan. Local critic Sara Dickerman wrote that Mixtura's beef-heart anticuchos "are, for lack of a better expression, freaking awesome."

Does Mixtura's success signal that Peruvian food will catch on big in the U.S.? To be sure, those Peruvian rotisserie chicken places you see in some big cities already pack them in. But we note that none other than Auguste Escoffier ranked Peruvian food as the world's third-greatest cuisine, right behind French and Chinese. Even if you just start selling pisco sours at your bar, there could be something in this trend for many RH readers.

## London Heads For The Top

**It now goes without saying**, except to those who haven't set foot in London for 10 years, that this majestic city now ranks with Paris and New York for the highest accolades when it comes to fine dining. If you want great French food, go to Paris; if you want great food of every kind, go to London. Indeed, if London has not yet nudged New York out of the spotlight as the most diverse and exciting of cities to dine out in, it may only be a matter of time.

The London-based *Restaurant Magazine* last month announced the results of a poll of world food authorities (including this writer), restaurateurs and chefs for the World's 50 Best Restaurant Awards. The list was compiled by dividing the world into 20 voting regions, with panels of up to 31 individuals in each region voting for two restaurants in their own region and three internationally, for a total of 2,800 votes.

Of the final 50 chosen, seven were in Paris, five in New York, and six in London. The number one restaurant, El Bulli in Spain, switched places this year with number two, The Fat Duck, in Bray just outside of London.

What seems to be driving London's soaring restaurant scene is, in a word, money—not the anemic U.S. dollar, but British pounds Sterling. Toss in a few continental Euros and bags of Saudi riyals, and you get full restaurants every night, from Marylebone to Wandsworth, where the equivalent of \$100 per person for dinner has become common. In 2006, only the rare restaurant in New York and Las Vegas costs what most of the top restaurants do in London, usually with a 12.5 percent "discretionary service charge" and 17.5 percent VAT tagged on. Add to that scorching 300 to 500 percent mark-ups on wines, and you have reason to choose your options very carefully.



**STARTER SET:** Novo-Andean cuisine features plenty of seafood and Peruvian-tinged ingredients.



**BY THE BOATLOAD:** An influx of big spenders is driving the London restaurant scene.



**EL BULLI BOSS:** Non-Londoner Ferrán Adrià ranks as the world's No. 1

Multi-units have become all the rage: Most of Sir Terence Conran's restaurants are still doing extremely well, from the seafood house on the Thames called Pont de La Tour to Bibendum, which actually set the style for modern Franco-Anglo cuisine 20 years ago. The redoubtable Gordon Ramsay signed up with the new owners of the former Savoy Group to take over management of their restaurants at Claridge's, The Connaught and The Berkeley. MARC Ltd. now runs the very posh Greenhouse, the very stylish Japanese restaurant Umu and the ultra-exclusive private club Morton's.

Not surprisingly, while French bistros have been copied in London right down to their yellow walls and lace curtains—and French waiters are ubiquitous in town, earning far more than they would in Paris—London restaurateurs seem to have caught on to a very American notion: Build it and they will come—as long as you add a lot of dazzle and posh to the mix. What is possibly the most expensive restaurant ever built—Sketch, at a reported \$16 million—has restrooms shaped like nine-foot, egg-shaped pods, chocolates displayed in jewelers' showcases and food, from Paris 3-star chef Pierre Gagnaire, that will run you an easy \$175 per person before wine.

The city is now flooded with expensive Italian ristoranti like Locanda Locatelli, Zafferano, River Café and Ceconi, and huge Asian restaurants, like Zuma. There are now three branches of Nobu in town. Indian restaurants have moved way beyond curry house clichés and become first-rate, enchantingly decorated restaurants like Michelin-starred Zaika.

Borough Market, long a resource for cooks, has become a vibrant, teeming area for people searching for the best British cheeses, freshly baked bread, the finest seafood and first-rate meat—all of which can be found on the second-story, glassed-in restaurant, Roast.

Yet the old-timers not only linger on but thrive majestically. The Ritz London has never been more beautiful and its restaurant never better attended. The classic Le Gavroche is still a tough table to get, and don't even think about getting into Wilton's for lunch on short notice.

Can this level of excitement and number of new restaurants continue in London? And is it possible the city will overtake New York as the world capital of fine dining? With so much money being spent and so much pouring in, it's not outside the realm of probability.

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