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Chefs Pick: Cali, Colombia's Best Eats

by Karen Catchpole | Nov 13, 2014

7-9 minutes

At first glance **Cali, Colombia**, the steamy self-proclaimed salsa capital of the world, does not seem like a food town. However, it didn't take long for Cali-born chef [Paula Silva Wiswel](#), who trained in Spain including spending one time with Albert and Ferran Adria, and runs a catering and consulting service in Colombia, appears on Colombian television and will be opening a new restaurant in 2015, to change my mind. Here are her favorite market snacks, sophisticated restaurant plates, artisanal cocktails, and more.

Silva was on a mission. We'd arrived at the daily Alameda Market in Cali and she was moving with purpose past the jumble of prepared food and fresh produce stands, pausing only briefly when a fresh fruit or vegetable caught her eye. We finally settled onto stools at an eatery called *Las Rellenas de Carolina* (located at *Mesa 1, puesto 712*) and soon we had plump, steaming tamales in front of us.

The silky corn meal masa was filled with tender pork, potatoes, and peas in a succulent and tasty package. Selma, Carolina's sister, brought out a plastic bowl full of spicy, rich homemade *aji*, hot sauce, that made them even better. When the tamale was devoured Silva ordered a plate of the food stand's other specialty,

morcilla blood sausages in two varieties: with rice or with herbs. I've had *morcilla* all over Colombia but these were earthier and richer than any I'd had. Doused in that hot sauce they were irresistible.

Cali is known for its *cholados*, a mix of fresh tropical fruit, condensed milk, day-glow syrup, cookies, and shaved ice.

Nowhere is more famous for *cholados* than *Parque del Cholados* in a town called Jamundi on the outskirts of Cali. Here an entire park, currently being renovated and set to re-open in December, is devoted to this beloved treat with nearly 40 open air *cholado* stands. The traditional *cholado*, which started out more than four decades ago as ice flavored with fruit juice on a stick, has become more and more elaborate over the years as vendors try to one-up each other.

Cholados now have so many ingredients that they have to be served in a cup with a carefully arranged "fruit flower" on top. If you don't want all the bells and whistles you can custom order your *cholado*. That's what Silva did, eliminating the syrup, condensed milk, and cookie and going heavy on fresh lulo, mango, strawberry, and banana with a dash of pineapple juice over shaved ice. Tip: the man who made our *cholados* thinks avocado juice will be the next new ingredient added to this ever-evolving treat.

According to Silva, you really can't go wrong at any of the sidewalk stalls selling shrimp cocktails on the street behind the Alameda Market. Turnover is high and pride is taken with every single bowl full of small, cool, pre-cooked shrimp doused in a pink sauce made from mayonnaise and ketchup and mixed with chopped white onion and parsley then served with *Crackenas*, Colombia's version of Saltine crackers.

I'd already started eyeing the crisp, cool, inviting [Calathea](#) shop in the increasingly hip El Peñón neighborhood of Cali even before Silva confessed that this is her favorite place for frozen treats. In 2009 FCI-trained Colombian pastry chef Maria del Pilar Agudelo Muzzulini, whose first job was at Restaurant Jean-Georges followed by stints with other Michelin-starred chefs in Spain and with renowned pastry chef and chocolatier Oriol Balaguer, started making and selling one liter containers of artisanal ice cream and sorbets out of her house in Cali.

By 2011 Agudelo needed a bigger space and by 2012 she opened her first Calathea store. Her second opened in 2014 and both now offer ice creams made fresh daily with no artificial flavors and no commercial bases in 30 flavors which rotate daily. Agudelo is particularly proud of the flavors that sum up her experiences and memories from growing up in Cali like *queso con bocadillo*, *breva*, and *desamargado*.

Most restaurants in Cali have a bar but it usually looks and feels like an afterthought – a tiny, cramped, neglected space meant to handle any overflow waiting for a table but certainly not a destination in and of itself. The El Bar de al Lado at Restaurant el Escudo del Quijote restaurant is a welcome change. It has its own ample, well-decorated and well-furnished space with a full-time talented bartender and great music. That's why it's one of Silva's favorite places to meet for a drink, especially the gin and tonic. It's made with one of half a dozen types of gin, Tonic water, freshly crushed juniper berries, and a sprig of fresh rosemary that is carefully heated over a flame before it's added to the drink.

Don't worry if you get a bit peckish at El Bar de al Lado. Everything on Restaurant el Escudo del Quijote's wide-ranging and very

popular menu is available for order at the bar and many of the plates make perfectly shareable bar snacks. Try the smoked mero over tabouli and eggplant or this plate of beef carpaccio with maracuya “caviar”, diced avocado, micro arugula, and edible flowers.

In the middle of the historic San Antonio neighborhood of Cali you will find an unassuming corner house. Step inside [Azul Restaurant](#) and you enter the inventive, no-holds-barred world of Chef Marta Izquierdo. She has never tasted many of the items on her *Mediterranean* and Spanish influenced menu and says her dishes are not necessarily recipes but “ideas” brought to life within the constraints of ingredient availability and the customer palette in Colombia. Her favorite diners are those who request her “clandestine” menu of dishes not on the menu and subject to the vagaries of her current mood and interests. Silva says it’s exactly that unconventional but skilled approach to food that makes Azul one of her favorite restaurants in Cali.

Off the clandestine menu at Restaurante Azul is this terrine of marinated cubes of mero on diced avocado over a bed of chips made with lentil flour all dusted with house dried spicy chili flakes. Also try some of the chef’s favorite a la carte offerings: a rich, smoky take on moussaka or a cold appetizer of smooth, sweet, deconstructed stuffed artichokes in turmeric mixed with baby cilantro. Rabbit, salt cod, lamb and an extensive wine list solidify this restaurant’s standing head and shoulders above many others in Cali.