



At Arequipa's Victoria Picantería Democrática, dishes such as river shrimp with potatoes, corn, and peppers draw on local ingredients and pre-Columbian recipes. It's one of several restaurants winning Peru's second city international attention.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY VICTORIA PICANTERIA DEMOCRATICA

TRAVEL

## Arequipa might be Peru's next great food city

Sure, Lima is delicious. But the country's second city serves up hearty stews, llama steaks, and pisco sours. Here's where travelers can try them.

By Mark Johanson

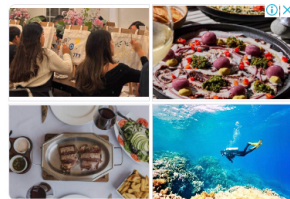
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In 2023, when the World's 50 Best Restaurants [list](#) of top global dining spots was announced, the city with the most entries—including the No. 1 pick—was Lima, [Perú](#). The culinary capital is known for pisco sour bars, ceviche spots, and Chino-Latino restaurants. But if you ask Peruvians where they'd travel for a memorable meal, many would choose the nation's second largest city, Arequipa.

This high-altitude agricultural hub, 630 miles southeast of Lima and sprawled beneath three fertile volcanoes, has a unique mestizo gastronomy merging Indigenous and Spanish influences. Its cuisine is wholly dissimilar from that of Lima. In Arequipa, instead of ceviche, *causa*, and *lomo saltado*, you find alpaca steaks, *chupe de camarones* (river shrimp chowder), and *ocopa* (potatoes in chile sauce).

If Limeños prize innovation, Arequipeños honor tradition. In fact, UNESCO named Arequipa a [Creative City for Gastronomy](#) in 2019 (its baroque Spanish-colonial core, built from white volcanic stones, is also a [UNESCO World Heritage site](#)).



Bigbox Perú



Many cooks in this growing city of one million people prepare dishes over open fires and grind ingredients with outsized mortars and pestles. Arequipa is also known for *picanterías*, traditional restaurants—typically located on the edge of town—and mostly run by women who inherit them from their mothers and grandmothers.

This explains why travelers rarely find Arequipeño cuisine in Lima—much less abroad. It's also why this intangible cultural heritage is threatened. There were about 3,200 *picanterías* in Arequipa in the 1800s and 2,000 in 1900. Today, there are only about 80 left.

Here's how to experience the city's culinary heritage—and taste what's next.

### Arequipa's rustic taverns

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Picanterías trace their origins to the 17th century, when rustic taverns called *chicherías* poured *chicha de gūiñapo*, a pre-Columbian alcoholic beverage made from fermented corn. The Spanish colonial government forced the watering holes to serve small plates, akin to Spanish tapas, to prevent customers from overindulging. To keep clients thirsty, owners spiked dishes with spicy *rocoto* and *aji panca* peppers.

By the 19th century, the snacks were more popular than the booze, so the taverns became known as *picanterías*. Early on, they drew (mostly male) musicians, writers, and intellectuals. Now, people of all sorts gather around their long, communal tables. “You eat in a picantería to feel Arequipeño,” says Sergio Salas, who led Arequipa’s Creative Cities project with UNESCO. “It has a soul, an essence, and a history.”



(Where to find ceviche, pisco sours, and fusion food in Lima, Peru.)

Dishes speak to Arequipa’s location on an ancient trade route between the Pacific Coast and Amazon Basin, featuring seafood from the former, fruits from the latter, and products like quinoa, corn, potatoes, and peppers from surrounding Andean valleys. The Spaniards introduced beef, garlic, onions, lima beans, and dairy, creating mestizo dishes such as *rocoto relleno* (hot peppers stuffed with beef and cheese).



In the Peruvian Andes, Arequipa is surrounded by four volcanos, including El Misti (shown). The city’s white buildings are constructed of *sillar*, a stone harvested from the surrounding hills. PHOTOGRAPH BY LEPRETE PIERRE, GETTY IMAGES

Alcoholic *chicha de gūiñapo*, served in a 1.4-liter (around six cup) glass, called *el caporal* (“the chief”), still accompanies picantería dishes including traditional stews specific to each day of the week. The atmosphere continues to lean rustic—guests might sit near an outdoor pen of squealing guinea pigs, a staple meat that’s usually on the menu.

Salas says UNESCO recognition has fortified the city’s restaurant industry, which supports thousands of jobs, and accounts a significant chunk of the city’s GDP. It’s also brought the women of the picanterías into the spotlight.

### Why women rule Arequipa’s restaurant scene

Female restaurateurs, known as *picanteras*, have kept picanterías alive. “To become a picantera was not a decision but rather an imposition,” recalls Mónica Huerta, owner of Picantería La Nueva Palomino. “You were practically obliged to take over from your mother.”

Huerta resisted joining the family business at first, knowing how tough the work was on her mother and grandmother. “Society often didn’t forgive them for being in charge of their own lives, for being economically independent from men,” she says. Even now, Huerta estimates that 90 percent of her colleagues have never married.

Yet, increasingly, picanteras are seen as symbols of female empowerment and upward mobility. “You have to be strong, intelligent, and capable of commanding a big team,” says Saida Villanueva, owner of [Picantería La Cau Cau II](#). “A picantera innately becomes a leader in her community.”

*(From a Tokyo sushi temple to a Valencia food hall, here are the best spots to eat in 2024.)*

Villanueva’s four sisters are also picanteras, but she worries that younger generations won’t continue the legacy. Huerta’s concerned, too. “Our mothers and grandmothers were conferrers of culture who, through their plates, could tell the history of our region, and of our mixed race,” Huerta says. “If this culture is not continued, we will lose a great part of the story of Arequipa.”

## What’s new with food in Arequipa

One member of the younger generation who has stepped up is Roger Falcón, owner of [Victoria Picantería Democrática](#), open since 2018. Falcón is one of just five local men who’ve followed their mothers into the business. He sees Victoria as “a picantera 2.0.” It’s located on Plaza San Francisco in Arequipa’s historic center, not on the outskirts, and serves an “anthropological menu” inspired by everything from pre-Columbian cuisine to modern trends. Falcón uses dishes and ingredients pegged to specific historical dates, like a 18th-century-style pork adobo in a vinegary chicha sauce.



The food in this city has always changed with the times, and it’s now morphing again, particularly in the historic center, with Lima-based stars (like Gastón Acurio’s [Chicha](#)) alongside picantera-inspired restaurants ([Salon at CIRQA](#)), and other fusion food hotpots like [Indigo](#) and [Mumis](#), the latter of which turns an Arequipa icon, *rocoto relleno*, into rocoto pepper-infused cappelletti.

At Victoria, in addition to chicha, guests sip pisco sours blended with *sancayo* cactus fruit, Peruvian wines, and mojitos with medicinal Andean herbs like *muña*. “I think we can look toward the future, and back at traditions, at the same time,” says Falcón. “If we don’t put picanterías harmoniously in the modern context, then they’re at risk of dying out.”

### IF YOU GO

**How to reach Arequipa:** There are no direct international flights to Arequipa, but it’s easily reached via several daily flights from Cusco (1 hour) or Lima (90 minutes).

**When to visit:** Known as “the city of eternal spring,” Arequipa has high temperatures in the 70s Fahrenheit all year round, but heavier rainfall occurs from December to March. Several food festivals happen between August and November, including the Fiesta de la Chicha, [Mestizo Festival](#), and [FestiSabores](#).

**Where to stay:** [CIRQA](#), a luxury hotel located in a converted 16th-century monastery, has a fine picantera-inspired restaurant. [QASA by Nomad](#) is a food-focused hotel with a fusion restaurant and rooftop cocktail lounge.

**Food tours:** Several local companies offer culinary experiences, including [Arequipa Food Tours](#) and [Food Tour Arequipa](#).

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