



# PERUVIAN FUSION

VENEZUELAN CHEF JUAN LUIS MARTÍNEZ HAS ESTABLISHED HIMSELF IN LIMA, WHERE HE CREATES CULINARY SPARKS BY BLENDING CULTURES. **BY MARY HOLLAND**

**T**ucked behind ancient adobe walls on a narrow street in the Barranco neighborhood of Lima, Mérito is not the sort of place you'd stumble upon with ease. It's a sliver of a restaurant, with low ceilings and a tight kitchen, set in a former horse stable, a building that must be at least 100 years old.

"I wanted to find a place that has a history," says Venezuela-born chef Juan Luis Martínez, who acquired the space in 2018. Although the brown, chalky walls are a giveaway that the building is old, the sandy wooden tables, stone floors and smooth steel-and-black-tiled kitchen are anything but.

Martínez never intended to bring his Venezuelan flair to Peru. It was only after pursuing culinary school in Paris and a cooking career in Europe that he was introduced to the innovative cuisine materializing in South America—which took him by complete surprise. At a cooking show in Madrid, Martínez witnessed Chile's Rodolfo Guzmán (of Santiago's Boragó) and Peru's Virgilio Martínez (owner of Central in Lima) creating pioneering dishes from their home countries—which gave him the appetite to return to his roots. "I was really blown away," he says. "I felt so ignorant not knowing that they were doing such great things in Latin America." On a whim, Martínez sent his résumé to Central and in 2014

began work at Lima's most esteemed restaurant.

Arriving in Peru, Martínez was struck by the strong Latin American culture. "Maybe it's the weather or the craziness and rawness of the city, but it felt a little more like home," he says. He spent two years sharpening his knives and knowledge at Central, then hatched a plan to launch his own place with his business partner, José Luis Saume, a former colleague from Venezuela.

It would have been easy for the chefs to open a spot serving food from their native country, but "we knew we couldn't just do Venezuelan cuisine," says Martínez. "That's what people would expect." He wanted to offer something unexpected and

**LEFT TO RIGHT: Mérito's José Luis Saume and Juan Luis Martínez in the kitchen; An arepa with sea urchin from the restaurant.**

create something entirely new. When conceptualizing the restaurant, he had to think hard about what diners would want while also incorporating his heritage and staying true to local products. “We needed to make [the food] cohesive with the roots we have as Venezuelans and the roots we’re planting as immigrants,” he says. “We needed to find that link between our nationalities.”

Another challenge was debuting a restaurant in a country with the profound food culture that Peru has. Thanks to that culture and a smorgasbord of incredible ingredients (more than 4,000 types of potatoes grow in Peru), Lima is bursting with good ceviches and *causas* (potato casseroles). It’s also bursting with excellent restaurants—which raises the stakes for a foreign chef opening a new joint.

“We wanted to create a place that we would like to go to, and we thought a place like Mérito was missing,” says Martínez. Offering a simple à la carte menu with a

handful of dishes—like fish tartare with amaranth and quinoa crackers or a quesadilla made with yucca and goat cheese—Mérito is as unfussy as it is exceptional. It’s the kind of restaurant that’s laid-back but still sophisticated, where the food is complex but not complicated. Here, you don’t have to carve out four hours for a lengthy dinner service.

Mérito’s menu fuses elements of Peru with those of Venezuela. One selection unites arepas, a Venezuelan staple, with a butter made from a reduction of *chicha de jora* (corn beer), a quintessentially Peruvian item. “The products are simple, but they say a lot about the two cuisines,” says Martínez.

While the menu pulls from both countries, inside the restaurant the trimmings are all Peruvian. Items such as wood serving boards and ceramic plates are made by artisans nearby. For someone who was once deeply drawn to Europe, Martínez has done a stellar job of keeping Mérito

hyperlocal. His next venture will be a bar next door (expected this spring), where he’ll serve cocktails and naturally fermented South American wines.

Visit Mérito and you’ll find diners tucked in wooden booths in the cozy upstairs dining room or at one of the coveted seats along the kitchen-facing bar. From there, they watch Martínez and Saume masterly prepare dishes in the lively atmosphere. Martínez juggles cooking and talking patrons through the dishes with ease. “We love what we do and that gets translated to the client,” he says.

Despite the restaurant’s unassuming location, more and more locals are beginning to find their way to the other side of the earthy adobe walls. Even one of Lima’s most discerning diners, Central’s Virgilio Martínez, has become a familiar face in the dining room. Regardless of the fame of the people eating there, Mérito’s Martínez maintains his laid-back approach, saying, “We just want to make tasty food.”



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