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# Meet The Queen of Colombian Cuisine

by Karen Catchpole | Feb 25, 2015

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Chef Leonor Espinosa doesn't look like anyone else in Colombia. Born in Cartagena, she's an imposing mix of Afro Colombian genes. More importantly, she doesn't *cook* like anyone else in Colombia. That's clear the moment we sat down to eat at [Leo Cocina y Cava](#), her chic and acclaimed restaurant in [Bogota](#).

You can order a la carte off an oversized gold menu full of dishes crafted exclusively from traditional and often obscure Colombian ingredients and techniques. But do yourself a favor and choose one of the two tasting menus (\$60 for nine courses). Every one of the plates was gasp worthy in presentation and flavor.

Truly creative, but never silly, dishes included Chinese potato dusted cones filled with creamy crab with olive oil pearls on top, succulent dollops of rich, slow-cooked beef tail served on a bed of creamy manioc with basil foam and ant-encrusted seared tuna. The meal was capped off with an aperitif of [tomaseca](#), an obscure infused fermented sugar cane drink that's been made by Afro Colombian communities for hundreds of years.

Espinosa, who is a trained economist and says she learned to cook by researching Colombian ingredients and techniques, is motivated by the desire to give those ingredients and techniques their due. "In

Colombia we've gotten used to thinking that foreign things are better," she said. "That has led us to lose our culinary value."

Her work to restore that sense of culinary value doesn't take place exclusively in the kitchen. Along with her daughter, sommelier Laura Hernandez, Espinosa also runs the [Fundacion Leo Espinosa](#), which works to preserve Colombia's food heritage through initiatives like buying finished artisanal food products (including the tomaseca served at the restaurant) and visiting rural areas to record and encourage local food traditions.

In 2014 Leo Cocina y Cava was added to the list of [50 Best Restaurants in Latin America](#), an accolade that Espinosa says "is a recognition not only of me but of Colombian cuisine." But she isn't resting on her laurels. In 2014, Espinosa was part in a Colombian culinary television show called *The Test* and at the end of the year she opened Misia in Bogota, where she's serving gourmet, artisanal takes on *piqueteadero*, Colombian favorites including *morcilla* (blood sausage), arepas, smoked sausage, and more. The plan for 2015 includes expanding the Misia concept across Colombia and publishing a cookbook. We'll be first in line to pick one up.