

WINTER 2023

DEPARTURES



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DESIGN

BRAZIL'S
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The Real **AMAZON PRIME**

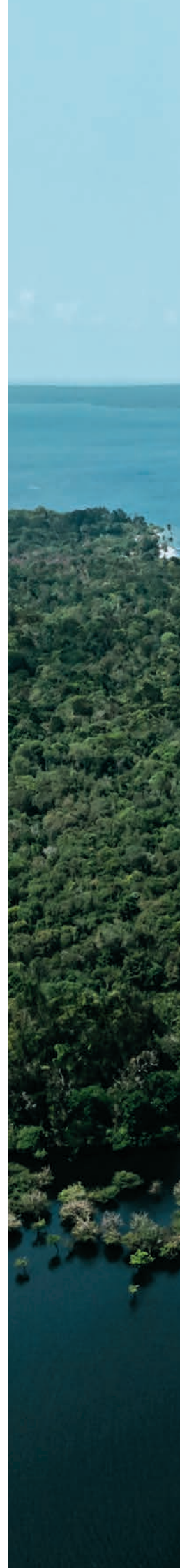
The Brazilian Amazon is known to harbour an astonishing range of flora and fauna – but what about food? PAUL RICHARDSON finds the verdant natural wonderland to be a wellspring for utterly unique ingredients, surprising flavours and rich culinary tradition.

Photographs by JILLIAN MILLER & RYAN WILKES

It's a steamy tropical evening in the city of Belém, at the mouth of the Amazon River in northern Brazil. In the glaring neon light of a street-side food stall, locals wait in line for their nightly bowlful of *tacacá*, a tangy soup based on the juice of the manioc root boiled up with salted prawns and a spinach-like leaf known as *jambú*. The first big surprise about *tacacá* is that it's always served piping hot, even in the broiling heat of a Brazilian summer. The second is *jambú* – one of the world's more remarkable vegetables. As I gingerly take my first spoonful of the soup, my mouth is filled with an extraordinary tingling, numbing sensation, like when the anaesthetic wears off after a visit to the dentist.

In a globalised world, it can sometimes seem as though there are no flavours still to be discovered, no ingredient that can't be bought at your nearest corner shop. A recent journey along the Amazon with bespoke travel outfitter Cazenove & Loyd showed me just how wrong you can be. My ten-day journey, which included stops in the cities of Belém and Manaus and a boat trip among the rainforests of the interior, was a deep dive into a kaleidoscopic world in which every day brought a raft of surprising dishes, an ingredient which to me was unfamiliar even though the riverside communities of the Amazon had been using it for centuries – and a challenge to my preconceptions.

The next morning at eight o'clock, I find myself at Belém's Ver-o-Peso market, one of the largest in South America. A handsome neo-Gothic structure dating from 1899, the market building stands on the banks of a river so wide you can barely see the other shore. Many of the products on its 2,000-odd stalls are unknown and unavailable even in other parts of Brazil. The fish section, in





A bird's-eye view over the remote beaches of Atodí, a remote village along the Arapiuns river in the Brazilian Amazon



particular, is a spectacular array of giant species like the *tambaquí*, much appreciated locally for its meaty flesh and pork-like “ribs”; and the mighty *pirarucú*, which can reach three metres in length and has a huge, leering mouth.

From a long line of stalls comes the tap-tap-tap of hammers breaking into the hard shells of Brazil nuts, a cash crop here known as “Pará chestnuts” (after the state of which Belém is the capital). I crunch on one of the freshly shelled *castanbas*, remembering that when these nuts appeared on our family table at Christmas, they were usually well past their sell-by date.

Later in the morning, a cooling breeze drifts off the river as I taste my way through a range of Amazonian fruits, savouring their unique and sometimes bizarre flavour characteristics. There’s the guava-like *buriti*, the appley *taperebá*, the bitter/acid *bacurí*, and the curious *cupuaçu*, whose peculiar aroma combines cloying sweetness, piercing acidity and a whiff of something that could (not unpleasantly) be kerosene or nail-varnish remover.

So begins my total immersion in the food culture of the Amazon basin, an experience that’s as thrilling as it is occasionally bewildering. In the coming days, I’ll visit rainforest communities where manioc root is processed

into multiple forms using ancestral techniques. Among the cooks I’ll meet, some use local ingredients in traditional recipes, while others deploy the same ingredients in ingenious contemporary ways.

Into the first category falls Prazeres Quaresma, who serves barbecued *tambaquí* and rice with *jambú* at her charming riverside restaurant Saldosa Maloca. So does Wagner Vieira, whose project, Toró Gastronomia Sustentável, aims to give visibility to the indigenous communities of Pará state by showcasing their culinary practices. In a rambling colonial house in downtown Belém, Vieira prepares for me a dish of *pirarucú* braised in Brazil-nut milk and Amazon herbs. While he cooks, his wife and collaborator Susane Rabelo speaks passionately about the need to reinforce the cultural self-esteem of tribes like the Wai-Wai and Suruí Ai Kewara, who have seen their lifestyle ruined by deforestation and other depredations on their land.

On the next day, I take a speedboat across the river’s mouth to Combu, a low-lying island across the water from Belém. Here, on a peaceful river inlet between walls of tropical greenery, Izete Costa (aka Dona Nena) runs a bean-to-bar chocolate factory using the produce of her own cacao plants, which grow hugger-mugger with overarching forest trees.

And it’s here on Combu island that I receive my induction into the world of *açaí*. In the woodland behind her house, Dona Nena points out thick clusters of what look like purple berries at the top of a slender palm tree. While in Europe and North America this “superfood” is most often eaten as a breakfast accompaniment for granola and yoghurt, the residents of Belém prefer it as an accompaniment for fried fish. When Dona Nena offers me a bowl and an invitation to taste, I can see why the combination might work: it’s low on sweetness, with an

Below: looking out across the vast canopy of Tapajós National Forest, a 500,000ha nature reserve in the state of Pará; *opposite page, from far left:* a local fisherman angles at the confluence of the Tapajós and Amazon rivers in Santarém; roast duck with *tucupí* sauce and *jambú*, served with rice and *farofa* at Casa do Saulo Quinta de Pedras restaurant in Belém





Clockwise from left: Carmelita, one of the oldest sellers in Belém's Ver-o-Peso market, is famous for her vast range of fruit; sieving manioc flour, made from the starchy root, a staple ingredient in Amazonian cooking; a remote beach in Caracaraí, a rural municipality along the the Arapiuns river

earthy yet unctuous texture that proclaims its multiple virtues as a health food. (Açaí is rich in iron, antioxidants and protein.)

In the town of Santarém, reached by a one-hour-and-twenty-minute flight from Belém, I board the craft that will be my home during a five-day traverse of the Tapajós river. The *Tapaiú*, one of three boats belonging to high-end Amazon cruise specialist Kaiara, is equipped with every conceivable comfort – including a cook, Socorro, who specialises in river fish every which way and cakes made with forest fruit (her passion-fruit tart will live long in the memory).

The boat chugs gently along a river whose immense width, as much as 12 kilometres in places, tricks the mind into thinking of it as an inland sea. In the afternoons, under the watchful eye of the crew, I fish for piranhas, picking at their firm, dry flesh after Socorro has sizzled them briefly in the frying pan. At nightfall, we moor beside beaches whose dazzling white sands and clear blue water have little to envy the Caribbean. I come to look forward to the ritual of an evening dip followed by a sundowner caipirinha made either with the classic lime or with *cupuaçu* or *taperebá* fruit.

One morning, I wake to find that we have overnighted beside the small village of Atodí on the shore of the Arapiuns River, a spur of the Tapajós. The community's medicine woman, Raimunda, a small lady with black hair dressed simply in Western style, leads me on a nature hike through the forest, stopping now and then



to tell me about some root or leaf or fruit, and its use in the community. The forest is the indigenous people's medicine cupboard, but also their spice rack and larder. This shiny black seed (*cumarú* – also known as a tonka bean) has a scent as voluptuous as vanilla. This prickly pod (*urucum*) contains a substance widely used as a red food colouring and body paint. The kernel of the *babaçu* nut produces an exquisite and highly valued oil – and sometimes, confides Raimunda, also contains a small white grub which is “a delicious thing to eat”.

Deep in the woods, we come upon an open-sided shack where a group of women are processing *mandioca*. It's no exaggeration to say that the manioc root (aka cassava) forms the central pillar of the Amazonian diet. But *mandioca* – not to be confused with *mandioquinba*, a different kind of potato-ish tuber – contains cyanide, and requires a long and complex process to leach out the deadly poison. I watch as the women peel the roots, grate them, squeeze out the moisture, and toast the crumbs on a flat metal brazier. These crunchy crumbs are *farinha*, a fundamental element of the Brazilian kitchen. Meanwhile, the juice

is boiled for days to make *tucupí*, the base ingredient of *tacacá*, in which duck and fish can be simmered as in a kind of stock. And from *tucupí*, in turn, comes a rough white powder called *tapioca* – a word which will hold bad memories for anyone who struggled to finish their tapioca pudding in the 1970s.

Fast forward to Manaus, a brash and bustling riverside city in the heart of the Brazilian Amazon. Belém and Manaus are the region's two main urban hubs, but in culinary terms, as in other ways, the two have different strengths. Where Belém rules as a treasure house of ingredients, Manaus is increasingly known for its forward-thinking creative cooks. Among the best known of which is chef Felipe Schaedler, who hails from Brazil's far south but has long been a standard-bearer for the new Amazonian cuisine. At Schaedler's restaurant Banzeiro the menu features fried *sauva* ants (these have a strong citrus flavour and an appetising crunch) with a *mandioquinba* foam and tapioca croquettes with *cupuaçu* jam.

But the name to conjure with on the Manaus food scene right now is Débora Shornik. The last night of my Amazon





Above: chef Wagner Vieira prepares fish; below: fresh açai grows in the Atodi forest



tour sees me settled at a window table in the first-floor dining room of Caxiri, the restaurant Shornik opened in 2016 after leaving her native São Paulo four years earlier. Just across the street lies the famous opera house built by Manaus's wealthy rubber barons in the late 19th century. A bohemian figure in a fetching 1950s-style turban, Shornik comes to the table to tell me about her love of the Amazon region, its people and their food, which are still firing her imagination on a daily basis. "What inspires me here is the freshness of everything, the power of the flavours, the alchemy of the forest," she enthuses, reeling off a list of the products that fascinate her right now: the *arunara* fish, the fiery indigenous sauce *arubé*, the fermented pineapple drink *aluá*, and the fine manioc flour from the remote community of Uarini, three days away by boat towards the Venezuelan border.

What Shornik serves me tonight is a sample of her imaginative yet always respectful take on indigenous foodways. *Tucupí* appears in all manner of guises, including a ceviche and a sauce for shredded duck meat and pungent *chaia* leaves. *Jambú* is crushed into a pesto, or forms part of an invigorating salad of bitter and sour Amazonian leaves. With *tucumã*, the tender flesh of a palm fruit hugely popular in Manaus, Shornik makes a buttery-yellow aioli. The desserts at Caxiri are a chapter in themselves: I loved the cupuaçu sundae with caramelised Brazil nuts and the açai ice cream served with pineapple syrup and a subtly flavoured *cumarú* cream.

At my table, the chef introduces me to Yupuri, of the Tukano tribe, who together with his wife Clarinda, has set up his own restaurant in a cultural centre in downtown Manaus. Biatüwi claims to be the first indigenous-owned restaurant in the whole of Brazil. It might seem surprising that this has only happened now, but Shornik has an explanation: the indigenous peoples of Brazil were marginalised for so long that they began to be ashamed of their own rich cultures. At Biatüwi, where'll I eat a last lunch before heading for the airport, the short menu is the "real Amazon prime". *Quinbapira*, a kind of fish soup served as a celebratory meal across the region, is seasoned with salt and sauva ants. Roast *tambaquí* comes wrapped in a cacao leaf. No industrial sugar is used in the kitchen, the only sweetener being a rare honey sourced from wild, stingless bees.

Anyone who reads the news will be aware that the Amazon is in grave danger. At least a fifth of its total forest area has disappeared in a single generation. But the unique food culture of the region is also under threat, says Yupuri, as industrial meats and sweet fizzy drinks make inroads into the indigenous diet. If, for tourists like myself, the Amazon's diverse ingredients are merely a dazzling array of exotica, for the people of the forest its exhilarating flavours are both heritage and cultural identity.

Cazenove+loyd curates the trip of 12 nights with a private Amazon yacht charter, private experiences and guides in Belém, Tapajós, Manaus and Brasília, cazloyd.com