

THE WAY TO SAN JOSÉ

Forget Costa Rica's glitzy coastal restaurants and make a beeline for the energetic district of Escalante in capital San José – a barrio that has been taken over by a new breed of chefs, intent on using indigenous produce and reviving authentic recipes. Philip Sweeney digs in

PHOTOGRAPHY
BY ULF SVANE

GOURMET TRAVELLER
COSTA RICA





This page, clockwise from far left: the opulent interior of the Teatro Nacional; a local woman; sea bass and chips at El Jardín de Lolita; Tomillo's plantain paste with cacao; the velvet and gilt-clad theatre. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Teatro Nacional's Alma de Café; local coffee beans; an espresso at Alma de Café; a Rávi Gastropub chef; lamb belly at Silvestre; Pablo Bonilla of Tomillo; vegetables with cheese at Rávi; a local café; a Silvestre starter; lunch at Rávi; mist over a forest path

Travel information

San José is the capital of Costa Rica. Flights from the UK take 11.5 hours. Currency is the Costa Rican Colón (CRC). Time is 6 hours behind GMT. In Feb/Mar, the average high temperature is 25C; the average low is 18C.

GETTING THERE
American flies London Heathrow to San José via Dallas. *american.com*
British Airways has flights from Gatwick to San José. *ba.com*

RESOURCES
Visit Costa Rica is the official tourist board and its website is packed with useful information to help you plan your trip. *visitcostarica.com*

'A full-scale boom is reaching its climax. Ever more ambitious food outlets open every week and locals and tourists roam the streets seeking them out'



Chayote Lodge

High above the Central Valley, among woods, coffee fields and pasture lands, and not far from the celebrated Poás Volcano Park, this is an excellent place to sample rural Costa Rica only an hour from the city centre, and even less from the airport. Owner Rolando Campos searched for years for the perfect spot to build his dream business before finding it minutes from the village where his mother ran the local school. His architect created a series of spacious chalet suites cleverly based on the unique traditional design of the coffee sheds still dotting the area. From the secluded balconies of the chalets or the broad hydrangea-surrounded terrace of the glass-walled restaurant and bar area, you can gaze down towards the distant city, set out to explore neighbouring coffee estates, and on certain nights, Mondays, oddly enough, drive 20 minutes to a neighbouring village to dance to vintage salsa with the locals in a vast country discotheque. Doubles from £275. Llano Bonito, Naranjo, 00 506 4001 6923, *chayotelodge.com*

Mention you're going to Costa Rica and acquaintances who know the place rave about jungle-bordered beaches, world-class surfing, zip-wired rainforests, charming people, amazing wildlife. Add that you're staying in the capital, and to sample restaurants, and the congratulations change to commiseration. Sleepy little San José features on most radars solely for arrival and departure, and certainly not as a gastro-destination. The few restaurant recommendations you hear involve newly fashionable beach resorts like Santa Teresa on the Pacific coast, now a magnet for upwardly mobile chefs.

A restaurant backwater is not how it feels to the residents of Escalante, a barrio of broad streets, gardens and middle-class houses less than a kilometre from San José's centre, where a full-scale catering boom is reaching its climax. Ever more ambitious food outlets open every week and hordes of foodie locals and tourists roam the streets seeking them out. 'Four years ago there were six restaurants in Escalante,' says Luis Cisneros, owner of Rávi Gastropub, one of the most successful of the brand-new category of Costa Rican vegetarians, 'now there's over a hundred. Actually, it's getting too much, rents are rocketing, it's getting hard to make a living'.

A few blocks from Rávi, the latest contender is spared the rental problem. Isolina is named after the property's original owner, matriarch of the Escalante family, coffee growers who gave their name in the 1870s to the district, then a swathe of coffee plantation dotted with houses, and also provided the land for the Atlantic railway whose elderly diesels still chug past the doorways of the new gastro-businesses on their way south from the old Escalante station. The latest generation of the family has just converted half of the rambling 1940s villa, discovering under layers of wallpaper the old photos and which now form part of the very swish decor. An Argentinian chef produces the sophisticated menu, typical of modern Costa Rica, composed of local ingredients and internationally fashionable combinations: pork belly with pickled pineapple and grilled okra, ceviche of sea bass with passion fruit and roasted chilli sauce, lots of smoking and fermentation.

If Isolina represents the new high-end Escalante, another 1940s house near the historic Customs House theatre typifies the district's more alternative side. Manos en la Masa – literally 'hands in the dough', figuratively, 'caught red-handed' – is the



Where to eat

Prices are per person for three courses, with a glass of beer or wine, unless otherwise stated

Al Mercat Informal premises filled with pale wood and plants. Excellent produce, much of it fresh from chef José González's family veg farm, including lots of under-used indigenous items. Sophisticated, simple cooking, typified by superb grilled avocado with a punchy chorizo and chimichurri sauce. From £28. *Avenida 13, 00 506 2221 0783, almercat.com*

Azotea 7 Rooftop bar/restaurant with small outside terrace. Excellent wine and cocktail service and obliging waiters. Some nice small plates: ceviches, bocas. Croquetas, hamburgers and steaks. From £22. *Central Avenida Boulevard, 00 506 2010 0000, hotelpresidente.com*

La Criollita A long-established, traditional restaurant where an ageing and uniformed waiting staff convey large and very acceptable versions of all Costa Rican and some international standards. Popular with local office workers. From £15. *Avenida 7, 00 506 2256 6511*

La Esquina de Buenos Aires A large corner restaurant near the cathedral offering excellent grilled meats and much more amid white linen, dark wood and old tango photos. An atmosphere hard to beat anywhere in town. From £52. *Calle 11, 00 506 2257 9741, laesquinadebuenosaires.net*

Isolina Latest of the Escalante new wave, set in a 1940s house with a wine cellar in a former bedroom, and an Argentinian chef with a liking for purées and creams to accompany meat dishes. From £60. *Calle 33, 00 506 2100 8747*

El Jardín de Lolita A chilled-out, arty complex of restaurants and food stalls offering everything from pizza to ramen, with alfresco terrace seating. *Avenida 3, Calle 25 and 29, 00 506 8470 9485*

Park Café Run by Michelin-starred English chef Richard Neat in the spacious, open-sided salons around the courtyard of a big house off Sabana Grande – the Hyde Park of San José. Meticulous small tapas dishes combining local ingredients with European tradition. From £48. *Sabana Norte, 00 506 2290 6324*

Silvestre One of the key practitioners of high-end modern cooking in Costa Rica occupying a period house in Amón. Erudite and dynamic chef-owner Santiago Fernández is a future star. From £45. *Avenida 11, 00 506 2221 2465, restaurantesilvestre.com*

Clockwise from top left: Santiago Fernández of Silvestre; chocolate mousse and grilled plantain at Al Mercat; the tropical zapote fruit; fresh watermelon; turtle eggs with hot sauce; a splash of colour at Al Mercat; a Jardín de Lolita food stall; takeaway from the market; chillies for sale; Adriana Sánchez of Manos en la Masa; ceviche at Tomillo; a market wine bar; shoppers stop for a break; buying a lottery ticket; a Jardín de Lolita terrace. Below: a woman at her market produce stall



creation of Adriana Sánchez, a former linguist and writer turned baker and cook. The series of panelled rooms she now rents once belonged to another high bourgeois family. 'This road was all politicians and landowners up to the 1970s,' she says. In the 1980s and 90s, the coffee plantations disappeared and the old families left, and the area fell victim to classic inner urban decay. 'Around 2006 a movement started to reclaim the city,' says Sánchez, serving me a slice of her famous *tres leches* cake, 'mass cycling groups, dances in the squares, little cafés and bars...' Much of the new crop of Escalante catering followed Euro-American trends – craft beers, sourdough bakers, etc. – but importantly also, the movement, very prevalent in Latin America, to rediscover lost or overlooked indigenous foods. 'You must try Tomillo, Pablo Bonilla's doing and Santiago Fernández' Silvestre is amazing,' she says.

But first it's time to look at San José's food scene prior to the Escalante revolution. I'm staying bang in the centre, a block from the sedate grey Cathedral, the exuberantly gilded Teatro Nacional and the few 1940s and 50s department stores and office blocks which complete the architectural heritage. My billet, the Presidente, forms part of this, originally a boutique, before conversion by the proprietor into a hotel in 1963, named after the famous visit that year by President Kennedy, and now renovated quirkily into the newest and flashiest in town.

From the rooftop bar of Hotel Presidente, Costa Rican mojito in hand – local guaro cane spirit replaces the rum – you can look out over a patchwork of corrugated rooftops up the green valley slopes towards the hills, from where the



From left: a man stops to read a text on his phone; market shoppers in full swing; stuffed chilli with white sauce at Rávi Gastropub. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: tuna with ginger dressing and mango purée at Park Café; an El Jardín de Lolita bar; Park Café's quail stuffed with cherries and quail egg; a man eats his lunch in a downtown soda; Chayote Lodge and its spectacular view over San José; Costa Rican bling; scallop with prosciutto and spinach omelette at Park Café; a Hotel Presidente terrace; a smiling local woman

'In some of the bars, musicians entertain, elderly coastal marimba xylophone combos, or the Mexican mariachis who congregate in their silver-embroidered charro costumes waiting to be hired for a party'

rain clouds roll down every afternoon. A dozen streets away, the murky hangar-like interior of the big central market complex contains all the food products of the country. In short, the corn, pumpkins, tubers, fish and fowl of the indigenous tribal inhabitants, the milk and cheese, beef, breads and rices of the Spanish, Afro-Caribbean touches from the Atlantic coast and of course a huge variety of fruit, not least the bananas, which, along with coffee, became Costa Rican emblems under the production of the multinational Del Monte, bete noire of the ecologically correct new foodies of Escalante.

The market also contains dozens of examples of the 'soda', the traditional cheap popular eating place of Costa Rica. Run by teams of labouring women in flowery aprons manipulating great steaming cauldrons and frying pans, the sodas' little formica tables and bar counters provide big bowls of *gallo pinto* (rice and beans), *olla de carne* (a pot au feu style stew), ceviche, sometimes flavoured with coconut, and the ubiquitous *casado*, a composite dish of white rice, beans, fried plantain, salad, and some meat, maybe finely chopped and stewed as picadillo, or a fried egg. I head for the legendary Soda Tapia, a crowded little establishment, to scoff an excellent *chifrijo*, a layered bowl of beans, chicharron pork crackling, rice, fresh tomatoes and piquant chimichurri sauce.

Apart from the sodas, big cantina-style popular bars also serve food. A handwritten notice on the counter of one announces

'*Hay huevos de tortuga*': turtle eggs, broken into a glass, topped with spicy tomato sauce and swallowed raw. In some of the bars, musicians entertain, elderly coastal marimba xylophone combos, or the Mexican mariachis who congregate in their silver-embroidered charro costumes by Calle 9 waiting to be hired for a party.

Though San José excels in rough drinking dives, it's not a place of elegant café terraces. The nearest to a classic café is found within the newly renovated Grand Hotel, or amid the dark wood and marble interior of the buffet of the Teatro Nacional. Opposite the central post office, one of the city's few monumental buildings, the Club Union is probably the last culinary outpost of conservative old money, with a separate glass kiosk café open to non-members.

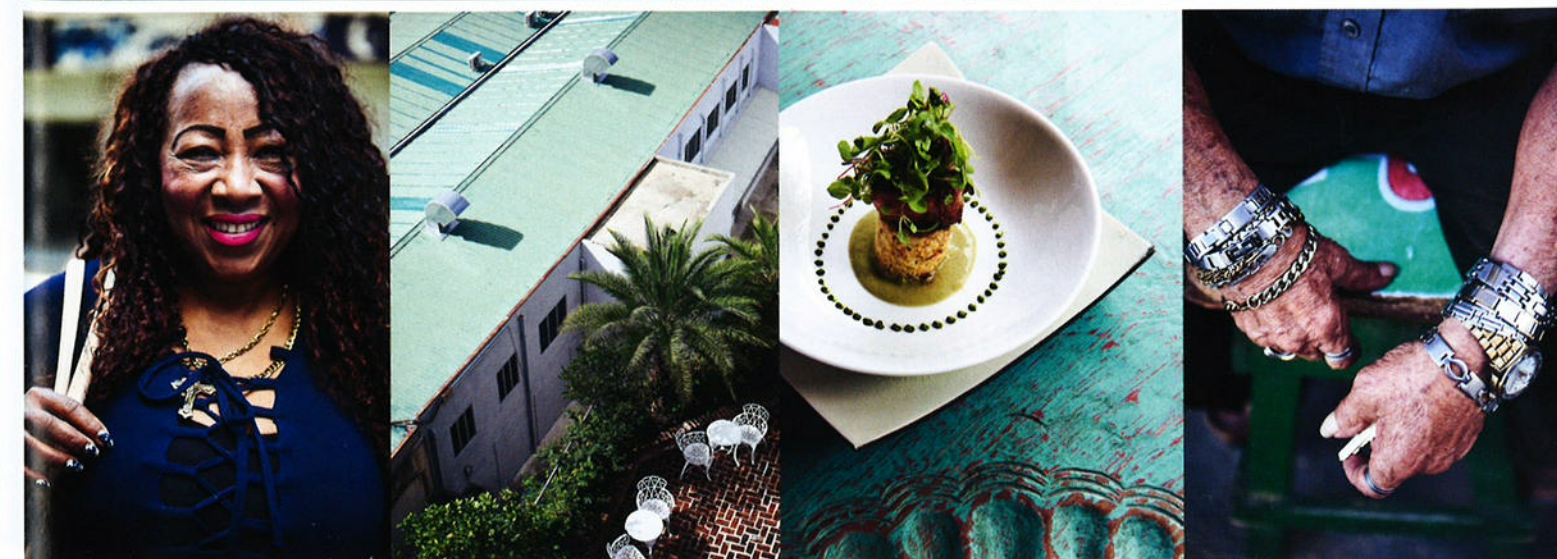
In recent years the old central municipal markets have acquired rivals. The huge and numerous US-style shopping centres obviously, and also the alternative middle-class organic markets with their attendant clothes and jewellery vendors, yoga and massage stalls. In a grove of tall, flamboyant trees by Escalante, the Saturday Feria Verde market is a pleasant place to try artisan *turrialba*, *palmito* or *bagaces* cheeses from the Valle Central, or odd finds like artisan smoked trout made by a retired German engineer. The best places of all, though, for quality, variety and teeming picturesque vitality, are the farmers' markets. I spend an enjoyable Saturday morning at Zapote market, beside the Plaza de Toros (Costa



Where to stay

Apartotel La Sabana Pleasant, modern, low-rise hotel with a lovely, foliage-bordered swimming pool in a quiet street off Sabana Norte Park. A little distant from the centre but an extremely comfortable base for relaxing away from the bustle of the city, giving you all the comfort of a hotel alongside the freedom of an apartment. Doubles from £75. *Sabana Norte*, 00 506 2220 2422, apartotel-lasabana.com
Grano de Oro San José's most sumptuous lodgings, hands down, a rather grand 21-room boutique hotel richly and elaborately decorated in swathes of period fabric, wood and glassware from the turn-of-the-century home of the Pozuelo coffee family. Very posh, rather old-fashioned. Highly esteemed and has a good restaurant. Doubles from £138. *Calle 30*, 00 506 2255 3322, hotelgranodeoro.com
Hotel Colonial Pleasant, quiet, traditional-style hotel with a wonderful cream and chocolate-coloured facade from the 1950s, a fantastic colonnaded interior patio and two floors of comfortable rooms. Well

situated in the centre opposite an excellent Argentinian restaurant. Doubles from £61. *Calle 11*, 00 506 2223 0109, hotelcolonialcr.com
Hotel Fleur de Lys Garish but fun neo-Victorian mansion-style property offering 31 rooms. Well run, comfortable and very well positioned, near all of central San José's attractions, and very competitively priced. Doubles from £39. *Calle 13*, 00 506 2223 1206, hotelfleurdelys.com
Hotel Presidente Quirky modern hotel situated above a large clothes shop in the heart of the city. Well-appointed, smart rooms, good staff and a great rooftop bar/restaurant. Doubles from £79. *Central Avenida Boulevard*, 00 506 2010 0000, hotelpresidente.com
Sleep Inn Dreadful name belies a smart, modern hotel, part of the central downtown Colonial Casino complex. Slightly bland but extremely well positioned, with a front view of the attractive, Eiffel-designed school and its mature tree-filled small park. Doubles from £73. *Paseo las Damas, Avenida 34*, 00 506 2521 6500, sleepinnsan jose.com



Food glossary

- Boca** General term for a snack, which can include gallos, tacos, chicharrones, empanadas and much more
- Casado** Very common composite dish served in popular restaurants, consisting of rice, fried plantains, beans, salad, and meat or eggs
- Ceviche** Popular at all levels of restaurant. Raw fish and seafood, in the usual citric-based marinades, and sometimes coconut milk
- Cheese** As in nearby Colombia, the cool pasture areas of Costa Rica produce numerous cheese varieties, most reputed cow's milk varieties including Turrialba from the Valle Central, palmito, a sort of Creole mozzarella, bagaces, a drier cheese from Guanacaste region, and assorted goat's cheeses
- Chicharron** Pork skin or offal fried to produce a moreish, crunchy dish similar to crackling
- Fruit/vegetables/juices** Large variety of pan-tropical fruit and veg augmented by native Costa Rican species such as *ayote* (pumpkin), *achiote* (red dye-producing edible seeds), *guanabana* (local sour sop), *jocote* (sour cashew fruit), *pejibaye* (peach palm fruit), *mozote* (shrub used to make infusions). All made into batido shakes
- Gallo** Corn tortilla topped with or rolled around a filling, typically eaten as a snack
- Gallo pinto** Most common basic dish of Costa Rica eaten any time of day including breakfast. Known on the Atlantic coast by its English name, 'rice and beans'
- Picadillo** Finely chopped or minced meat cooked with diced vegetables and herbs
- Rum/guaro** Costa Rican sugar cane spirits are produced by the state monopoly distilleries: Centenario for rum and Cacique for the cane alcohol guaro
- Salsa Lizano** Very popular bottled sauce brand, which is nothing less than a version of the British favourite Worcestershire sauce
- Taco chino** Emblematic snack of the large Chinese community of Costa Rica – in effect a Creolised fried spring roll
- Tamal** Ground corn mixed with assorted seasonings and steamed in a leaf or waxed paper

Clockwise from top: a man checks his crops; watermelons at the market; the Saturday FERIA Verde; toast with houmous and avocado at Rávi; locals enjoying a stroll; José González shows off his green fingers; limes at the farmers' market; the verdant landscape just outside of the city; mint growing on José González's farm; avocado, cheese and peppers at Rávi Gastropub; a residential street in San José; tropical flowers in Park Café; detail of a leaf; lunch at the FERIA Verde

Rican corridas nowadays don't kill the bulls, incidentally, as befits a country famous for the abolition of its army). There are rows of butchers, bakers, and fruit and veg sellers, but also terrific and genuine street food: lines of juice squeezers working flat out, griddles and fryers of gallos, bocas, pupusas, chalupas, and all the other varieties of stuffed, topped or smothered flatbread, or of tacos chinos, the Creole spring rolls of Costa Rica's Chinese community.

While many chefs enthusiastically patronise the farmers' markets, some go further and grow their own. We drive out with a dynamic young Escalante entrepreneur named José González to his small farm in a valley on the edge of the city. Fields of vegetables, rows of greenhouses, groves of trees, all tended by a resident family, Nicaraguans, like many of Costa Rica's agricultural workers. González, son of a Del Monte agronomist and once personal cook to a rich American in southwestern France, jumps from plot to plot, uprooting, sniffing, tasting, extolling the virtues of fine local produce simply cooked, in free-flow exclamation commentary: 'Wow, it's so good man!' should be the name of his restaurant, rather than Al Mercat. It is here that José proceeds to rustle up a delicious lunch which completely supports his principles: gallo tacos with chunks of succulent avocado, chicken, chorizo-like Toulouse sausage, chicharron, corn cobs, ayote, wonderful avocado, all barred with dark griddle marks, and enhanced with fresh piquant sauces.

The following day, it's into deep ethno-gastronomy at Tomillo, a small pavement counter and shopfront café in a community cultural centre at the outer edge of Escalante, just within sight of the cream spire of Santa Teresita church. Pablo Bonilla, chef-proprietor, tattoo of the Boruca god Sibú on bicep, talks of his mentor, Costa Rica's pioneering indigenous





'Pablo serves us corn gallos, corvina fish, a ceremonial dessert of plantain paste and a glass of pejibaye juice, which is so worthy I'm tempted to ask maliciously for a slosh of Pepsi and a little parasol in it'

Clockwise from top left: French toast with ice cream and strawberries at Manos en la Masa; San José as seen from the Hotel Presidente; a colourful mural adorns a building; a visitor to the farmers' market; art in Rávi Gastropub; a market pit stop; taking a break from shopping; the Rávi interior

food researcher Leila Garro and his own years studying remote communities. I hear of the ancient renown of Costa Rican foodstuffs – the Aztec emperor Montezuma used to import cacao from Talamancas in the 16th century – and the suppression of indigenous food practices by the Catholic Church, illustrated heart-rendingly by the story of the green bread: taught by visiting priests that their native bread was only fit for pigs, a jungle community sent members to trek for days to buy white bread to store ready for the next unpredictable priestly visit and, when it happened, proudly ate the white bread, now green with mould, to demonstrate their civilisation.

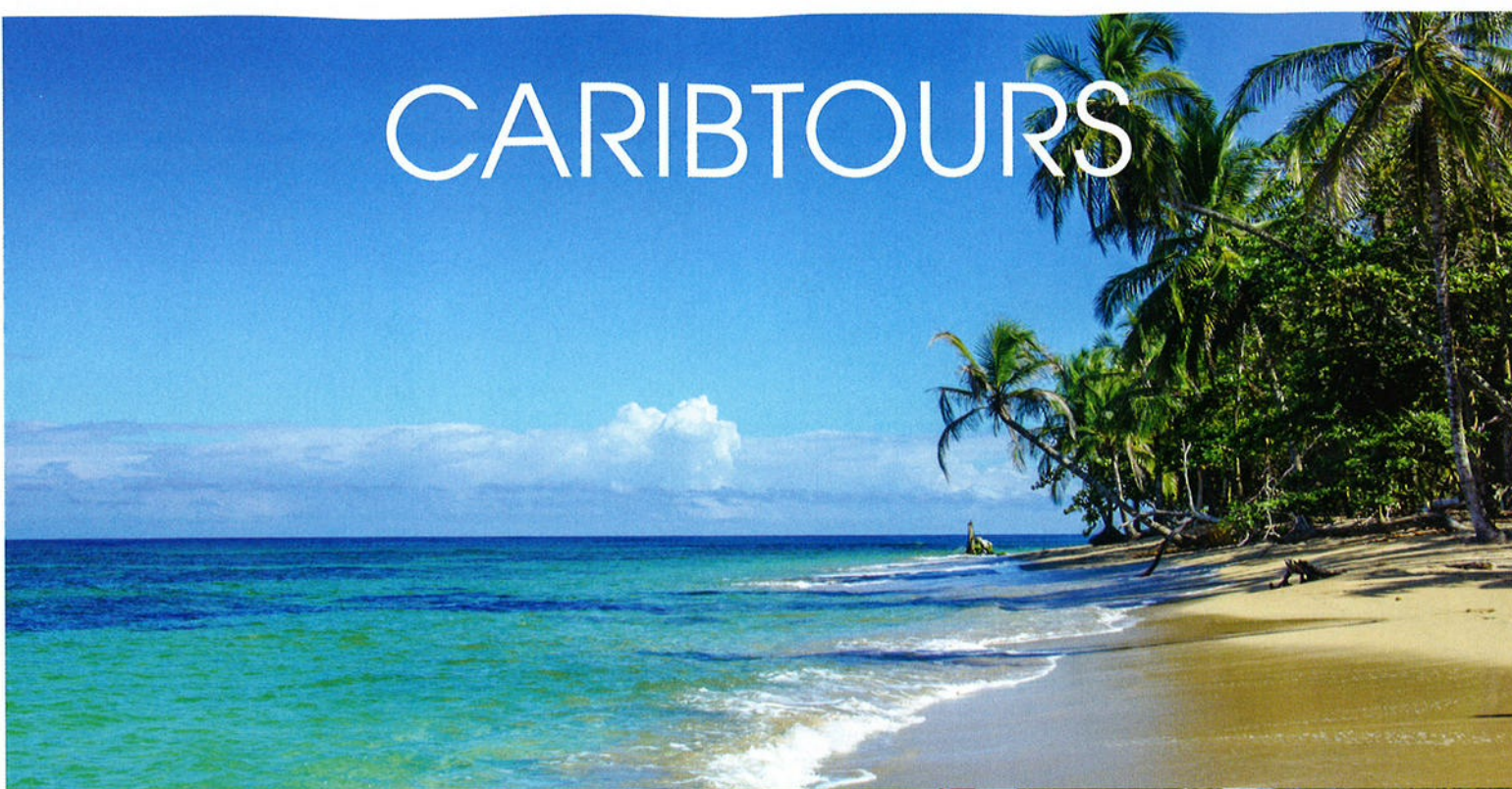
Pablo serves us corn gallos with smoked chicken, corvina fish in pejibaye, a ceremonial dessert of plantain paste and a glass of pejibaye juice, which is so worthy I'm tempted to ask maliciously for a slosh of Pepsi and a little parasol in it. But I can only admire Pablo's dedication, and sympathise when he points to the big new hamburger outlet just opened. 'They can sell 5,000 burgers when there's a street party in the barrio. Do you know how many dishes Dona Leila sold when she set up an indigenous food stall? One.'

Like many pioneers, however, Leila Garro's work has not been in vain. A new generation of polished caterers is emerging to carry on

the now fashionable field of culinary ethnology. It's time for dinner at Silvestre. With his first restaurant in the north already winning awards, Santiago Fernández' new venture occupies a former wealthy home in Amón, a barrio adjacent to Escalante and next on the gentrification list. Fernández devours cookbooks, spends his weekends visiting indigenous communities with ethno-botanists, and turns out tasting menus of remarkable inventiveness and eclecticism. His current offering is a tour of Costa Rica in eight playful dishes, from the lamb reared on volcanic ash soil of Cartago province with an aligot of Cartago potatoes and cheese, to a haute cuisine rendering of a Caribbean coast Churchill ice cone.

It's no surprise that Fernández organises visits by high-profile European chefs and follows keenly the careers of the culinary stars of Peru, Brazil and Mexico. If anyone's going to take Costa Rica into this global coterie of glitzy events, expensive PR agencies, rich sponsors and publicity-hungry governments, it's Santiago Fernández. I reckon I may have got to sleepy little San José in the nick of time. □

Philip Sweeney and Ulf Svane travelled to Costa Rica courtesy of the Costa Rica Tourism Board. visitcostarica.com/uk



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