



CASHEWS TO CACHACA

São Paulo's food scene is full of ingredients fresh from the rainforest and dishes influenced by world cuisines, finds Laura Price

From left: Crackling, A Casa do Porco; São Paulo Municipal Market



IMAGE: MAURO HOLANDA, AWL IMAGES

From left: Porco san zé, A Casa do Porco; balcony view from a bar on Rua Harmonia



All around me, people are on their feet, phones in hand, filming or even live-streaming the scene, zooming in on the details, eagerly capturing the sound effects. But the spectacle in front of us isn't a volcano eruption, a flash mob or an unusual animal; it's a chef, slicing through the crisp, roasted skin and juicy flesh of a hunk of pork jowl, with all the accompanying aroma, crackle and crunch. This tableside theater is all part of porco san zé — the show-stopping finale to a meal at A Casa do Porco — an experience that has to be recorded.

Outside the restaurant, people line up around the block, patiently waiting to try chef Jefferson Rueda's 11-course tasting

menu of sustainably produced pork jowl sushi, pork tartare and pork belly for just 125 reais (\$31). Some have traveled across the world for this meal; there's a wait of up to four hours for a table. It's not unusual to find lines for the most sought-after, no-reservations joints in New York City or London, of course. But this is downtown São Paulo, in a neglected neighborhood that's never been known for its restaurants, let alone for its fine dining.

The wild popularity of A Casa do Porco (meaning 'house of the pig' in Portuguese) is a sign not only of the power of social media to pull in diners from across the globe, but also of how far São Paulo has

MEALS AT D.O.M. REFLECT YEARS OF RESEARCH IN THE JUNGLE

IMAGES: MAURO HOLANDA / 4CORNERS IMAGES

come in terms of its cuisine. When I first visited the city in 2000, I found myself in a backstreet churrascaria, my initiation into Brazil's all-you-can-eat barbecue institutions a low-budget, low-hygiene dive with undercooked meat bleeding onto my plate. Sure, I'd later discover the great steak and fantastic Japanese food that have always been available in São Paulo, but two decades on, I find the food scene unrecognizable.

It might seem unusual to visit Brazil for its restaurants. After all, this is the country of Carnival, tropical climes and unique flora and fauna. But beyond the beach capital of Rio de Janeiro, the jungle capital of Manaus and the capital city of Brasília, there's São Paulo, the undisputed capital of

// FOUR TO TRY

1 The meat-lover's must-have

Picanha, or sirloin cap, is Brazil's most popular cut of beef, abundant at barbecue houses, known as churrascarias in Sao Paulo and beyond.

2 The chocoholic's choice

Brigadeiros are Brazil's best-loved candy — small balls of condensed milk, cocoa powder and butter, covered in chocolate sprinkles and served as dessert or on their own in specialty stores.

3 The best of breakfast

Brazilian breakfast staple pão de queijo are small, gooey balls of dough and cheese, often made with manioc instead of wheat flour. Best eaten fresh out the oven, with the cheese still oozing.

4 The on-the-go Arab bite

Esfahas, or sfihas, are pies filled with lamb, beef, ricotta or vegetables, available at street stalls and cafes across Sao Paulo, thanks to its large Lebanese and Syrian immigrant communities. >>

gastronomy. In the past few years, following Brazil hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2014 and Rio hosting the Olympic Games in 2016, Sao Paulo has massively upped its food game.

“Sao Paulo is a gastronomic hub because of immigration,” says chef Rueda. “We have Armenian food, Arab food, Italian food. There’s an entire neighborhood dedicated to Japanese food, and that’s before we even get onto Brazilian cuisine.”

So what exactly is Brazilian cuisine? In one sense, it’s all about staples like feijoada, a comforting stew of black beans and pork traditionally eaten on Saturdays with family and friends, as part of a long, lazy lunch. I eat it on arrival at Tordesilhas, where chef Mara Salles serves arguably the best version in the city. Brazilian cuisine is also typified by the churrascarias found all across town, serving every cut of meat and even barbecued pineapple.

But in the past few years, Brazilian food has also come to mean an exploration of the country’s ingredients, and there’s no better showcase than D.O.M., a regular in The World’s 50 Best Restaurants list and frequently named the best in Brazil. With a signature degustation and wine pairing menu priced at a whopping 1,030 reais (\$270), D.O.M. is a once-in-a-lifetime destination, and the cost reflects years of research and exploration in the Amazon jungle under the guidance of chef-owner Alex Atala.

When it opened in 1999, D.O.M.’s use of Amazonian produce surprised the locals, many of whom had never cooked with ingredients from the rainforest, even though it makes up two thirds of Brazil’s landmass. Now Atala is one of the world’s most famous chefs, with a host of awards and widespread acclaim for his work supporting indigenous people. His success has inspired younger chefs, such as Ivan Ralston, who makes sorbets from local fruits at Tuju, and Cesar Costa, who cooks with organic ingredients at sustainability-focused Corrutela.

Soon after I sit down in D.O.M.’s grand-yet-cozy dining room, I’m presented with a plate of ants. To one side sits a large, black ant on its own, and to the other, another ant, encased in a sugar shell filled with cachaça, a punchy distilled spirit. I start with the ant on its own



Clockwise: A Casa do Porco; D.O.M., chef Alex Atala; cashew fruit ceviche, Mani

IMAGES: RUBENS KATO, SERGIO GOMBRA



TOP RESTAURANTS



A Casa do Porco

This casual, no-bookings restaurant serves pork, pork and more pork. To beat the lines, arrive by 11am for lunch or by 5pm for dinner.

D.O.M.

Rock-star chef Alex Atala’s ode to Amazonian cuisine offers everything from ants to aligot, a combination of mashed potato, cheese and honey.

Tordesilhas

Perfect for people-watching around the upmarket Oscar Freire shopping street, this local favorite has been feeding Paulistas since 1990. Start with grilled coalho cheese with sugar cane honey and work through to feijoada stew with all the trimmings.

Shin Zushi

In the city with the biggest Japanese population outside Japan, sushi options are everywhere, but Shin Zushi guarantees good value, top quality Edomae-style cuisine in a casual setting. For those who can’t choose, there are combo plates, such as Tirashi Zushi.

Mani

Set in an old house in the leafy Jardins neighborhood, Mani serves colorful, elegant dishes showcasing Brazilian ingredients such as manioc and heart of palm. Request the tasting menu for the full experience.

Evvai

At his cozy restaurant, young chef Luiz Filipe Souza impresses diners with his flavor-packed Italian-influenced cuisine, classic cocktails and superb wine list.

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Nara Bar lounge, Sao Paulo

// ESSENTIALS

When to go: September to March offer hot summer weather. The rainy season runs from March through June, although rain is often tropical and in short bursts in the afternoons, making Sao Paulo pleasant all year round. Flights and room rates increase around Carnival and New Year.

Currency: Brazilian real. \$1 = BRL 3.81

Language: Portuguese, although English is spoken in many hotels and restaurants across the city.

Getting around: Sao Paulo's subway network covers a small area in the center, and buses are not usually considered safe for tourist use. Taxis are cheap but it's best to request a reputable firm from the hotel concierge.

— it tastes nutty, with a hint of lemongrass, and has a satisfying crunch — before biting into the sugar shell, which bursts with liquid in my mouth. My server, Alice, tells me the saúva ants are collected by the Baniwa people, who use them as seasoning.

Over the course of the tasting menu, I work through mushrooms the Yanomami people have been eating for centuries, yet are new to most Brazilians. Then ravioli made from peach palm; five ways with manioc, the national root; and finally beef rump so soft it's served with a spoon and fork. Each ingredient offers a new taste of the Amazon.

“Most Brazilians have never eaten the Brazilian ingredients I serve,” Atala says.

Like many people, before I first visited Brazil I was ignorant about the origin of the cashew nut, so readily available on supermarket shelves back home. But here, the fruit that protects the nut is used in everything from the national cocktail, caipirinha, to a vegan ceviche at Mani, where chef-owner Helena Rizzo uses the soft, chewy flesh as a substitute for fish.

“Brazil is a country the size of a continent so its biodiversity is enormous,” says Rizzo. “My favorite fruit is cashew, with its unique, meaty texture, and a flavor that's acidic and sweet at

the same time.” She offers the cashew ceviche a la carte and on her tasting menus.

But Sao Paulo's appeal isn't just about fine dining. Some of its best food is found in bars and botecos, the casual drinking spots serving beer and snacks like crispy manioc fries and pastries. Then there's the Mercado Municipal, Sao Paulo's central market and home of the mortadella sandwich, a towering pile of sausage meat and grilled cheese. The market is a haven for vegetarians too, with rows of tropical fruit and veg, from the plum-like caqui to jackfruit, graviola and jabuticaba. And all over Sao Paulo natural gluten-free options abound due to the versatility of manioc.

As my trip nears its end, I find myself craving something simple. So it seems like fate that Sao Paulo's most popular traditional restaurant, Mocoto, is just a short drive from the city's international airport. It's here I fill up on cubes of tapioca with coalho cheese and sweet chili sauce, followed by escondidinho, a dish of jerked beef topped with manioc puree. After a caipirinha from one of the city's finest selections of cachaças, I'm perfectly prepped for my flight — and already thinking about my next food trip to Sao Paulo.

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