

EXOTIC EATS | Costa Rica's jungle lodges let gourmets get up-close and personal with local, organic finds.

The cult of cooking, made popular by shows like *Top Chef* and *Hell's Kitchen* and galvanized by the rock star eccentricities of toques like Jamie Oliver and Gordon Ramsay, has permeated the world of upscale educational travel.

Novices eager to perfect their Pad Thai can spend a week in Bangkok chopping alongside famed local and national chefs; Tuscan wine and food devotees will find complete immersion in Old World ways while rolling gnocchi in the ancient kitchen of a stone abbey. When wannabees aren't manning the range, cultural and active adventures round out the experience. On my own recent culinary tour in Costa Rica, that meant ziplining through the canopy of a verdant rainforest when I wasn't wielding a kitchen blade.

Costa Rica is already a favorite among American naturalists, outdoor adventurers and families—cultural and natural diversity means that anyone from a thrill-seeking surfer to a frog-loving toddler will find something to interest them. For food lovers whose green leanings go beyond the thumb, Costa Rica's rural lodges offer the unique chance to get up-close and personal with products hand-plucked from the jungle, and to participate in the creation of dishes that go straight from the soil to the table. Cities like San Jose and Quepos showcase internationally competitive chefs who put cosmopolitan spins on what can admittedly be a basic cuisine (think beans and rice with occasional inspired cues from European and southern Latin menus.) But add to that the fresh and exotic fruits, sultry, slow-burning hot peppers and glistening fish found locally, and you'll begin to understand why gourmets find a

WINE AMONG THE VINES

Wine lovers in the wild needn't forego their favorite beverage. Delicious cuisine paired with a solid wine list gives these four additional culinary-friendly Central American lodges extra appeal.

Lapa Rios' (Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica) restaurant serves free-range poultry, wild-caught fish, and locally grown fruits and vegetables. Pair with powerhouse favorites Veuve Cliquot or Don Melchor Cabernet Sauvignon; or a boutique selection like Anityal Organic Maipu, Chile. laparios.com

Wines poured at Francis Ford Coppola's **Turtle Inn** (near Placencia, Belize) include his own pretty-in-pink Sofia Blanc de Blanc, 2006 FC Diamond Series Claret and 2006 Encyclopedia Cabernet Sauvignon as well as selections like Guigal Crozes-Hermitage Blanc and 2000 Antinori Pian Delle Vigne Brunello di Montalcino. blancaneaux.com

Inside El Tigre Vestido Restaurant and

Bar Buho at **Finca Rosa Blanca Coffee Plantation & Inn** (Santa Barbara de Heredia, Costa Rica), a working organic/shade-grown coffee farm, most of the food is sourced locally (and organic or biodynamic). Try the catch of the day with ginger passion-fruit sauce or chicken breasts stuffed with Serrano ham and plantains. Wines include Grgich Hills Zinfandel and Fume Blanc, and Buena Vista Carneros Merlot. fincarosablanca.com

Upon arrival at **The Lodge at Pico Bonito** (La Ceiba, Honduras), a waiter greets you with a tropical drink on a platter. The restaurant specializes in Meso-American cuisine and can arrange candlelit dinners for couples. Choose from four Champagnes (including Moët Chandon, Brut Imperial, Epernay, N.V.) and other French greats (like 2002 Joseph Janoveix Margaux). picobonito.com.

—Kristine Hansen

home here beyond the city sprawl.

On the foodie radar: **Playa Nicuesa Lodge in the Osa Peninsula** [Golfo Dulce; playanicuesa.com] near Corcovado National Park. Here, owners Michael and Donna Butler are committed to sustainable practices and, perhaps a remnant of



their Manhattan origins, modern-meets-classic cuisine (top photo). A former cacao farm that was rehabilitated, the 165-acre complex (above) is entirely run on solar power, and ingredients used in Chef Edixon Lezcano's three daily gourmet meals are sourced from the lodge's onsite fruit and herb garden, as well as from the ocean and dense jungle beyond. Mahi-mahi and red snapper with fresh ginger, gallo pinto with fresh cilantro and pepper, plates spilling over with ripe bananas, papayas and guava—all are results of what's growing outside cabin doors.

Food-minded guests are invited to join guide Freiman Venegas and sustainability coordinator Jodie Thomas on "edible landscape" outings, which include foraging in the onsite gardens or in the jungle for indige-



PHOTOS TOP TWO COURTESY PLAYA NICUESA RAINFOREST LODGE; BOTTOM LA SELVA VERDE LODGE



Above and left, guests and staff at food-focused jungle lodges collaborate on authentic meals from start to finish; bottom, Chef Lezcano of Playa Nicuesa creates menus based on seasonal ingredients.

nous ingredients. One of our own walks produced sour guava, sugar cane (which we cranked into juice in lieu of soft drinks), cashews and papayas, all of which turned up in one form or another in the seasonal “tropics meets West” menus. Groups are then invited into the kitchen to chop, peel, mash and roll the fruits of their labor under the tutelage of the self-proclaimed rural chef with urban leanings, Lezcano.

Another spot to watch is **La Selva Verde Lodge** (Sarapiquí; selvaverde.com) on the banks of northern Costa Rica’s Sarapiquí River. Technicolor poison dart frogs, dragon-like iguanas and chattering monkeys offer constant eye candy, while the lodge’s river-view dining room serves traditional cuisine made from regional family recipes. We used Selva Verde as a base for culinary adventures in the region. While not river rafting, hiking or zip-lining through ancient forests, we toured local farms raising black pepper, pineapple and cacao. We learned to pick and grind cacao seeds into a powder that would later become chocolate, tasted a pepper farmer’s weird but wonderful black pepper syrup on ice cream and joined hotel chefs al fresco in making *patacones*, *picadillo de palmito* and fresh tortillas. Nearby, the Sarapiquí Conservation Learning Center (learningcentercostarica.com) offered daily cooking classes with local women, a desserts cooking class teaching the key to making indigenous desserts like *chorreada* and outings to local markets. (For recipes, go to winemag.com/costa_rica).

Culinary tours are available throughout Costa Rica, with some focusing primarily on coffee and rum production. For more information, go to visitcostarica.com. For information on eco-friendly flights within Costa Rica, go to NaturAir.com. —SUSAN KOSTRZEWA



SPIRIT OF THE JUNGLE

Though wine lovers rely largely on imports from Europe, Argentina, Chile and Mexico to quench their thirst in Costa Rica, spirits abound. Innovative cocktails mixed with fresh ingredients like coconut, lime and sour guava showcase the national spirit made from sugarcane, **guaro** (guaroliqor.com), as well as the Peruvian **pisco** (piscomall.com) and numerous outstanding Latin American rums, including the **Costa Rican Centenario** (centenariointernacional.com). For Costa Rican cocktail recipes, go to winemag.com/costaricacocktails.