

No Substitutions: The Cultural Significance of Set Meals

by Nina Lary, Reporter at Large



“What’s for dinner?” is a common evening refrain in homes across the country. The possibilities range from American classics like meatloaf and mashed potatoes to exotic dishes such as pad Thai or Moroccan spiced chicken.

But what if everyone doesn’t want the same thing? There are allergies, sensitivities, likes, dislikes and plain old picky eaters. Maybe the chef is coerced into whipping up a little something special, something “off menu.” Does this engage our senses or alienate us from one another?

What if everyone had to eat the same thing? Would they grow to love it and more importantly, would it forge a connection between them?

To consider these questions, we look to the heart of everyday Peruvian dining – the set menu or *menu del día*. Whether served in rural comedors or upscale metropolitan restaurants, the *menu del día* is generally the most economical option for dining in Peru. Quality and presentation vary widely but the idea remains consistent: a set three-course *almuerzo* (lunch) or *cena* (dinner) with one main entrée or at times a couple selections to choose from. The entrée comes accompanied by a set soup or salad, side dishes, and possibly a dessert and refresco (juice or tea). At times, an upgraded option called *menu ejecutivo* is offered, which follows the same structure but includes more elaborate options for about \$1 more.

Scrunched into a sidewalk café or bustling cafeteria-like space, you find yourself seated next to business executives, young families, older women taking a break from their market stands. In *comedores*, the most basic establishments, poor families feed on basic, filling foods in a communal side-by-side setting. By eating dishes from a set menu designed particularly for the day, you partake in a sort of familial ritual. It’s not “this is what I want for lunch,” but “this is what is for lunch.”

As William Doherty, a social science professor at the University of Minneapolis at Minnesota, said in a recent *Time* magazine article: “A meal is about sharing. I see this trend where parents are preparing different meals for each kid, and it takes away from that. The sharing is the compromise. Not everyone gets their ideal menu every night.”

In the U.S., dining is heavily delineated by class and menu structure caters to the wants and needs of the individual. Many will scoff at a menu that states “no substitutions.” As is the case anywhere, Peruvian diners choose a restaurant based on cost, appearance, consistency, and social alliances. But with a set menu, it is not at their whim that the meal is determined.

Just as riding the bus in Peru doesn’t so much distinguish your class as get you from point A to point B, dining collectively on *menu del día* is a community affair. While done individually or in small groups, sharing a collective dish brings some connection to the diners.

At the conclusion of a decade-long research study recently released by Columbia University, scientists concluded that eating regular family meals together diminishes delinquency and drug use in adolescents. It was concluded that more Hispanic teens eat meals with their families than black or white teens, and that parents with less than a high school education eat with their children more often than parents with high school or college diplomas.

Cultures worldwide still take in heady midday meals together and many Latin countries place an emphasis on this practice. If meeting the demands of a modern workday keeps families from home, partaking in a Peruvian-inspired collective dining experience can provide kinship at this culturally significant time of day.

When homesick from traveling in another country, often the most commonplace experiences are the ones we yearn for. Those activities that we may have seen as ordinary, even plebian at times begin to manifest as the basis of our cultural identities. At the root of all cultures lies a fundamental need for food. It is how, when, and with whom we eat it that defines us.



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.

