

# TICO TREASURE

In the capital, San José, a group of enterprising chefs are turning Costa Rican cuisine on its head, looking beyond rice and beans and attempting to create a new national cuisine

WORDS: ELLA BUCHAN. PHOTOGRAPHS: SEAN & GENNA DAVIS



# SANTIAGO FERNÁNDEZ BENEDETTO WANTS TO MAKE PEOPLE CRY. HIS TWISTS ON TRADITIONAL AFTER-SCHOOL SNACKS AND SWEETS, WHICH TEND TO BE MADE BY GRANDMOTHERS, DELIBERATELY STRUM ON HIS DINERS' EMOTIONS.

Sure, his version of olla de carne — a meaty, comforting soup — contains a concentrated beef consommé cube wrapped in edible gold leaf. But the nostalgia of it is supposed to cause tears to be shed.

And often, it works. “I’ve had a few customers crying at the table,” says the chef, who opened his restaurant, Silvestre, in Costa Rica’s capital, San José, in August 2017. “They’ll say, ‘I haven’t tried this since my grandmother died.’”

Santiago calls this the ‘*Ratatouille* effect’, where, like a scene in the Pixar film, a mouthful of food proves so profoundly evocative, it whisks people back in time. Occasionally, however, the strategy backfires.

I’m sitting in one of Silvestre’s elegant dining rooms as a waiter places a brightly painted doll in front of me. Its horns and sinister sneer depict the Pisuicas, a devil that’s a terrifying feature of masquerade parades. Santiago gestures for me to lift it, revealing a pale orange disc coated in desiccated coconut — this is a dish he calls ‘fake coconut cajeta of the Pisuicas’. Disguised as a cajeta, a traditional coconut sweet, its outer layer is actually a soft coat of chilli mayonnaise, which gives way to a croquette flavoured like traditional potato and vegetable stew.

This particular amuse-bouche provoked one diner to threaten violence. “He banged his fists on the table and demanded to know why I was serving him a sweet as an appetiser,” recalls Santiago. The chef persuaded him to take a bite and, upon realising his mistake, the customer exploded with laughter.

In Costa Rica, where food is so intricately connected with home and family, people are not used to chefs messing about with the classics. “The general consensus is that nobody wants to eat traditional Costa Rican food in a fancy place,” Santiago says. “People think, ‘my grandmother can cook it much better, so why bother?’”

The olive-and-white building that houses Silvestre looms on the corner of a vertiginous

street in Barrio Amón, one of San José’s earliest neighbourhoods. Founded by coffee plantation owners in the late 19th century, the area has resurged in recent years; jazz drifts out of the basements of art deco buildings, while chatter echoes from the patios of late-night cafes in converted homes.

When Silvestre first opened, the concept of a restaurant focused on Costa Rican food — especially a fine-dining one — was so unprecedented that Santiago worried it might be “too groundbreaking”.

For a long time, the chef didn’t believe his country had a cuisine — at least, not one worth mentioning. Most visitors, and even many Ticos (Costa Ricans), would describe the country’s food scene in two words: gallo pinto. And indeed, this dish of lightly spiced rice and black beans, usually served with pico de gallo (salsa), slices of sweet, sticky caramelised plantain, and a dollop of soured cream, is an undeniable part of the food culture here.

Until recently, eating out in San José tended to mean sitting at the Formica tables of a cantina with a gallo pinto breakfast, or an empanada, its crumbly yellow pastry filled with slightly sweetened white cheese, from the maze-like Mercado Central. The few upscale restaurants resided within colonial-era hotels, their menus leaning towards European dishes such as ravioli and crème brûlée.

Santiago honed his craft in top Dubai and Sydney hotels, where the cuisine was international, as were his fellow cooks. He listened, enviously, as Italian chefs spoke longingly of Piedmont’s white truffles. Others, from Spain, drooled as they recounted the nutty sweetness of jamón ibérico.

“They [the other cooks] would ask me about Costa Rica and I would say, ‘don’t even ask me,’” he recalls. “I felt ashamed. We had nothing, according to my little knowledge.”

Yet the thought simmered: what was Costa Rican food? Santiago realised that, while Costa Rica had no coherent gastronomic scene, it certainly had the ingredients and heritage

Clockwise from top left: Santiago Fernández Benedetto with his Pisuicas devil; lamb sirloin with pumpkin caramel at Silvestre; Marco Leiva gardening at Furca; herb butter with romesco and queso labneh at Furca; Pablo Bonilla; smoked pork with palo bean puree, toasted purple corn and caiguas, a local fruit at Sikwa; Sikwa’s Diego Hernández sourcing ingredients at Mercado Central; gin and vermouth-based cocktail at Furca; waitress at Mercado Central. Previous pages: Pejibaye vinegar cured red snapper at Sikwa







Clockwise from top left: Pablo Bonilla shopping at the market; artisanal goat's cheese at Furca; Mercado Central; Santiago Fernández Benedetto; cassava; charcoal-smoked plantain ice cream with cacao nibs at Sikwa; grower at Finca Experimental Agroecológica Los Juncos, a supplier of Silvestre; signature soup topped with house-made crisps at Sikwa; Mercado Central



to create one. Today he's one of a handful of chefs challenging preconceptions of Costa Rican cuisine, reviving and reclaiming 'grandmothers' recipes' that younger generations have forgotten how to make — and showcasing native ingredients and cooking methods still practised by indigenous communities, yet rarely served in restaurants.

"We are recreating traditional recipes, or creating recipes as they should have been," says Santiago. As the next course arrives, the chef confesses his own '*Ratatouille* moment': pork tamales. One bite and he's sitting on the rug in his grandmother's living room, watching her pray with rosary beads. I taste his take on the dish: slow braised pork belly and crackling infused with annatto seeds, alongside pipettes of intensely flavoured prune purée and corn masa that's been smoked and cooked in plantain leaves.

#### Taste of the tribes

These flavours of earthy roots infused with smoke and heady spices can be traced back much further than a few generations. In fact they go back thousands of years, to the country's first communities — the descendants of which, according to Santiago and a small number of similarly minded pioneering chefs, hold the key to authentic Costa Rican gastronomy.

A few hours north of San José, close to La Fortuna, I visit the indigenous Maleku community of Palenque Margarita. The air is fresher up here, cool with the mist that shrouds the trees and mountains. Fanny María Blanco Acosta — who describes herself as the community's "trusted person to speak to the white people" — leads me inside the main building, known as the 'temple', the heart of the community. Its roof, woven with pine fronds, flutters with bats, while a single, golden hummingbird occasionally flits in a rectangle a few metres above our heads.

Indigenous communities now make up just 2% of Costa Rica's population, mostly living in

remote, mountainous pockets of land. There are fewer than 650 Maleku people remaining, divided into three clans or tribes, on a 7,500-acre reserve. It's protected under Costa Rican law, and yet, Fanny tells me, is encroached upon by non-Maleku as grazing land for cattle. She wants to preserve and document Maleku language, culture and recipes before they're lost completely.

A wood fire crackles at the heart of the temple. We sit around it, cross-legged, to eat tilapia fish flavoured with piperaceae — a peppery, aniseed-like herb — wrapped in a banana leaf and cooked slowly in the embers. An accompaniment of puréed endemic white root (similar to yucca), it tastes of layered and complex spices, yet only brick-red achiote paste, from the seeds of a native shrub, has been stirred through. It's deceptively simple, and completely delicious.

Back in San José, this is exactly the type of food Pablo Bonilla is attempting to recreate at his restaurant, Sikwa. Opened last September, it's little more than a clutch of tables in a community centre, and something of an anomaly in the trendy Barrio Escalante district, where the 120-plus places to eat include vegan pub, pizza joints and late-night markets serving street food and cocktails. But Pablo isn't interested in trends; his aim is to reclaim native cuisine, just as Peru's Novo-Andean movement did in the 1980s.

"People might know there are some [indigenous] communities, but they don't know about them," he says. "They don't see them as part of our background, but they are."

Having worked in top restaurants in Spain and Mexico, the chef now spends several weeks at a time with the Cabécar and Bribri, a pair of sister tribes based near Talamanca, a mountainous area by the Panamanian border. Pablo fetches wood and completes chores in exchange for knowledge of their ingredients, techniques and recipes.

"I was tired of having to cook something that wasn't ours, that was from another



#### LOCAL FAVOURITES

##### Tacaco

Endemic to Costa Rica, this rugby ball-shaped vegetable (above) grows on vines. Served boiled or mashed, it has a light, neutral taste that both absorbs and balances richer, meatier flavours. It's especially beloved as a key ingredient in olla de carne, a thick beef stew.

##### Heart of palm

This is, according to Silvestre's chef, Santiago Fernández Benedetto, "the truffle of South America". It's tender with a bite, and a sweet nuttiness. It can only be legally harvested from peach palms farmed for that specific purpose, as removing the heart kills the tree.

##### Malanga

A knobbly, hairy tuber, malanga root is a favourite ingredient in Maleku cooking. The starchy flesh is boiled before being mashed, served in chunks, or dropped into soups and stews for thickening. It's also popular as chunky crisps.

##### Cas

The 'Costa Rican guava' looks a little like a lime and has a pale, custardy flesh. It's squeezed into juices or eaten as a snack, and is widely believed to have antioxidant properties. It's delicious regardless, with the soft acidity of grapefruit.

##### Coffee

Though not indigenous, coffee is a key export. At home, it's brewed in a chorreador, a simple wooden frame where the coffee is filtered through a cloth into a mug below.







COSTA RICA

culture,” he says. “I always felt I was missing something about our gastronomic heritage. It’s permeated into our culture that we are embarrassed by our food. But I knew there were stories to be told.”

He tells these stories through plates infused with salt and sourness, smoke and fire. I taste white fish cured in vinegar, followed by pig’s neck that’s been cooked over charcoal for five hours and plated with puréed pejobaye (peach palm). Then a thick, achiote-spiced chicken stew soaks into crushed camote, an indigenous purple potato. Dessert is a quenelle of ochre-hued ice cream, made with plantain smoked over charcoal. It tastes of tobacco and cinnamon, with an earthy bitterness from shavings of a pure variety of cacao only found in Talamanca.

Pablo buys his ingredients directly from the communities, and works with other restaurants, such as Silvestre, which have an interest in representing indigenous foods. For him, the important thing is to encourage people to embrace these culinary traditions and the people who have preserved them. Both, he feels, have been overlooked for too long — yet hold the key to authenticity in the country’s cuisine.

“Some time in the future I think Costa Rica will be able to say it’s a gastronomic destination — that we do have something we can feel proud of,” he says.

### Down the garden path

Not all of the capital’s culinary innovation is about reviving lost ingredients and techniques. I stroll the tree-hemmed paths of La Sabana Park, ‘the lungs of San José’, on the western edges of downtown, to reach Furca — one of the city’s first modern, high-end restaurants when it opened six years ago in the residential Rohrmoser district. Here, chef-owner Marco Leiva’s main aim is self-sufficiency; he wants to prove that pretty much anything can grow in Costa Rica’s varied, tropical landscape.

Rather than importing parmesan and pecorino from Italy, Marco works with cheese

makers in the volcano-shadowed valley of Turrialba to create his own version, matured in-house. He melts them into his raclette appetiser, giving the gooey mixture a browned crust in a pan before scraping it onto a plate with poached asparagus and new potatoes. House-smoked goat’s cheese salads laden with micro-herbs, and a fresh version is used in passion fruit panna cotta.

I perch at the chef’s table, which consists of two stools facing the open kitchen, as Marco and his team sear potato gnocchi in a skillet before plating them with cubes of roasted pumpkin, wild mushrooms, and finely shredded sage, grown in the kitchen garden. Marco finishes it off with a few shavings of pecorino before spinning the plate over to me across the counter. It’s savoury, almost meaty, with the bitter, citrusy sage cutting through the deep sweetness of the pumpkin.

Marco leads me through the sleek dining room, passing a charcuterie case packed with hanging cured hams, pausing to chat with diners on the terrace before leaping down the couple of steps into the garden.

He seems at home here, striding contentedly around the neat rows and occasionally folding at the waist to sniff at a patch of wild garlic or pluck a sprig of chocolate mint (which tastes as delicious as it sounds).

“Acedrilla,” he says, handing me a tiny green leaf. “Try it.” It has a sharp, citrusy tang; Marco uses it to enliven salads and desserts. I bite into a berry from the native costesin plant, releasing a bitter juice a little like juniper.

Like Santiago, it took leaving Costa Rica to awaken Marco to his country’s abundance. Visiting farms in Rome, Valencia and Toronto, and seeing the produce grown there made him realise, he says: “We have got these ingredients. We can grow most things here.”

“There are countries that have a gastronomy, a signature dish,” he adds. “Maybe we are going to be there in 50 years. We can already see chefs doing new things — perhaps we can make it happen.”

From left: Pablo Bonilla sourcing ingredients at Mercado Central; gin cocktail with rosemary foam at Furca; Marco Leiva gardening at Furca

## ESSENTIALS

### GETTING THERE

British Airways flies non-stop from Gatwick to San José. Indirect options are available from various UK airports with airlines including Air France, United and Lufthansa. [ba.com](http://ba.com) [airfrance.com](http://airfrance.com) [united.com](http://united.com) [lufthansa.com](http://lufthansa.com)

### WHERE TO STAY

Aurola Holiday Inn Downtown San José has double rooms from \$116 (£89.50) a night, room only. [holidayinn.co.uk](http://holidayinn.co.uk)

### HOW TO DO IT

Llama Travel offers a nine-night Best of Costa Rica itinerary from £1,579 per person, with two nights in San José. Price includes internal flights, accommodation and transfers, but not international flights. [llamatravel.com](http://llamatravel.com)



## Fish caldosa

Santiago Fernández Benedetto's recipe puts a fine-dining twist on a dish that started out as ceviche spooned into bags of tortilla chips. The fish needs to be super-fresh – check with your fishmonger

**SERVES: 1-2 WITH LEFTOVER SAUCE**

**TAKES: 90 MINS**

### INGREDIENTS

120g white fish fillet (such as snapper or sea bass), cut into 4mm cubes  
2 corn tortillas  
500ml sunflower oil  
Coriander micro-greens and daikon radish, to serve (optional)

### FOR THE MARINADE

15g cured white sardines  
1 tsp spring onions, finely sliced  
1 tsp red onion, finely diced  
1 tsp fresh coriander leaves, finely sliced  
1 tsp fresh parsley, finely chopped  
juice of 1 lemon

1 tbsp mayonnaise  
¼ tsp habanero pepper, finely chopped  
½ tsp fresh ginger, grated

### FOR THE AVOCADO SAUCE

1 medium avocado  
3ml Tabasco sauce  
juice of ½ lemon

### FOR THE FLAVOUR MIX

skins of 2 medium tomatoes, removed with a peeler  
skin of 1 Lebanese cucumber (or ½ English cucumber), removed with a peeler  
½ medium onion, finely diced  
3 garlic cloves, finely sliced  
1 tsp smoked sweet paprika  
pinch citric acid powder

### METHOD

**1** For the flavour mix, preheat the oven to 150°C, fan 130°C, gas 2. Place the tomato and cucumber skins, onion and garlic on a baking tray in the oven for around 40 mins, or until

dehydrated. Remove, then grind to a powder using a pestle and mortar or blender. Add the paprika and citric acid, mix well and set aside.

**2** For the marinade, place the sardines on a chopping board. Using the flat part of a knife, mash them to a paste, then combine with the other marinade ingredients and a pinch of sea salt. Coat the cubes of fish with the marinade and set aside for 10 mins.

**3** For the avocado sauce, place all the ingredients in a blender and blitz until it forms a smooth purée. Set aside.

**4** Slice the tortillas into long, skinny triangles. Heat the sunflower oil in a large pan over a medium-high heat. Deep fry the crisps in batches until golden brown and crisp. Set aside on kitchen paper to drain and cool.

**5** To assemble, use a cutting ring to arrange the fish mixture on a plate, drizzle with the avocado purée and decorate with the corn crisps. Sprinkle over the powdered flavour mix and, to finish, add coriander micro-greens and layer with thinly sliced daikon radish. ●