



Patty Rodriguez, owner of Inka Trails restaurant in Claremont

PHOTOS BY THOMAS R. CORDOVA

Taste of Peru

**INKA TRAILS
OWNER FOLLOWS
A LIFELONG DREAM**

By BETTS GRIFFONE

CLAREMONT is a long way from Peru, but Patty Rodriguez has worked hard to keep the culture and cuisine of her native country alive at Inka Trails — a lovely little restaurant with Peruvian art and artifacts decorating the deep red walls. It's a warm and inviting setting.

When Rodriguez left South America with her family 25 years ago, she already had been exposed to the food industry. Her parents and grandparents had both owned restaurants, so it wasn't surprising when they encouraged her to do the same.

But that wasn't to happen for years.

After attending ESL classes and getting her high school equivalent degree, she went to nursing school. She was working in a hospital when, a little over 10 years ago, her family finally convinced her to follow her heart. So it was, with two small children and still working full time at the hospital, she opened Inka Trails.

"It was unbelievably difficult at first," she said.

At the time, she was working a night shift at the hospital and putting in another full day at the restaurant. Sleep wasn't a big part of the picture.

Rodriguez finally decided she had to give up the hospital job if she was going to make a go of the restaurant.

But she didn't give up on nursing entirely.

She belongs to PAMS, a Peruvian American Medical Society, and every year she goes on a medical mission with them. This year it was Haiti — one of the most emotionally draining missions she has ever done.

Although she devotes much of her time to promoting Peruvian culture and staying involved with the Claremont business community, she also gives 110 percent to the restaurant. She believes, however, she couldn't do any of it without her husband and family. Her kids, now 15 and almost 17, have helped at the restaurant for years.

Rodriguez never has been a mother who goes off to work and leaves the kids. She took them with her, and when they were old enough she let them start helping. It has become a family tradition, and it's important to keep everyone close.

At first, it was difficult introducing Peruvian food to the public. Probably 90 percent of her guests were from Peru, and they only seemed to come on the weekends. That wasn't going to work, so she started publicizing her little restaurant. If she could get people to come in, she could teach them about the food.

Little by little, she found success. Now, Peruvian customers represent about 10 percent of the clientele.

For the first two or three years, Rodriguez' father was the chef, teaching her all the family recipes. Now she has a chef and three cooks in the kitchen producing what is considered to be the most diverse of the Latin American cuisines. Diverse because there are many cultures represented in its dishes.

Seafood plays a big part in the cuisine, probably because of the country's coastal location. In fact, ceviche — often thought to be Mexican — actually has its roots in Peru.

And while some would think the potato had its origins in Europe, it was cultivated first in Peru. Potatoes are the basis of much of the cuisine. According to Rodriguez, there may be as many as a thousand varieties of potatoes found in Peru and

at least 300 are used in Peruvian cooking — each recipe calling for a specific type. "Potatoes were the gift of the Incas to the world," she likes to say.

The diverse menu offers many entree choices of meat, chicken and, of course,

seafood, but there are also a few vegetarian items and a section called Peruanisimo — traditional recipes of the Peruvian culture.

Inka Trails

1077 W. Foothill Blvd., Claremont; 909-626-4426, www.inkatrailsrestaurant.com



New to Peruvian food? One classic to try is Lomo Saltado, above, which is lean sirloin sauteed with onions, tomatoes and French fries. Americans might find it odd that this dish with potatoes is served with rice, but the combination works.



Also on the menu, the Ceviche de Pescado combines fresh sole marinated in lime juice with sweet potato, potatoes and Peruvian corn nuts.

Ceviche

Serves 4

Ingredients

- 1½ pounds of sole
- ½ small red onion, halved and slivered
- ¾ cup lime juice
- ½ teaspoon garlic
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 rocoto (Peruvian chile) seeded and thinly sliced
- 1 tablespoon aji amarillo (Peruvian chile)
- ½ cup cilantro leaves, chopped

Directions

In a large bowl, combine fish, salt, garlic, rocoto and aji amarillo. Add lime juice, red onions and cilantro.

Serve with sweet potatoes, yucca (boiled and peeled) and cancha (Peruvian corn nuts)

Note: Peruvian chile and corn nuts are available at many Latin food markets, in the section with Central and South American items.