

ASTRID Y GASTÓN BRINGS PERU TO THE D.F.

BY NICHOLAS GILMAN
Special to The News

Star chef Gastón Acurio's upscale space in Polanco gives classics a touch of Mexican

We live in the era of the "star chef." He's on TV, owns restaurants all over the world and has written innumerable cookbooks. The last thing you'll find him doing is slaving over a hot stove tossing your order of pasta.

That said, I like Gastón Acurio. The 40ish master from Lima has done more than anyone else to promote Peruvian cooking, one of Latin America's great cuisines.

Along with his wife, Astrid Gutsche, the high-end Peruvian fusion restaurant Astrid & Gastón, which they opened in Lima 15 years ago, has taken off and now has branches all over Latin America, in Madrid and now in Mexico.

Peru's cooking, like that of Mexico, is based on an intricate blend of native ingredients and techniques and those of Europe, notably Spain. Unlike in Mexico's cooking, however, there is a rather profound Asian influence due to the large migration of Chinese and Japanese populations to the country.

And with a long coastline and rugged mountain areas, there is a vast lexicon of national dishes that cover both surf and turf. The standard "cebichería" found all over Peru is the people's lunch joint serving superb marinated fish and seafood, concoctions similar to their Mexican cousins.

Acurio opened a cebichería in Mexico City a couple of years ago: the upscale, expensive La Mar. Like his bistro, which I have also tried in Lima, La Mar presents "Limeño" specialties using the best of local ingredients – and it is always crowded.

Our version of the recently inaugurated Astrid y Gastón is set in a modern space with touches of dark wood. It is directed by young Mexican master chef Yerika Muñoz and she does an extraordinary job; I had a better meal here than at the original.

Muñoz studied with Acurio in Peru for four brief but intense months and seems to have absorbed the essence of what the master wants to do. While Peruvian classics are ostensibly presented authentically, the chef often adds a



Yerika Muñoz was trained by Gastón Acurio before beginning a branch of his restaurant in Mexico City.

suggestion of the Mexican kitchen. Like all good chefs and great cuisines, she adapts to local ingredients and traditions and does so successfully.

Her menu is divided into two parts: La Tradición, featuring classic Peruvian dishes, and La Temporada, offering seasonal and more creative specialties. I'm a traditionalist, so I stuck more with the former.

"Anticuchos" are skewered beef hearts and are the quintessential Peruvian snack. I finally dared to try them while in Lima and found them to be tough and stringy, albeit flavorful. Here, they were tender, succulent and perfectly grilled, like a good filet mignon.

Of course, we had to sample the famous Peruvian ceviches (often spelled with a "b" south of the equator). There are five on the menu, and my favorite was the Ceviche Lima D.F., consisting of tuna, shrimp and mango all marinated in the traditional "leche de tigre" – white wine, lemon, mild chile and garlic. It was sublime. It had just the right amount of sharp and perfumy broth to accent the fresh fish. And the light touches of sweet mango and smoky chipotle added a Mexican touch.

Moving on, I suggested we go for a "causa." Peru is a land of potatoes, and causa offers up potatoes with sweet chile that can be topped with a variety of items. It can be dull – but not here. "La Actual," one of three causa dishes on the menu, was a surprising tower of fragrant

MORE INFO

Astrid y Gastón
Ternynson #117, Col. Polanco
Tel.: 5282-2455
Open daily for lunch from 1:30 to 6 p.m.; for dinner Monday through Thursday from 6 to 10 p.m.; on

Friday and Saturday from 6 to 11 p.m.
All major credit cards accepted
Average cost is **600-800 pesos** per person with wine

yellow chilled mash (nothing spicy, mind you, the Peruvians don't do that), layered with fresh tuna, crab and avocado cream – once again a nod to the Aztec homeland.

Of the 11 "platos fuertes" on offer, several stand out. The "sopa seca marinera" is served in a cazuela or ceramic dish. Thick, chewy soba-like noodles are nicely complemented by tender morsels of seafood and sweet caramelized onions and a very light accent of chipotle.

You'll find Chinese and Japanese flavors in Peruvian food.

A "cochinilla de tres semanas" – young suckling pig – is crunchy outside and falling apart tender within, and served in a confit sauce aromatized with cacao. The side mounds of "tacu tacu," a black bean and rice mold similar to the Cuban Moros y Cristianos look pretty and are filling – if a little on the dry side.

"Camarones en salsa chupe"

consists of grilled shrimp with an aromatic mint and tomato cream sauce called "salsa chupe" because it makes you want to suck the excess off your fingers. It is served over a bed of wheat risotto.

Desserts are not to be overlooked – the sorbet sampler includes one made with "chicha morada" a purple corn used to make a refreshing and common drink – it tastes fruity (and seemingly grapey although this may be psychological). Also top notch are profiteroles filled with delightful warm chocolate.

The wine list is extensive, although we were not happy with a couple of lower end selections of Mexican wines. Likewise, the service is friendly but, at this point, inexperienced. There is room for improvement, but Astrid y Gastón may yet become one of the best restaurants in the city.

Nicholas Gilman is author of "Good Food in Mexico City: A Guide to Food Stalls, Fondas and Fine Dining," available at all online booksellers. His Web site is www.mexicocityfood.net