Chicha as a Way of Life

by Nina Lary, Reporter at Large

One of the first things that diners at Andina see is a wide wooden bowl full of key limes, dried aji peppers, and the most attention getting item – small ears of dried purple corn. We use the purple corn to make a sugary Peruvian drink called Chicha Morada. As good as it is, Chicha Morada can't quite match the intrigue of its cousin, Chicha de Jora – a foamy homemade beer that has been made for centuries in small towns across Peru. Señora Zoraya is a native from the southern valleys of highland Peru, close to Cusco. She sat down to talk with me about Chicha de Jora, a fermented corn beer, and its significance to the Quechuan culture. Made from maiz amarillo, the chicha dates back to Incan times, when it was made by chewing the corn to kickstart the fermentation process. Sans the saliva, it is made today by a traditional laborious process in both small handmade batches and in large commercial plants.

For campesinos and people living in the countryside surrounding Cuzco, Chicha de Jora is not a drink, but a way of life. The Cuzco valley is ancient Incan territory and its inhabitants conserve their heritage by consuming chicha, which symbolizes their inherent connection to the land. "In a strongly Quechuan community," Zoraya says, "everyone drinks chicha". Even the children.

Though its alcoholic content ranges from 1 to 3%, residents view chicha as a traditional way of life and a boon to the health of all ages. "For one, it is a tradition," says Zoraya. "Two, it's good for you; they say it combats prostate cancer. And for three, it's cheap."

Chicha de Jora is often made and consumed in chicherias – small countryside homes appointed with simple wooden tables and earthen floors. The woman of the house makes her chicha and hoists a red plastic bandera, or flag, atop the house when it is ready to drink. She stays open for business until her supply runs out.

The chicheria is a place of refreshment and socialization where farmers come in from the fields for a midday break or after-work refreshment. Inside patrons gather around the rustic wooden table, drinking and chatting to the sounds of the Huayno music piped through the room. Huayno is an ancient form of folk dance music that Zoraya describes as "happy!"

And what is a good beer without a salty snack? One of the most famous chicheria snacks is "Nabus Jaucha": a sofrito of potato, onion, and garlic garnished with boiled parsnip, smeared with an "uchucuta" of peppers and cilantro, and topped off with boiled large kerneled corn called "mote."

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How To?

❖ *On the Farm*

20 pounds of choclo or maiz Amarillo is picked and lain to dry on a field for one month so it becomes very dry.

❖ *Germination*

After that, soak the corn in water for one day. Lay a big sheet of plastic on the ground and cover it with corn leaves. Place the corn on top of the leaves and cover with more leaves. Wrap the sides of the plastic over the top and seal to create an incubator for the corn to germinate. Leave corn in the plastic pouch for 7-10 days, opening once a day to sprinkle with water.

❖ *Grinding Corn*

After this the corn is ground on two smooth river rocks, the top, "tunao," rocking against the bottom, "batan," act as a smooth mortar and pestle. Every family home, rich or poor, has one of these stone grinders, and over the years, the rocks wear into perfect sync with each other.

❖ *Extracting Malt Sugars*

Add the corn meal into a clay pot with water and slow cook over a wood fire for 2-3 hours. Drain the liquid in fine wicker baskets lined with hay to catch the solids, or suttuchi, which is then used to feed livestock and chickens.

❖ *Boiling the Wort*

In a second clay pot combine wheat flour, fennel fronds, water, cane sugar, 2 beers and/or cañazo (sugar cane liquor). Bring to a boil, then strain in a standard colander. Mix the strained liquid with the reserved corn liquid.

❖ *Fermentation*

Pour the final product into a "chomba," a traditional clay chicha pot, cover with a white cloth and let sit for 48 hours. Enjoy.

Special thanks to Victor Platt for translating the interview and ensuring the accuracy of the exchange between Señora Zoraya and Nina Lary.

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Nina Lary is a Portland, OR freelance writer that covers culture,travel and environmental issues. She enjoys exploring far flung destinations, exotic street foods and hiking into the wild unknown. In between trips, she hosts at Andina and strives to make a perfect empanada.