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Panama's Top 5 Ceviche Haunts

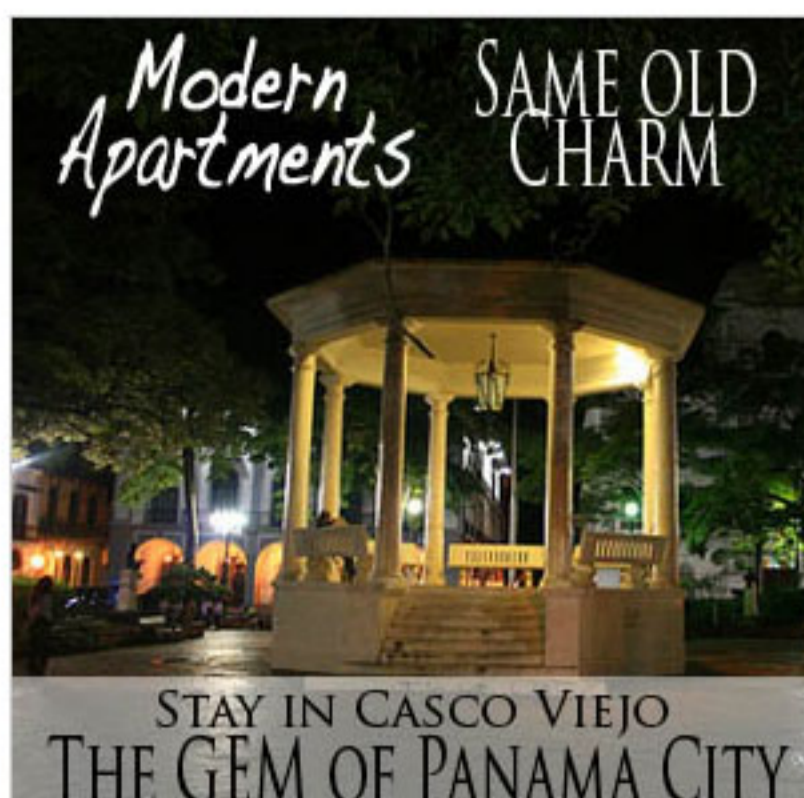


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Written by Matt Landau Monday, May 11 2009



Just the other morning in Panama I woke up pondering how much fish I had consumed over the course of the previous two days. I landed comfortably on the number twelve, as in twelve pounds, and spent the rest of the day trying to envision what twelve pounds of fish looked like in one place at one time. The result was daunting and actually a little gross, this heap of raw fish that could probably feed several villages in Kuna Yala for a month or maybe longer.



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"I don't know," I told my friend Val. "I guess I just like eating things from the ocean."

"What about...sand? Do you like eating that? Do you eat coral and sand?"

There are inherent differences between eating pickled fish and eating a reef colony, but I could see what Val was getting at. There is also the more realistic argument of ingesting contaminants like mercury, lead, antibiotics, PCB's that comes with eating twelve pounds of fish. But that's one of the first rules of arguing: never tell your opponent something they might use against you.

The discussion arose in Panama after I declared my new favorite food in the world to be ceviche, the Latin American dish of taking raw seafood (fish, shrimp, lobster, octopus...etc), marinating it for some time in a bath of citrus, and eating what actually results as a quasi-cooked final product. Some people call the technique "cooking" because the flesh turns opaque and firm, but like my friend Val, I could think of a number of things that would qualify as cooking under that pretense. A Posturepedic mattress for example, or a pair of modern pantyhose. Both opaque in color and firm to the touch.

I like to award the number one spot of my favorite food every few years - something in line with the election of a new president. If nothing else, the announcement to friends and family gives me something to focus on, a food to obsess over and explore so intimately that life takes on a new meaning.

Ceviche. Seviche. Cebiche. Seh-Bee-Chay (phonetically scribbled on a beach shack in rural Mexico). It's the new "in" food in places like New York City and Paris, but this old-world dish from Latin America has been a favorite of mine for quite a while now, its origin dating back to the Inca days in Peru or Ecuador. I once read a quote on this plaque at a fish market that said, "He was a bold man that first ate a raw oyster." The first ceviche recipe, I would imagine, was equally remedial and ballsy; the nerve to believe that something like a raw monkfish might taste good with a squirt of lime and salt.

The ceviche options in Panama are quite varied, ranging from cheap and basic to pricey and technically perfect. When asked who makes the best ceviche in Panama, many locals will tell you their father. But for those of us who don't have fathers who make ceviche (in fact, when I first mentioned the word to my father, he asked if Sevicha was a girl I went to school with), I've listed below 5 of my favorite ceviche options in Panama City.

- 1. La Marea (Las Terrazas, Multiplaza Mall, Panama City): Ceviche lovers unite! This small stall-ish restaurant in, of all places, the mall has about 12 different iterations on the traditional ceviche: see ingredients introduced like pineapple, exotic chilis, and sesame oil. The super-crunchy over-sized corn kernels are a nice contrast to soft lemon flavors and toasted pita chips are...well, the vehicles of god. (\$)
2. Segundo Muelle (San Francisco, Panama City): This semi-hidden converted home is a chain out of Peru who serves up nice large chunks of somewhere between 1/2 and 3/4 cooked sea bass. The slivers of red onion, canelles of roasted sweet potato, and traditional Peruvian beer options are like watching the Superbowl with an assortment of buffalo wings, hamburgers, and BBQ ribs: the ultimate culinary culture experience. (\$\$\$)
3. Restaurante Mercado de Marisco (San Felipe, Panama City): Once you get over the heat and swarming flies, this upstairs area of Panama City's fish market churns out an above-par traditional Peruvian ceviche. For an extra kick, try buying your fish selection downstairs (sea bass, snapper, shrimp, lobster...etc) and carrying it upstairs where they'll charge you a per/pound rate for preparation. (\$)
4. Machu Pichu (El Cangrejo, Panama City): This casual Peruvian atmosphere serves an admirable plate of traditional ceviche, paired with cold boiled potato, a hunk of corn on the cob and some of the most atomic Peruvian hot sauce I've ever had. The strips of fish are like velvet, the marinating juice (called Leche de Tigre or Tiger's Milk) good enough to drink alone. (\$\$)
5. Ego (Casco Viejo, Panama City): As the theme of the restaurant bodes, this variation takes old-school culture and mashes it up with new-world flare. Try the fried ceviche (fish pieces lightly floured, deep fried, then tossed in a lime and chili potion), which is surprisingly outrageously good. The crust picks up the texture of buffalo wings, crunchy but soggy: sounds weird on paper but so do fried Oreos and look where they've landed us. (\$\$\$)

Ceviche across various countries in Central and South America takes on different touches: in Peru, it's served with sweet potato and fresh corn, in Ecuador it's served with popcorn and nuts, and in Manhattan I imagine it might be served with fennel flower pollen or little edible gemstones in a vertical tower that reaches into the sky. Panama's traditional take on the recipe is two-fold: heavily marinate (to the occasional texture of rubber) then serve simply with soda crackers. You can find it just about anywhere in a country of so much coastline, but keep in mind that ceviche is best eaten fresh (so the room-temperature fish at the local Chinese quickie mart might be less than savory).

Now that I've declared it my favorite food, it's not uncommon for me to eat ceviche every day, sometimes twice. You may see an employee of Red Bull drinking cans around town or a Hawaiian Tropic model offering little samples to a crowd: that's how I feel, like an ambassador, responsible not only for regularly consuming the product I endorse, but for sharing the beauty of ceviche with others who don't yet know its charm. When I told my friend Val this, he shook his head as if I had asserted my adoration for feces. "Ceviche," he scoffed. "You're kinda starting to look like a ceviche too."

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D. Panama: LOL have you ever considered putting these articles in book form? very enjoyable reading and pretty insightful to boot! 1 May 11, 2009

Alan: Ceviche tour I'm heading to Panama next month and plan on visiting each of these these places. Thanks Mat 2 May 12, 2009

Caribbean: Astrid y Gaston Astrid y Gaston: it's a peruvian chain with locations in Tokyo, Paris...etc. They have excellent cebiche (as they spell it) with all the peruvian accountrements. Would also have to say beach shacks: the quality's not as good but the ambiance makes up for it; nothing better than a cold beer and ceviche on the beach. 3 June 01, 2009

H. Elder: Inca Trail I think this is the name. Located across from the ATlapa and Sharaton in San Francisco. This place used to be an italian pizzeria but now it serves great ceviche. FRIED CEVICHE TOO at only six dllars a plate. 4 June 17, 2009

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