

"Latinoamérica tiene salsa"

Interview with Gastón Acurio

Manuel de Rivero

Abstract

In this interview with Manuel de Rivero, Gastón Acurio analyzes the moment we are living: Europe cannot sustain the well-being society and faces serious challenges to renew itself; on the other hand, the North American societies are overwhelmed by an extremely individualist and consumerist vision. Facing that, Latin America shows itself generous, willing to return the illusion to spiritless consumers, without emotion for life.

The interview revises various concepts common to cookery and architecture, such as modernity and vanguard. Nowadays, Acurio says, being modern is looking inside us in search for a truth that the world can make his. Vanguard, on the other hand, is promoting fair trade and inclusiveness.

For Acurio, a new ethics is emerging: Latin America teaches to relate success to solidarity, luxury to commitment, and aesthetics to ethics.

Acurio points out that he makes restaurants in the world so that his country can be proud of its culture. About the position of Peruvian cuisine in the world, he maintains that it is due to the union of chefs. Peru got tired of failure stories.

For Acurio, one of the 20 most influential chefs in the planet, Latin Americans today have the opportunity to teach the world how to do things. For Acurio, Latin America teaches to relate success to solidarity, luxury to commitment and aesthetics to ethics.

There is great interest in Latin America. Our image is changing. If we used our ingenuity before, it was to survive. Nowadays, we use it to innovate. We begin to have things to say to the world. You are the spokesman of Peruvian culture and have become one of the leading figures in this historical process. How did this change happen?

The history of humanity has been written on processes where coincidences and luck often intervene. Today we are living a historical moment. The coveted Europe has become old, it is full of conflict, it cannot sustain a society of wellbeing and it faces serious challenges to renew itself. On the other hand, the North American society is overwhelmed by an extremely individualist and consumerist vision. The results of this economic vision are evident. We are in front of all this, Latin America, the world of opportunities. We are in front of that egotism as optimistic citizens, full of dreams, ideas, forms and conceptual opportunities, generous, impatiently waiting for the world to adopt our ideas.

In the recent gastronomic fair Mistura⁽¹⁾ you launched the campaign "Latin America has salsa". What does it mean?

On a superficial reading, it means that as China has chain production to cater

to certain specific needs of the world, we produce color, rhythm, salsa, in the widest sense of the word. Salsa, ready to flood the world with happiness. Salsa to give illusion back to dull consumers without excitement for life.

On a deeper reading, it means that we, Latin Americans, can tell beautiful, exciting and sensorially intense stories. That our stories can be profitable, successful, the protagonist in cookery, in architecture, in art, in science, in the reconnection of man with nature, in the new paradigms that humanity needs to assume in order to survive. Specifically, it means that Latin America teaches to relate success to solidarity, luxury to commitment, aesthetics to ethics.⁽²⁾

This is the key: we have to understand that the ball is no longer in the global consumer's court. The global consumer is waiting for us. Today, more than ever, we brighten people's life in the world, without stealing anything from them, without conquering anything, without faking wars, simply by being who we are, with our rhythm. In this world full of disappointment, a shining Latin America, full of very conceptually modern ideas has emerged.

How do you understand modernity?

In the past, being modern was looking towards Europe and interpreting it. Nowadays, being modern is looking inside us, in search for a truth that the world can make its own. We are historically used to Europeanizing, Americanizing or Japanizing ourselves. Today, we have the opportunity to Latin Americanize the world.

The change results from an alignment of critical situations in certain parts of the world, and to what else?

We are living an opportunity, a historical moment. Peru became tired of defeat. These are factors that are joined together and can be taken advantage of.

The alignment has been very clear in Peru: our cultural wealth and our ecological diversity are an opportunity for a new ethics.

Naturally, what is the Latin-American philosophy? What should be shared with the world? Our philosophy teaches that the world is not made of the successful and the defeated, but of human beings that share their defeats and their successes. If I am successful, my main objective is that others are successful, too. If someone fails, I am going to be the first one to help him, and when I have a difficulty, others will come to help me. Nobody should celebrate his success knowing that somebody is suffering his defeat. If I have a restaurant, those who are with me, the farmers, the producers, the fishermen, have to be fine.

Consumers embrace an idea of a fairer trade through my dishes. Instead of asking for prawns when it is their closed season, customers become controllers of the closed season. I appeal to pride, to being part of history. This principle is useful in mining, in fishery, in architecture, in education, in politics, in medicine, in everything.

It is like what Miguel Grau⁽³⁾ did when he sank Admiral Prat's ship.⁽⁴⁾ The first

thing he did was to lift him and write to his wife.⁽⁵⁾ And who is Miguel Grau? A great hero. Why? Because of that gesture.

We have the possibility of being heroes every minute, every time we win something, every time we succeed. Every time we achieve something we have to think of someone else who lost, in a way to make it possible for nobody to lose, for everyone to win.

You are invited to different places in the world to talk about Peru and Latin America. What is the impression that those who see us from outside have of us?

They no longer see Latin America as the continent of failure. They see us as a continent of dreams. When they think of Peru, for example, they think of magic, of unique, sensorial, emotional experiences that will enrich their life. Everybody would like to come in search of those experiences some day.

What is bigger in Latin America, the differences or the similarities?

With all its diversity, at least in the realm of the kitchen, similarities predominate. The great coincidence is that we all want to look inside ourselves and use our own products, even though local consumers still have a certain Frenchification. This happens because, although we embrace our own culture, we have not yet consolidated the union. Some Latin Americans continue to see themselves as competitors. Please! If I want to take Peruvian cuisine to the markets of the world and I do not see a Peruvian chef as my partner and my allied but as a competitor, I am fighting

for the crumbs of a cake that does not exist. If we have been able to place Peruvian food in the world is because of the union of the chefs. "Latin America has "salsa" is the union of conscientious chefs. We have been able to break the barrier of vanities, of egos, of personal ambitions and, above all, of fears, of mistrust, to go to a higher status of team work. And, unfortunately, this is what has not happened in some Latin American communities yet.

In Peru this discourse is an attitude that spreads to other territories, to that one of fashion, for example. When this happens in music, in architecture, and so on, everything will flourish much faster. We have to do away with the fears, egos, vanities and insecurities we carry inside. There have to be internal and personal battles.

You have achieved something very rare. Normally, "avant-garde" is someone who works in something very specific, at a practically artisan scale; and the big and massive is considered "commercial". But you have managed to be avant-garde and, at the same time to build this empire⁽⁶⁾ that everybody recognizes, with franchises and restaurants of all kinds. For us, this is unheard of. In architecture it is difficult to see a corporation like this to be avant-garde.

We tend to demonize or stigmatize because we confuse the principles. I do not make restaurants because I want to become rich; that is the first rule. I make them because it is an entrusted mission: to make restaurants in the world so that my work can contribute globally to the development of Peruvian trademark.

Behind these replicated restaurants there is a purpose: the cultural presence of a country. The objective is not to make more money; the objective is for our country to be proud of its culture. Having these principles in front of you, you will never renounce to incorporate the producers, all the agents of our biodiversity, our natural capital.

I have been questioned about opening restaurants in foreign countries and, at the same time, promoting my local culture and fair trade. But there is no contradiction. I travel with five ingredients. My philosophy is to buy from local producers. In Lima or anywhere. In New York, for example, I only buy fish from those who associate freely. I buy other products from organic farmers only. I always support the local community. It would be reproachable if I arrived in New York with my Peruvian fish, with my vegetables and everything else.

You arrive with your chili peppers.

I arrive with five ingredients that are the icon of my Peruanity. The same way that the Japanese arrive. I do not come to invade. I come to cheer up, to make the New Yorker's life prettier.

And what about the risk that growing so much you may become a "sausage machine"?

That is not going to happen, this company was born as a beautiful small restaurant. If I cannot make small and beautiful restaurants, it does not make any sense to make them.

Then, you replicate the first one...

Every manager, every chef, every maître, regardless of the fact that he belongs to a company, has the mission to make a small and beautiful restaurant. La Mar in New York has nothing to do with La Mar in San Francisco. There is a linking thread that is "Peruanity", certain tastes, the attitude, but the design has nothing to do with it. The design of La Mar in New York responds to certain characteristics of the neighbourhood and the one in San Francisco, to others.

Gastronomy is not just one dish, the taste that you savour, but it goes far beyond that.

It is an experience. It never ends. Before, your gastronomic experience ended the moment you left the restaurant and sometimes it lasted one more day if you told a friend that you had had a tasty meal. Nowadays, a successful gastronomic experience keeps you thinking about it all the time. It incorporates into your life new tastes, principles, values, products, and so on. Chefs who are not capable of prolonging the experience will have problems in the future.

Is this inclusive version of gastronomy a Peruvian invention, a formula created here?

In Peru, we have turned social contradictions into an opportunity to build stories.

And that is what you, Peru and Latin America are teaching the world.

It is funny; we are making a restaurant

where we play with the words "exclusive" and "inclusive". It is like a paradox. But that is what it is, today, what is "exclusive" is what is "inclusive". That is to say, who is not inclusive is not going to be exclusive. [m](#)

NOTES

(1) Mistura, one of the initiatives generated in Lima by Gastón Acurio, is a gastronomic fair that attracts near 400 thousand visitors in one week.

(2) Gastón Acurio, the Brazilian Alex Atala and other recognized American chefs like Sumito Estévez (Venezuela), Narda Lepes (Argentina), Dante Liporace (Argentina), Enrique Olvera (México), Mikel Alonso García (México), Matías Palomo (Chile), Tomás Olivera (Chile), Pedro Miguel Schiaffino (Perú) and Mitsuharu Tsumura (Perú) have joined forces in a campaign that not only promotes gastronomic values, but also social and cultural values of the region.

(3) Peruvian Admiral considered the greatest national hero of his country (1834-1879).

(4) Arturo Prat (1848-1879): Chilean navy officer and lawyer, considered the maximum naval hero of his country. He was not an Admiral but Commander of the corvette Esmeralda (Commander-in-Chief of the Chilean fleet was Juan Williams Rebolledo).

(5) Carmela Carvajal (1851-1931).

(6) Astrid y Gastón: The restaurant has branches in 10 countries.

Tanta: The bistró is in five countries.

La Mar: The cebichería is in eight countries.

Other enterprises: La Pepa (jugos), Panchita (anticuchos), Madam Tusan (chifa), Chicha (comida regional), Pardos Chicken (pollo a las brasas).