Food for social change in Peru: Narrative and performance of the culinary nation

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Abstract
This article discusses the most relevant scholarship produced on the rise of Peruvian cuisine and Peru’s gastro-politics. It focuses on the contexts, processes and protagonists behind the attempt to heal and re-found the nation through food after a period of decline and terror, and on the formulation of ideas of social change aimed at shaping and promoting Peru as an entrepreneurial, vigorous but also more equal and fairer society. It also considers the smaller societal changes that nurtured these ideas, which are varied in nature and scope. Methodologically, the article explores the semantics, practices and ideologies at stake as expressed in public discourse, media content, gastronomic trends and restaurant sourcing. By unfolding central processes of the culinary project: high-end cuisine, the refiguring of indigenous people as producers and the use of cultural identity as an authenticating force, it offers a critical reading of the so-called gastronomic revolution, highlighting the ways in which claims to unity and reconciliation, particularly in the incorporation of indigenous people and their food cultures, smooth over ongoing inequalities.

Keywords
culinary elites, culinary nationalism, gastro-politics, Peruvian cuisine, social change

Introduction
Food is, for more than a decade, the central element in Peru’s national project. How else to explain the reasons that drove more than 80,000 youth to attend hundreds of culinary schools, that catapulted chefs to fame and glory, that led the government to establish national days to celebrate local specialties and that provided, a few years ago, a celebrity chef with a chance to become the country’s president? Food unites Peruvians. They do not need to wait to celebrate the too infrequent goals of the country’s football team. Now
they puff their chests when fancy restaurants by Peruvian chefs do well in international rankings – even if they could hardly enjoy one of these places themselves. Food also puts the country on the map: Peruvian cuisine is now a national marketing feature as attractive as the iconic Machu Picchu.

Seeing Peruvians embracing this moment of culinary success as a way to consume, perform and celebrate sovereignty is striking if we consider that, two decades ago, Peru was still reeling from many years of political violence and economic precariousness that threatened any idea of national community. During the 1980s and 1990s, the war between revolutionary forces (Shining Path and MRTA) and the state left around 70,000 dead and countless people with broken lives. Most of those impacted were indigenous peoples (CVR, 2004). This is crucial background to contemporary stories of economic and cultural success. Whereas stories of decline tend with few exceptions to be profoundly pessimistic, it is worth acknowledging that they have a counterpart in narratives of resilience and resurgence that stress the potential of recovery and renewal after periods of decline. Peru’s recent violent history has left room for discourses of inclusion and tolerance. The country is reconstituting itself as a culinary nation and a gastronomic mecca not only for commercial and aesthetic reasons, but also in pursuit of a political, economic and cultural project in which Peruvian cuisine brings economic benefits to the country and leads to social reconciliation in a nation shaped by inequalities of race, class and gender. In its history as a republic, Peru has dealt with fragile institutions ruled by creole elites descended from Spanish conquerors. The ‘white’ coastal areas of the country became integrated first into the capitalist economy, thus establishing their domination over the ‘Indian’ Andean and jungle regions, which were branded as underdeveloped. Little has been achieved to date with respect to this situation. Indigenous populations continue to suffer marginalization and racial discrimination. Dominant narratives deploy Peruvian cuisine as an agent of social change and reconciliation, one that makes possible the move from fractured to unified nation.

This is significant as the so-called Peruvian gastronomic revolution (Lauer & Lauer, 2006) also overlapped with the implementation of neoliberal economic policies that brought money to Lima and opened the country to global capital. Peru’s successful macroeconomic performance between the mid-1990s and the 2010s paved the way for hopes about the future. And in the story of Peru’s comeback, gastronomy, together with mining and tourism, emerged as an especially prominent industry that has created not only economic activity but, as shown below, also significant cultural work. The internationalization of Peruvian cuisine, the media exposure of chefs’ success, and the identification of potential economic benefits have led political, economic and cultural elites to speak about Peruvian food in terms of opportunities. This was supported by a narrative reiterating national unity and pride, where the metaphoric role of food takes on a strong political tone embodied in the positive attributions allocated to the national cuisine. These attributions echo the belief that food provides a key national reference point of identification, a fertile ground for developing ideas of culture, place and identity: ideas that are invoked to connect Peruvians, define Peruvianess and project the Peruvian experience in and outside the country (Matta, 2014; Wilson, 2011). The narrative of the culinary nation gave Peruvians an awareness of their (alleged) common values and characteristics as a nation. It also situated Peru as unique (at least in part), with the hope of instilling pride
domestically and respect from other nations. National narratives need not to be true (they often have untruthful elements in them) but they unite people, create loyalty to the nation and can be appealed to as reasons why citizens should support new policies and programs (Prager, 2008).

Food, thus, became a promise of conquering the fear of an uncertain future in the nation. This sort of promise is common to nations characterized by a sense of fragility, a perception of a persistent threat that pulls the national journey into a continued pursuit for value and security (Abulof, 2015), or nations with a ‘body politic infected by race, region, ethnicity, religion, or another discriminatory designation, currently diseased by these past wrongs and now aspiring to cure itself’ (Prager, 2008, p. 407). Confronted by traumatic ruptures in the body politic, governments and elites seek to repair past wrongs through a process and politics of reconciliation to heal emotionally-infirm communities. This implies that societies have the capacity to overcome traumatic pasts, just as individuals have the capacity to overcome psychic trauma and fragmentation.

The visual and media politics that shaped the narrative of post-war Peruvian success has often cast chefs as national heroes and engines of development, self-esteem and national pride (Matta, 2014). Public and private elites endorsed these aspirations and came together in a project that posits food as a force for social change, capable of creating new linkages between rich and poor, new opportunities for managing anxieties around race, and of repairing the tears in the fabric of national sovereignty caused by decades of war and centuries of racialized inequality.

The project led to the emergence of a ‘gastro-political complex’ (García, 2021) made up of celebrity chefs and high-end restaurants, state tourism and gastronomic agencies, culinary schools, cookbooks, festivals, nation branding campaigns, diplomatic moves and much more (Cánepa, 2013; Matta, 2013; Matta & García, 2019; Wilson, 2011). Gastro-politics in Peru has been interpreted in different positive ways: as the turning point in the long-time lack of interest among elites in the needs of rural populations; as an opportunity for the country to consolidate gains in international food markets; and as a means for promoting the nation internationally (Fan, 2013; Matta, 2011, 2013).

This review essay discusses the most relevant scholarship produced in the past decade on the rise of Peruvian cuisine and Peru’s gastro-politics. It focuses on the contexts, processes and protagonists behind the attempt to heal and re-found the nation through food, and on the formulation of ideas of social change aimed at shaping and promoting Peru as an entrepreneurial, vigorous but also more equal and fairer nation. It also considers the smaller societal changes that nurtured these ideas, which are varied in nature and scope. Ultimately, it offers a critical reading of the gastronomic revolution and its impact in society. Methodologically, the article explores the semantics, practices and ideologies at stake as expressed in public discourse, media content, gastronomic trends and restaurant sourcing. By unfolding central processes of the culinary project: high-end cuisine, the refiguring of indigenous people as producers, and the use of cultural identity as an authenticating force, the sections in this essay deal with the changeable nature of society at different levels and point out how differences emerge and nurture ideas of change intended to ‘heal’ the nation.

The first section focuses on the early stage of food’s shift from culinary to cultural and political object. It presents Peru’s ‘gastronomic revolution’, a phenomenon that endowed
the national cuisine with international appeal and additional meaning, and discusses the underlying, changing contexts behind it as well as the cultural work through which chefs ‘elevate’ indigenous and formerly disregarded foods from cookery to gastronomy and from local to global. The second section deals with the stage of the formulation of Peruvian cuisine as a development engine loaded with attractive cultural diversity. It argues this was possible by the capacity of (culinary) elites to (a) translate local food features into competitive culinary concepts in ways thought as beneficial to them and the country as a whole, and (b) refigure the role of Indian peasants by recognizing them as partners in this endeavour. The third section focuses on the moment of re-founding and performing the culinary nation. It shows how Peru presents itself today as a proudly mestizo¹ and entrepreneurial country that knows how to be commercially and culturally competitive on a global scale. More specifically, it analyses how the national narrative – where identities, individuals and markets intertwine – unfolds around the concept of mestizaje and is expected to accomplish the promise of reconciliation and unity, without compromising the promise of progress and development. The concluding section, presented as an epilogue, addresses the way the narrative has been played out and its effects in society, while recalling that change does not end with successful or failed intentions, as it also grows in the interstices of social relations that convey these intentions.

A gastronomic revolution?

Peru as a food nation could not have been possible without the ‘gastronomic revolution’, which originates from the early 1990s, was developed further in the 2000s, and has shaped the contours of the country’s gastronomic field. This phenomenon stems from post-war neoliberal policies that increased the purchasing power in the cities, mainly in Lima, and placed Peru as a nascent actor on the global scale. The growing economy and the arrival of global cultural patterns prompted processes of class differentiation through new tastes and consumption trends. In such a context, the interest in gastronomy, one expanding aspect of urban experience, is anything but surprising. These contextual factors matter as much as the changing trends in gastronomic business models and activity worldwide.

A gastronomic field in Peru was first made possible by the increasing attractiveness of gastronomy as a profession. This fact is linked to the rise in social position gained by chefs during the 1970s and 1980s in Europe and the United States, when the key players behind French nouvelle cuisine and California fusion cuisine launched their own restaurants. Since then, the business has grown in importance as a key component of the cultural industry, while cookery has increasingly gained respect. Although gastronomy has become over the years a very competitive market in which compensation and reputation is concentrated in a few top performers, the self-marketing strategies pursued by chefs have encouraged globally and in Peru the opening of restaurants and an increase in publications, TV shows and culinary schools. Old images of sweaty, grumpy and overweight restaurant cooks vanished, replaced by slim, fashionable and smart chefs; also gone was the notion of cookery as a risky and harsh career, associated with servile tasks. On the contrary, qualified culinary skills are now recognized as accomplishing important societal functions. The commitment of young people to the ascending profession was crucial
to building the prominence of Peruvian cuisine as a legitimate cultural field and as a profitable activity. The most visible leaders were (and still are) sons of well-off families from Lima who had the opportunity to receive European training during the 1990s. The story of chef Gastón Acurio is well known. The son of a former prime minister, he was sent to Madrid to study law in the 1980s. While there, he dropped out of law school to follow his childhood dream of cooking professionally, completing his training at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. He later became ‘a one-man advertising agency promoting Peru through its food’ (Cox Hall, 2020, pp. 595–596). Even though Acurio and others had to overcome parental resistance, the diversification of sources of social prestige among the very conservative Peruvian upper class was already underway: Lima’s elite finally understood that, in the modern world, prestige could be more easily reached by becoming media personalities rather than by sticking to anachronistic imperatives of distinction. This reminds us that ‘social change is also the story of individuals and of differences between generations in families’ (Harper & Leicht, 2018, p. 19)

The social background of these young people was, however, crucial for them to become elite chefs, since it allowed them to speak with authority about their interpretations of Peruvian cuisine. Indeed, they have not had to face social or cultural barriers when they addressed novel creations, unusual ingredients and stylistically daring performances to their clients and social peers: their lineage has made the task easier and made people less suspicious of them. Therefore, it would be fair to say that their first successes are as much due to their privileged social positions as their individual skills.

Notions of terroir, heritage, cultural identity and authenticity at play in the food and tourism industries, coupled with advances in kitchen technology, have further stimulated the latest transformations in restaurant cookery. New markets for food products and culinary skills and discourses emerged. Trends such as Spain’s nueva nouelle cuisine, Novoandina and Nordic Food, together with the rise of local food activism such as by Slow Food, have paved the way for highly trained cooks to perform cultural work resulting in corpora of dishes that can be simultaneously local and cosmopolitan. Sammells (2014) has termed them as ‘haute traditional cuisines’. These cuisines move between local foodways, composed of locally produced foods associated with knowledge from the ancestral past, and cosmopolitan foodways, which comprise technical professional skills and upper-end impetuses. Peruvian cuisine has benefited both from a tremendous ecological biodiversity and from a complex culinary history that encompasses crops and practices resulting from the meeting of precolonial heritage with the legacy of centuries of immigration from various parts of Europe, Asia and Africa. Within this configuration, Peruvian chefs and restaurateurs have moved rapidly into available ‘ethnic’ and ‘exotic’ niches characterized by the use of foreign influences and ‘ethnic foods’ from the interior of the country. In fact, Peru is a country whose population of European migrant origin views its indigenous population as ‘ethnic’.

Key in such endeavour is the use of Andean and Amazonian elements in a way that challenges representations of ‘the inedible’ rooted in long-standing racial and social prejudices. As explained elsewhere (Matta, 2013), Peruvian chefs (re)appropriate and re-signify food that elites have long seen as ‘dirty’, backward or old-fashioned by using haute cuisine techniques and aesthetics. Therefore, items kept away from fashionable tables, such as guinea pig, paiche (*Arapaima gigas* Cuvier, a large fish from the Amazon
river), arracacha (*Arracacia xanthorrhiza* Bancrof, a root vegetable similar to carrot and celery), or cushuro (*Nostoc sphaericum* Vaucher, a blue-green spherical algae) enter the scene and obtain a higher status. Andean and Amazonian foods are now sources of inspiration in the restaurant kitchen and, consequently, new sources of enjoyment for foodies (Fajardo, 2019; Matta, 2016). Chefs achieve food gentrification through specific combinations of material and discursive practices and across a number of steps. First by removing items from their prior social context – thus neutralizing their potentially ‘harmful’ indigenous and lower-class characteristics – then by identifying and communicating their desirable attributes in ways to appeal to an international audience, and finally by connecting them with elements from other culinary cultures, in particular those which already enjoy global recognition. This cultural tour-de-force put Peruvian cuisine to operate in a niche within the increasingly cosmopolitan and ‘ethnic-friendly’ gastronomic market.

Grey and Newman (2018, p. 719) provide a strong critical reading by describing similar progressions as culinary colonialism, a phenomenon they identify as common to settler-colonial societies. Similarly, as above, the authors identify three steps. The first corresponds to ‘the destruction of Indigenous food systems as a tool of war (conquest)’, an idea that matches well with that of neutralizing harmful Indian features. There follows the ‘forced conversion to a Settler diet (assimilation)’, which implies cultural work to create trust and appeal. The final step is ‘the revalorization of Indigenous gastronomy for Settler consumption (appropriation)’, which means articulating the material, technical and symbolic dimensions of the resulting cuisine to be consumed in elite public spaces.

Although this interpretation offers clarity on native food’s move from the inedible to the sublime, it would be misleading to think that Peruvian chefs always embrace a colonial gaze, and that they do so in systematic and intentional ways. When referring to cultural colonialism – of which food and cuisine provide myriad examples – we must distinguish claims about cultural appropriation and claims about use, and interrogate the actual consequences this has on ethnic Others. In cooking, it is very difficult to draw the line where cultural appropriation begins: all culinary and gastronomic traditions are the product of cultural hybridization (Heldke, 2003). The foods of Andean countries, like foods everywhere, have all been influenced by other people’s cooking and edible cultures (Markowitz, 2018). In Peru, the use and re-interpretation of native foods in fine-dining settings has not deprived indigenous communities from using these same foods even if white, male elite chefs reap the major rewards. Not of least importance is the fact that many of the ingredients that chefs ‘discover’ are not used in actual everyday cooking by indigenous peoples. Here the colonial dimension corresponds more to the use of metaphors of exploration and discovery, which are common in cultural colonial and culinary discourse – for Peru, see McDonell (2019) and López-Canales (2019). Furthermore, if Peruvian chefs mostly adhere to European gastronomic techniques and aesthetics, it is less due to a will to (paraphrasing Grey and Newman) destroy indigenous food systems than to the fact that they are caught in the structural forces alongside the coloniality of gastronomy (McDonell, 2019). Indeed, since Peruvian cuisine’s drive depends largely on the perceptions of local and international gourmets and foodies, chefs’ skills and goals, together with the native foods they manipulate, have little choice other than to subordinate to Western aesthetic canons and consumption trends (Janer, 2007). The global rise
of Peruvian cuisine has thus to be understood within the context of the global forces of
the gastronomy and tourism industries that, as they expand relentlessly, allow – if not
directly promote – processes that neutralize ‘negative exoticisms’ and instead propose
‘positive exoticisms’. Chefs know that the lines between the acceptable and the non-
acceptable may be thin, and therefore tread a tightrope, sometimes concealing the
uncanny and at other times embellishing reality.

These considerations do not aim at dismissing the importance of criticism in terms of
coloniality. I concur with Johnston and Baumann (2015) and other scholars in that food-
dies’ search of exotic and ‘new’ foods, and the discourses surrounding it, draw from an old
legacy of colonialism as well as contemporary inequalities. This is especially true in the
fine-dining landscape of settler-colonial societies (Granchamp, 2019; Sammells, 2019;
Zaneti & Schneider, 2016), where chefs operate within ongoing settler-colonial struc-
tures and logics; where their so-called exploration and discovery of indigenous products
and their reliance on those products for profit is more akin to extraction than collabora-
tion; where their emphasis on indigenous ‘authenticity’, ‘tradition’ and ‘ancestry’ per-
petuates idealized representations of indigenous people and might hinder community
claims to food sovereignty and intellectual property (García, 2020). Food is always
loaded with power and, thus, is never innocent. However, I consider equally important
not to take for granted cross-cultural meals as intentional acts of (neo)colonization.
Otherwise, we would be incurring the risk of overlooking subtle changes or inflections
in people’s views and attitudes (both of practitioners and customers) resulting from their
interactions with new knowledge, information and codes. As we will see, ‘gentrified’
Peruvian cuisine has not only turned the country into a gastronomic mecca. It has also
endowed food with a broader meaning, nourished policy and private expectations and
contributed to a (very) modest improvement in the way the contemporary urban elite
looks at the rural world; at least now accepting that it ‘exists’.

Refiguring the role of the Indian

As seen previously, the flipside of the gentrification of Peruvian cuisine is the invisibiliza-
tion of indigenous peoples and the production systems behind them: all recognition went to
the bold chef who ‘(re)discovered’ ingredients and brought them to high levels of sophisti-
cation. Even though the resulting creations contained an ‘inclusionary rhetoric’ (García,
2013, p. 515), the ‘traditional’/Native dimensions within have been either obscured or
moderated by the cultural work of chefs. This dynamic began to reverse after the mid-
2000s, when international accolades to Peruvian cuisine and understandings of taste
involving biological, cultural, ecological and political contexts brought food into policy
and politics; namely, at the centre of an ambitious discourse about development that unfolds
around two main prospects. First, Peruvian culinary culture could bring positive economic
impacts to the country if grounded on a balance between cultural preservation and adapta-
tion to the international markets. Second, food as a privileged vehicle of national identity
could instigate social reconciliation in a nation fractured by old and persistent inequalities.
National consensus has been built on these ideas and with the following assumption:
Peruvian cuisine has the potential to connect the urban with the rural, the male chef with
the female peasant, the traditional with the modern, the past with the present.
This rapidly became the discursive cornerstone on which rests the present and future of Peruvian cuisine. Writings and speeches by what I term here as ‘culinary elites’ epitomize this outlook, which rapidly plugged into notions of development, social inclusion and economic value (Acurio, 2006; Valderrama, 2009; Villarán, 2006). Culinary elites are a diverse, numerical minority group within the societal hierarchy that is able to make use of food to uphold either conservative or progressive values and possesses sufficient means to press moral and societal demands. It may include a diversity of dissimilar members, from chefs, restaurateurs and connoisseurs to policy makers, politicians and the media. In Peru, culinary elites started to define cuisine in terms of potentialities or opportunities. For example, Fernando Villarán (2006), former Minister of Labour, began his influential essay ‘Visión estratégica de la culinaria peruana’ (Strategic vision of Peru’s cuisine) with the following question: ‘Why is Peru a global culinary power?’ He then listed the country’s competitive advantages in that realm, asserting that if in today’s world diversity is a universal value then Peru is a privileged country, home to biological mega-diversity and notable cultural diversity.

But it is star chef Acurio who took Peruvian cuisine’s cultural and entrepreneurial vision to its ultimate in his seminal speech to students at the elite Universidad del Pacífico in Lima. On that occasion he issued a call to stop thinking about Peruvian cuisine merely in terms of its biological resources – that is, as raw material – and, by contrast, start considering it as a sum of cuisines with economic potential to be exploited through the creation of concepts and brands. In this way, Acurio places value not only on food and ingredients, but also on cultural aspects reflected in culinary practices, knowledge and customs:

Behind our beloved cocina criolla [Creole cuisine] our pollerías [Peruvian rotisserie chicken restaurants], the neighborhood chifitas [Chinese-Peruvian restaurants], or Novoandina cuisine, Arequipa’s picanterías [traditional food from Arequipa], the anticuchos [Peruvian style kebabs], our sanguches [Peruvian style sandwiches], Nikkei cuisine or the cebicherías [traditional Peruvian seafood], there are tremendous opportunities to create concepts that transcend their local area to become products, Peruvian export products that not only aspire to rub shoulders with concepts already installed globally, as pizza, hamburger, sushi bars and Mexican taquerías, but also generate enormous benefits both economic to individuals as well as to Marca País [Peru’s nation brand]. (Acurio in Lauer & Lauer, 2006, p. 246, my translation)

The chef sees cuisine as a cultural commodity that must live up to internationally recognizable standards – what he calls concepts – incorporate creativity and serve as a representation of local food cultures because it is cultural difference that in the end becomes commercial value. The ‘omnivorous’ nature of gastronomic consumption and the avid search of culinary exoticism worldwide (Heldke, 2003; Johnston & Baumann, 2015) backs up and enhances the centrality of cultural diversity in Peru’s culinary narrative. Inspired by Acurio’s ability to transform humble and vibrant food cultures into fashionable concepts, culinary elites began to reflect on representing, valorizing and conceptualizing Peruvian cuisine as well as how to fit the culinary traditions existing in the country into globalized spaces for ‘ethnic’ consumption.

This originated a shift in perspective (at least discursive) on the way the country’s culinary excellence was so far understood. Not only historically undervalued or neglected
foods became objects of appreciation in upscale restaurants. Culinary elites also refigured indigenous peasant farmers as food producers and brought them to the forefront of the gastro-political agenda by acknowledging their involvement with the biodiversity underpinning Peruvian food cultures. The artisanal and millenary traditions embedded in peasants and their foods provided the base upon which a value-added food marketing platform is defended, although still by a gastronomic authority based in Lima.

Following Cook and Crang (1996), when it comes to cuisine and food there are different ways to work the commodity surface. One is to relate the quality of the commodity with a supposed local essence rooted in the land, the climate and the agricultural and culinary traditions, as the French-inspired concept of terroir does. Another implicates elaborating on the value of the commodity’s biography, underscoring the quality of its production and distribution channels. Contrarily, it is also possible to rough up commodity surfaces, playing on and with them with the aim of recognizing, perhaps creating, “moments of rupture in a cultural fabric that appears all too continuous” (1996, p. 147).

The prevailing argument about the value of Peruvian cuisine derives from the first and the third (see next section) models. Assigning terroir to primary products such as potatoes, salt, coffee and chirimoya, transformed them into premium commodities *papas huayro*, *sal de Maras*, *café Tunki* and *chirimoya de Cumbe* (Fan, 2013). The relationship between a successful product – as Peruvian food has been for almost two decades – and the people, places and territories where it is rooted has shone the spotlight on peasant farmers as a crucial link in the food value chain and sparked reflection on the role they might play in the transformation of the country.

They [the chefs] are certainly spearheading this movement, but we must remember that many other people and activities are involved in it . . . Rural farmers are probably the most involved, and are those who can benefit the most. They are in charge of upkeeping the variety and quality of food products in the field, maintaining thousands of varieties of potato, sweet potato, corn, and Andean grains, raising alpaca (whose meat is a new ingredient in Peruvian food). But at the same time, they also need to improve their growing methods to raise productivity and income, while at the same time taking care to preserve and enhance natural and ecological methods. Scientists at universities and research centres need to help them with biotechnology and other developments to fertilize plants naturally, deal with pests, improve yield per hectare, and, if possible, enhance flavour and durability; all of this without chemicals or preservatives, (Villarán, 2006, p. 3, my translation)

Notably, production methods that enable reifying traditional types of production with economic value are not set in stone. Rather on the contrary, the bridging between chefs and farmers (or between modernity and tradition) should rely on research and technical assistance to adjust to market demand and cyclical changes in consumption. In this view, the gastro-political complex should aim at the re-interpretation and re-creation of cuisine and foodways within the confines of a nation invigorated in its move toward capitalist development. The reach of this top-down strategic vision reveals glimmers of change in how the ruling creole elite thinks. In some way, it represents a first step in the realization of a project that locates the path to national progress in the crosslinks that bind the various regions, peoples and cultures of Peru, rather than the antagonism between Indians and creoles or between Lima and the periphery. The hope is that the
discursive transmutation of Indians into guardians of the country’s food may seed changes in how coastal elites and people living inland perceive one another – wrought not through violence and conflict, as in the past, but through productive alliances.

This implies recognizing the Other (the indigenous peasant farmer) not only as an object of care or aestheticization, but rather admitting it as an interlocutor and collaborator (Zúñiga, 2007). Imagined as an associate in market building, ‘the Indian’ is not anymore ‘the big obstacle in the middle of the narrative of progress’ (Orlove, 1993, p. 328). However, its acceptance in the culinary re-foundation of the nation is subject to conditions. Its inclusion must go hand in hand with market-oriented policies to bring about significant improvements in the image of Peruvian cuisine and be profitable to everyone contributing to its global reach, regardless of their place in the food production chain. In other words, Indians must be competitive and strive for a higher aspiration than their own needs and goals; they should act in the greater national interest.

The rendering of praise to peasant farmers shows similarities to what took place in past creole-devised inclusion projects such as indigenism, which sought to bring the indigenous peoples into the dominant folds of society. In Peru, during the first decades of the twentieth century, indigenism paid rhetorical praise to idealized Incaic roots while deploying a unilateral vision of development that disparaged indigenous peoples’ culture and forms of organization (Greene, 2005; Méndez, 1996). The narrative of the culinary nation operates a kind of update of indigenism in that it stresses the new role of peasants in the country’s food system and grants them with symbolic recognition in culinary festivals and the media; but this only after deeming their labour to hold economic value as well as meanings that leverage the imaginary of a culturally diverse yet unified nation. How can this translate into improved livelihoods is a question that remains to be answered.

It is good at this point to juxtapose the compelling force of this narrative against shifts in context, such as the generational renewal of Lima’s elites, greater social and racial intermixing in the main cities, the consolidation of gastronomy as a cultural industry, and the palpable effects of sustained economic growth. Such circumstances have enabled the narrative’s momentum among vast sectors of society who now see food as an agent of social change. Peruvians’ obsession with ‘their’ food manifests in expressions of national pride that were very rare not long ago; chefs refer to the responsibility they carry in dealing with social and environmental issues and the centrality to that aim of considering the realities of small producers (Kollenda, 2019); even activists and academics who usually assume critical stances in discussions about development and national unity have backed the potential transformative power of food (Matta, 2011).

Re-founding and performing the culinary nation

From the above we see that food in Peru is laden with hopes for economic and social development to be achieved through strategies driven by market competition. The objective is to brand and sell Peruvian cuisine to the world. Supporting this goal is the idea of Peru as a culinary nation founded on racial and cultural mestizaje.

Mestizaje refers to racial and/or cultural mixing of white people and native people living in what are now Latin America and the Caribbean. It may be defined as a ‘gesture of deep reverence for the indigenous (or, in Brazil and perhaps Cuba, African) roots of
national identity, combined with a European-oriented mestizo (mixed-race) subject, as bearer of rights and source of political dynamism that looks to the future’ (Hale, 2005, p. 12). Mestizaje emerged as Latin American state projects in the early twentieth century when creole elites sought narratives to ensure hegemony by highlighting strong national identities while downplaying (non-white) racial and ethnic identities, which were usually assumed to impede national development. But as science increasingly discredited white supremacy, intellectual elites promoted renewed ideas of mestizaje based on literary and scientific texts, political and artistic expressions and state policies with the aim to counter whitening ideologies and put a positive spin on mixture as the essence of Latin American nationhood. These ideas became a moral obligation for Latin America, even though some elements of whitening ideologies remained (De la Cadena, 2005; Telles & García, 2013).

Scholars have critically questioned the rhetorical potential of food to bring people and cultures together and redress historic wrongs. Some warn that food literature and cultural expression deploying progressive or inclusive rhetoric tend to build on entanglements of nostalgia and utopia, offering narrators an easy ground to implement distortions of history and culture (Bak-Geller, 2016; Kelting, 2016; Pilcher, 2012). Passidomo (2017) shows that cookbooks from postcolonial nations stylistically undermine racial, class and gender hegemonies, whereas in practice they reinforce them: they celebrate cultural diversity but, at the same time, enforce the primacy of white, male voices. For García (2013, 2019), the idea of mestizaje as synonymous of national identity and unity in Peru contains a celebratory glow that obscures a dark side of continuing ostracism against indigenous and nonhuman bodies. More recently, Cox Hall (2020) argued that mestizaje provides Peruvian chefs with a common foundation through which to invent dishes that are more cosmopolitan, but it does so by obliterating the racial and gendered stratifications of the country’s (food) history. Read together, these works convey that the relationship between food and the nation diverts the attention away from social and cultural inequalities and conceals political conflicts.

But the movie Cooking up Dreams perhaps summarizes the culinary nation’s ethos better than any other cultural or scholarly production. Cooking up Dreams (De ollas y sueños) is a movie premiered in 2009 and directed by Peruvian filmmaker Ernesto Cabellos. The movie received funding from multiple investors such as banks, corporations, universities, non-profit foundations and Peru’s official tourist and investment board (PromPeru), and was screened in cinemas, movie festivals and public diplomacy settings (embassies, international fairs, among others). The wide acclaim it received is likely due to the use of stereotypes and romanticism (and, of course, of food) to narrate the country’s history: Cooking up Dreams presents Peru as a nation already liberated from all conflicts, be they class-based, economic, racial or cultural. The plot evolves around the question of whether cuisine can represent a nation, and develops the answer around the following proposition: In a country with so many differences and inequalities as Peru, ‘there is a unique and auspicious space in which the nation is harmoniously integrated; this space is the pot’ (Cabellos, 2009, 00:00:18, my translation). Cabellos illustrates his arguments through a notion of mestizaje recognized both as a historical process of cultural mixture and fusion and as an agent of integration of differences in modern times. From the initial sequence, the movie defines Peru’s cuisine as mestizo by
Matta describing it as the result of ‘encounters and dis-encounters’ and as a space in which different flavours, tastes and colours ‘struggle, confront, negotiate and reconcile’ (Cabellos, 2009, 0:00:43, my translation).

Most strikingly, however, is how mestizaje emerges as an asset for the country’s projection in the global economy. This occurs in the last quarter of the movie, particularly when chef Acurio makes his appearance, affirming: ‘When I was a child, the word mestizo was pejorative; today it is our worth (nuestro valor, or our value)’ (Acurio in Cabellos, 2019, 1:04:23, my translation). The use of the term valor refers not only to people’s greatness, but also to a value in monetary terms, thus suggesting that mestizaje can become a competitive advantage in markets. As Hale (1999, p. 309) notes, positioning oneself as mestizo is ‘infinitely more productive for those interested in forging hegemony because the process of mestizaje inherently includes Indians in name’, while the notion of creole primarily contains a presumption of ‘Spanishness’ (Kuznesof, 1995). Peru’s food narrative embraces the mestizo logic by downplaying the European influences, overrepresented at the elite’s tables in past decades, to advance instead the idea of mixture or fusion as intrinsically and distinctively Peruvian. This food identity supports the optimistic business projections proclaimed in the movie and defines the guidelines of action for and the spirit of Peruvian cuisine. Acurio states this idea as follows: ‘Our job is to transform Peruvian cuisine everywhere we go into a powerful consumption trend, so that other Peruvian restaurants can open and be equally successful, and so we can finally . . . let’s say, defeat other trends like Japanese sushi bars or Italian trattorias’ (Acurio in Cabellos, 2009, 0:57:00, my translation).

The chef reinforces the movie’s performative and prescriptive dimensions by announcing the secret for global success incarnated by his disciples, young cooks in training. The apprentices are students at the Instituto Pachacútec, a culinary school nearly free of charge located in one of the poorest districts of Lima. Acurio created the school as a social initiative, as it only enrols young from underprivileged backgrounds. The students see this as an opportunity to move forward socially and professionally, inside or even outside the country. Although certainly most of them will remain in Peru, they believe that their cooking skills are appropriate for abroad. The attitude they show in the movie is competitive and spirited. One of them recounts before running cameras: ‘I believe that all of us here have a mission, a very important mission from our hearts, which is to make our gastronomy known to the world . . . like one teacher once said: “everyone be prepared for when we finish”’, she affirms smiling and trusting (Raquel Ramírez in Cabellos, 2009, 0:55:58, my translation). One of her classmates confirms this enterprising and conquering spirit by saying: ‘We are studying to increase our knowledge and then declare war on the food of all the other countries.’ The apprentices seem to have completely internalized the idea of a competitive culinary nation, with Acurio backing this up in a previous scene: ‘The boys and girls at Pachacútec’, he says with a challenging gesture, ‘really are authentic soldiers’ (Acurio in Cabellos, 2009, 0:54:50, my translation). He elaborates that, despite all the setbacks in their lives, these students show strong commitment to their country. Such an attitude, he adds, is missing in Peruvian economic elites.

The latter stance is not uncommon in Acurio’s media appearances. The chef has been stepping into politics for many years with a discourse blending competitive entrepreneurship, social responsibility and sustainable development (García, 2010; Matta,
Indeed, it is not surprising to see him depicting – not without reason – the country’s elites as historically indifferent to the problems of poor and rural populations, and primarily aiming at economic growth. With Acurio at its centre, the movie’s claim for culinary greatness breaks with a tradition of pessimism in elite thought, signalled by Méndez (1996) as an intellectual stance with a lengthy trajectory in Peru. Cooking up Dreams proposes cuisine as a means to alleviate poverty and opens a new way of thinking Peruvian society. This is staged by showing a think-tank of chefs and cooks from different social and ethnic backgrounds discussing the future of Peruvian cuisine and wider issues such as the significance of peasants’ work or the nutrition problems in rural Peru (Cabellos, 2009, 0:52:15). Tackling matters related to indigenous and minorities’ rights – as in the state’s discourses of mestizaje – this scene evokes the rise of a culinary leading class composed of ‘all bloods’, and makes itself unique within cultural representations of the nation in neoliberal times. Even if it would be difficult to consider how profound this shift in attitude is, we should not neglect the possibility of newer elites engaging frankly in self-critique and demonstrating receptiveness and interest in the demands of broader society.

However, so far, the nation’s resurgence through food is driven by the search of global acclaim. This becomes clear in one scene in which Acurio frames the mestizo, fusion character in food as a tool that leads to cosmopolitanism and modernity, turning it into a valuable resource for survival in competitive contexts.

In this moment, when fusion is a tendency throughout the world, when integration, globalization, and all these kinds of concepts become modern concepts, Peruvian cuisine appears, having fused cultures, but in a very balanced, very reflexive, very consensual way over the last 500 years, and this is what makes it magical, what makes it so attractive. (Acurio in Cabellos, 2009, 00:57:48, my translation)

Good as it may sound, this statement is unrealistic. Cultural and culinary exchanges originating from interactions between native and settler societies were not balanced and consensual but conflictive and uneven (Long, 1996; Markowitz, 2018), just as all other relationships resulting from such encounters. Behind the façade of harmony and consensus are the harsh realities of colonization, the annihilation of indigenous peoples, the political violence of the 1980s and 1990s, present-day racism and classism as well as the disdain of indigenous mindsets and agency. Cooking up Dreams makes a tabula rasa of this backdrop and leaves us with an enchanted, sublime narrative.

By way of conclusion (and reality check)

Official and trustable data provide a rather grave scenario: one in which discrimination and social exclusion do not abate and in which the inequality gap is still extremely wide. Peru’s ombudsman’s office, Defensoría del Pueblo, reported 11,600 protests in the country between 2008 and 2018, of which 23% involved violent action. Most of these conflicts took place in impoverished Andean and Amazonian areas and in opposition to resource extractive practices that generate negative social and environmental impacts.
(Coronel, 2019). In such a context, one could only think that the livelihoods of rural populations are under permanent threat.

By focusing on the turning points during food’s move from culinary to potential social weapon and highlighting the ways in which claims to unity and reconciliation smooth over ongoing inequalities, this article delivers a similar conclusion. Indeed, it seems difficult to envisage a better future for peasants and small producers when hopes to redress inequalities begin and end with the flow of private capital and pleas for market-oriented modernization. It is not surprising, therefore, to see the transformative force of food outlined in these pages stagnate despite the efforts of progressive actors in the food chain to make good intentions reality by their own limited means. Although awareness exists among chefs, restaurateurs and peasant farmers regarding the shared benefits to be gained through partnership (Fajardo, 2019; Kollenda, 2019), the government has not sufficiently supported measures to reduce the distance between producers and consumers, or guaranteed regulations through which to materialize the inclusive rhetoric. State’s efforts seek mainly to capitalize on the gastronomic boom in monetary and imagistic terms through nation branding campaigns depicting Peru as an entrepreneurial and economically viable nation. Early proponents of the gastronomic boom have expressed concern on this, yet their voices have not been heard.4

The state’s partial withdrawal also affected pillars of the gastronomic revolution, revealing clear signs that the phenomenon has lost steam. The culinary festival Mistura, held annually in Lima since 2008 and acclaimed as the biggest in Latin America, ceased operations in 2018 in the midst of controversies related to corporate interests and disagreements between the organizers. Equally dramatic was the discovery by journalists that renowned restaurants in Lima employ unpaid interns.5 This prompted legal and ethical debates that received attention in the media and in public opinion and directed some discredit toward once untouchable chefs.

However, this is not all bad news. The more open attitude by newer elites toward the rural world represents a positive outcome of the gastronomic boom. Admitting and acknowledging peasants as valuable partners in the food value chain is a novel discursive halt to long-lasting denigration and exclusion of Indians from productive structures and related ideas of progress. Celebrating and promoting native foods might also allow Peru’s urbanites to think than they can help peasant farmers to have a better life. Whether the skills, knowledge and determination of small producers will find commercial reward and genuine social recognition remains so far uncertain. Nevertheless, a shift in mindset is already visible when white male chefs proclaim the moral responsibility of thinking about the well-being of indigenous producers as crucial to their businesses. Such shift is the first but most important step to pursue socially and environmentally responsible standards in the sector.

The effects of the gastronomic boom have also reached other levels of society, distant from Lima and the fine-dining world. Rural and indigenous actors are taking part in the epic of the culinary nation in a different manner, by opposing simplistic interpretations of the country’s unity. Indigenous cultural affirmation organizations such as Chirapaq, PRATEC and ANDES, among others, fight against the negative implications of culinary nationalism on various fronts (García, 2013; Matta, 2019b). On the front of food sovereignty and security, they denounce local foods commoditization and the global fashion
of superfoods that made crops such as quinoa expensive in local markets and less accessible to communities that consumed them regularly. On the front of culture, they denounce the exclusion of indigenous voices and worldviews from national accounts of culinary greatness. More generally, they challenge the forces that support the national project imagined by culinary elites and dispute the narrative that this essay has sought to unpack. These indigenous organizations are making food compatible with cultural and land management concerns that address only the needs of local communities and do not comply with mechanisms that bring prestige and revenues to the state and powerful cultural entrepreneurs. By developing activities such as workshops, barter gatherings, and small-scale culinary festivals, these actors aim at decolonizing the diet and revitalizing indigenous food systems. Maybe it is these kinds of initiatives that carry improved seeds for social change.

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**Notes**

1. Racially and culturally mixed, see more below.
2. Whether referring to the exoticism of foods hailing from geographically faraway regions or the exoticism of foods from socially distant places.
3. See https://acuriorestaurantes.net/ (accessed 30 March 2020).
4. See the interview with Peruvian chef and sociologist Isabel Alvarez, https://journals.openedition.org/aof/9987 (accessed 31 March 2020).
5. See www.telesurenglish.net/news/Restaurant-Workers-Abused-in-Peru-20141126-0041.html (accessed 30 March 2020).

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