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Ceviche in Latin America

Ceviche is the national dish of Peru and one of my all-time favorite foods. In fact, this dish is so popular it has its own national holiday celebrated on June 28th. Ceviche originated around 1820 and is made with white fish, like sea bass, lime juice, onions, salt, and chili peppers. This how I grew up eating ceviche (minus the chili peppers since I did not like them), so when I found out that Mexican ceviche had shrimp and tomatoes in it, I was shocked. I know that countries make their own versions of dishes from other countries, especially in the United States, but it still surprised me. When I went to a Mexican restaurant and tried their ceviche, I did not like it because it tasted nothing like the ceviche my mother made for me growing up. Even the ceviche here in Costa Rica is completely different than both Peru's and Mexico's. I always wondered why so many of the dish's components were changed. Was it because different fish lived on their coast, people's preference, or did they want to make something unique. Different countries in Latin America have made their own twist on ceviche to a point where it is almost nothing like the original dish, why is that the case?

I cannot remember the first time I had ceviche was, but I believe it was when I first travelled to Peru with my mother when I was around four or five years old. My grandma had made it for me and my two younger cousins, and I remember my cousins crying and complaining to their mother about how they did not want to eat it because they did not like it. I had no idea as to why because I thought it was the most delicious food in the world. Ever since then, my mother had started making ceviche at home, though unfortunately my father did not like ceviche at all, so she usually made it when

he was not home which was usually during the summer since she worked at a school and we both got summer break. To this day, I still get so excited when my mom says she is going to make ceviche for me. I have even tried ceviche from a Peruvian restaurant near my town and it was still delicious, even though my mother said that it was not as good as her ceviche. In Peru, ceviche is traditionally made with sea bass, lime juice, onion, salt, and hot chiles and is served with corn or sweet potatoes. These five simple ingredients create a fresh, intense, acidic flavor that is something you have never tasted before. Unlike most seafood dishes that cook the fish using heat, the fish in ceviche “cooks” by being immersed in citrus juice and that causes the fish to “cook” through a process called denaturation. “Though it is never ‘cooked’ in the traditional sense, ceviche goes through a chemical process that effectively rearranges or ‘denatures’ the fish’s proteins, much like the application of heat” (Lower) The history of ceviche is unclear, but according to an article on Peru for Less “ceviche originated on the Pacific coasts of Peru nearly 2000 years ago. The Moche civilization, who inhabited the area, prepared fish with the juice of a local passionfruit known as tumbo” (Cronin). Peru would later gain their independence around that time in 1821, so we can hypothesize that the reason ceviche did not have a variety of ingredients like other Spanish foods is because it was made during the first years of Peru’s independence. According to National Geographic “the concept of ceviche is so old we’ve no recipes for its earliest incarnations... There’s good evidence to suggest that 3,000 years ago, fishermen ate their catch straight from the sea” (Seal). This tells us that people have been eating raw fish for years and the Moche found a way to prepare the fish so that it would be safer to eat. The dish would later be modified as the when the Spanish arrived

and brought limes and cilantro with them. Today, ceviche is a dish loved around the world and is so loved in Peru that it has its own national holiday. “National Ceviche Day was proclaimed by the Ministry of Production of Peru in 2008, to celebrate and honor their country’s national dish. It was assigned on June 28” (Happy Days 365). Besides ceviche being eaten on National Ceviche Day, the dish is mostly eaten on Peru’s coast and in their capital, Lima.

During my time in Costa Rica, I tried ceviche three different times. The first time was through a cuisine class where we got to make all kinds of dishes from different Latin American countries. One week we made ceviche and the ingredients were fish filets, shrimp, mandarin limes, white onions, red onions, sweet chilis, cilantro, ginger ale, salt, pepper, and oil. This was far more ingredients than I thought were needed and I was shocked that we were using both fish and shrimp. The seafood only cured in the juice for a few minutes, though I believe it should cure for at least an hour. When I tried it, I thought the flavors clashed a lot, especially since we used both white and red onions. I also thought the shrimp needed more time to cure as it was a bit tough. I personally thought it was okay, but I remember hearing some of my classmates say they did not like it and I had to explain to them that Costa Rican ceviche is different from Peruvian ceviche, and they should definitely try the Peruvian version if they ever get the chance. The second time I had it my host mom made it for me, and it was similar to the one we made in the cuisine class, just without shrimp. Then finally the third time I ordered it from a restaurant in Puerto Viejo and that one was the closest to the Peruvian version of ceviche out of the three. I have even seen some restaurants here have ceviche with tropical and exotic fruits like pineapple, mango, water apple, and peach

palm. So what has led to these big changes? Well first we need to find out what kind of fish live off the Costa Rican coast. According to Fishing Vacations, “the most popular fish in Costa Rica are snapper, mahi-mahi, marlin, tarpon, and roosterfish.” Despite it not being one of the most sought-after fish, corvina is actually the most popular fish used to make ceviche in Costa Rica (Clower). Corvina, or also known as sea bass, is available all year round off the coasts of Costa Rica. So like Peru, Costa Rica uses white fish for their ceviche along with shrimp and octopus. Taking a look at the ingredients, it is clear that Costa Rica has added their own twists and flavors that make it different from Peru’s ceviche. I think a big difference is using mandarin limes instead of regular limes, both have similar flavors, but in the end, I could taste the difference and I prefer lime juice. Additionally, Costa Rica’s staple food is rice and beans, and it is in popular Costa Rican dishes like casado, gallo pinto and arroz con pollo. Rice and beans are a bit bland, so this could also affect the flavors of their ceviche. However, Costa Rica has a huge variety of fruits and vegetables that they add into their dishes to add extra flavor, and ceviche is no exception, making Costa Rica’s ceviche a truly unique dish.

Lastly, we’ll look at Mexico’s version of ceviche. This variation I have the least amount of experience with only having ordered it from a Mexican restaurant from my college town. It was my first time having a different variation of ceviche, so I went into it thinking it was going to be the same thing or at least similar to Peruvian ceviche. I was wrong, very wrong. This ceviche has shrimp, lime juice, tomatoes, peppers, and avocado. The mixture of tomatoes and lime juice did not work with the shrimp in my opinion, and I did not like the peppers. I know Mexican restaurants in the United States

are not a good reflection of traditional Mexican food, so what is Mexican ceviche really like? Mexican ceviche is usually made with corvina or mahi-mahi, scallops, shrimp, limes, tomatoes, onions, cilantro, tomatillos, avocados, olives, and cucumbers (Alfaro). Mexican ceviche can also be made with tuna, squid, or even octopus. Mexican ceviche can be made with a variety of seafood, and since Mexico has a lot of coasts to fish from, it is no surprise that Mexico has a lot to choose from. Mexico also serves their ceviche differently from Peru, according to Jaguar, “typical Mexican ceviche will either be served with toasted chips or as a sort of ‘cocktail’ with tomato sauce. Peruvian ceviche is less soup-like than most ceviche iterations, served promptly on a plate after the fish marinates” (Jaguar). In Mexico, people cook with lots of herbs and spices, their food is savory and zesty, and they have applied that to their ceviche. From using any type of fish that they can catch to adding olives and jalapenos, Mexican ceviche is truly a league of its own.

Ceviche is definitely a comfort food for me, and I try to make some whenever I can, even if I am the only one eating it. I still have yet to make it exactly like how my mother does, even though she gave me her recipe. Eating ceviche brings back memories of living with my mother, and how every year we would have it on Peru’s Independence Day. I always loved the sour taste and would pour the leftover lime juice over some rice that my mother prepared too. It was moments like that that brought me closer to my mother and made me feel proud to be Peruvian. I am happy that ceviche has become so popular because it is such a unique dish. Even if I do not like other countries interpretations of ceviche, I am still glad I got to try it. There are a lot of

restaurants around the world that make great Peruvian ceviche and I truly believe everyone should try it at least once.

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