



## Rodent at the Last Supper

WORDS & PHOTOS: *Jayme Moye*

Standing in the Cusco Cathedral in Peru gazing up at a nearly life-sized painting of Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper, I noticed a peculiar anomaly: On a gold platter at the center of the table, de-haired and flat on its back with legs straight up in the air as if reaching to the heavens, was a deceased guinea pig.

Shorn and roasted is “the most traditional way to serve *cuy*,” explained Francis, an excitable 30-something Peruvian guide who’d been tasked with taking our small but rowdy group of hikers on a city tour and who was currently confusing the source of my surprise as the preparation of the dish as opposed to its very existence. “It’s also the most delicious,” he continued. “I’ll prove it to you all at dinner tonight.”

The Andean palate for guinea pig goes back 2,500 years before Christ, meaning South Americans were raising them as food long before their northern neighbors moved in and began keeping them in glass aquariums as pets. Today, Peruvians consume 65 million guinea pigs each year.

As I struggled to come to terms with the fact that I could soon be eating a rodent, I reflected on Beethoven, the pet guinea pig I had growing up. Barely over a pound, he was small by Peruvian serving-size standards (the average farmed guinea pig weighs in at 1.5 pounds), with ginger fur the color of a Labrador retriever’s. He’d crawl around on my bedroom floor, sniff inside my Barbie castle and fall asleep in the palm of my hand. Not once did he strike me as a creature that would be good to eat. But Francis’s excitement about the dish was infectious, and it wasn’t long before our cathedral tour devolved into a walking question-and-answer session about eating guinea pigs.

“How does it taste?” somebody asked as we passed a crucifixion statue blackened from centuries of smoke. “Like heaven,” Francis (ironically named for the patron saint of animals) answered. Leading us through the sacristy adorned with portraits of Cusco’s bishops, he reminisced about the guinea pigs his mother prepared on special occasions—baptisms, birthdays, weddings, parties and harvest feasts. She raised them on the kitchen grounds and roasted them with a bit of their own blood, salt, lime juice and *huacatay*, a local aromatic herb similar to mint, he said. The questions from the group kept coming. Can you buy them in the supermarket? (Yes.) Can you order them in a restaurant? (Yes.) Do you actually eat them whole? (Yes.)

What about the head? (Yes.) The teeth? (No, you spit those out.) Francis was delighted by our fascination.

After we left the cathedral, he took us to the local market to continue our guinea pig education. I stuck near the back of our pack, feeling less than enthusiastic. The thought of watching Peruvians pick their dinner from a pen of fuzzy Beethovens made my throat tighten.

We followed Francis into the rice and grain area first (easing us in, I thought). There, we encountered women wearing *polleras*, colorful hand-woven wool skirts, and carrying big bushels of alfalfa. Francis pointed them out as commercial guinea pig farmers. They had come into town to purchase the legume-based hay because it’s high in protein and fattens their guineas nicely.

A women-run industry in Peru? I felt a tad more enthusiastic. Francis said demand was high—50 percent of the meat consumed in Peru was guinea pig. Programs in the last decade created by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) had been very successful in teaching guinea pig husbandry skills to women. Universities, NGOs and Peru’s agriculture ministry had also gotten involved, leading intensives that taught breeding and feeding techniques.

Learning these skills enables women to earn an income while staying home with the kids. Guinea pig farming also provides rural women living close to the poverty line (\$140 USD per month) a way to double their family income without a lot of hardship—guinea pigs don’t take up much space, and they mature quickly and reproduce rapidly.

Perhaps guinea pig farming in Peru was something I could get behind. Francis had purposely avoided the meat section of the market, which made it easier to desensitize myself to the Beethoven factor. And I’d learned that guinea pig has a higher protein content than beef, chicken, pork and lamb. It also has virtually no fat, and very low cholesterol. Interesting. But could I eat one?

As promised, I had my chance to find out at dinner. “First, an appetizer,” Francis told the table, winking. Moments later, the waitress appeared with a steaming platter of charred rodent. The fresco in the cathedral had not prepared me for the sight. The guinea pig was whole, a mammalian Cornish hen with the head still intact. Its skin was burnt black, its white buckteeth firmly clasped over an ornamental red pepper. Unlike in *The Last Supper*, this entrée was served on its stomach, legs splayed like a bearskin rug. I wasn’t sure if this position looked more or less civilized, but it was apparently a special preparation

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done only at Tunupa Restaurante.

As the waitress set the platter down in front of him, Francis gave instructions: Tear apart the limbs and suck the meat from the thin bones. I closed my eyes. When I opened them, the entire table was staring at me, the adventure travel journalist. I realized they were expecting me to be their proverbial guinea pig—the one who'd biked through Egypt and trekked through Palestine and who didn't bother to wear mosquito repellent in a place with no malaria. Suddenly, I felt itchy. My reputation was on the line.

To facilitate sharing, Francis sent the dish back to the kitchen to be separated into bite-sized pieces. I exhaled. When the platter reappeared, the head had been detached from the rest of the body, which had been artfully sliced into about a dozen chunks. Francis pushed the platter toward me. My travel companions waited. I leaned forward and took a sniff. Pungent. I picked up my fork and gave a poke. Slippery.

*What would Jesus do?* Avoiding the head, I forked a chunk with feigned gusto. Lifting it to my lips, I hesitated, and then deposited it as far back on my tongue as possible. I released the flesh from the fork. I began to chew—softly at first, curious as I assessed: overcooked meat, stringy, lean, poignant like rabbit. A putrid burned flavor overpowered any spices (or maybe that was the spices), and my mind passed down judgment: not tasty, not tolerable, *hurry before you barf up Beethoven*. One last swallow, which I chased down with water. There was a brief smattering of applause from my judges. I eked out a smile and held the plate out to a chatty Francis.

The Central Peruvian preparation—pounded, deeply fried and served with peanut sauce and potatoes—is typically more appealing to an American palate, he explained, taking the platter. But “there’s no better way to eat guinea pig than roasted.”

Francis punctuated his point by plucking a piece with his thumb and forefinger, and holding it in mid-air for a moment. After one last reverent gaze, he popped it into his mouth, chewing slowly. “Divine,” he said, and then licked his lips. **W**

