

Ovo Brandy, Snails, Earth Salt & Rice Chicha
from the Black Highlands of Ecuador
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Ambuquí, a town in Chota-Mira Valley in the Highlands of Ecuador, is renowned for its annual three day *ovo* festival, terminating on the second Sunday in March. The *ovo* – which was introduced into the region some 150 years ago by the Spanish - is a fruit the size and shape of a large olive that is harvested in May and October and sold in Tulcán. It is said to have medicinal properties for it serves as a purge. When ripe, the fruit turns yellow and is sold in leaf packages for immediate consumption. The fruit can also be used to make: 1) marmelade; 2) sweets; 3) hair shampoo; or 4). a local brandy called *trago de ovo* or *vino de ovo*.

In order to make the brandy the following procedure is observed: 1) the ripe fruit is plucked from the tree; 2) it is then cooked in water; 3) the water is then thrown out; 4) and the juice of the fruit is obtained; 5) the juice is allowed to ferment for four days; 6) and then filtered so that only the liquid remains; 7) sugar is then added.

On a visit to Tulquisán, another Black community in the Chota-Mira Valley area, I visited the home of Abrán Santa Cruz who was born in 1919 in Santa Ana (Parish of la Concepción) and is the father of seventeen children (7 with one wife and 10 with another). He had been living in Tulquisán for the past 25 years and used to work with his brother as a chauffeur. After an accident, he was able to buy half of another car with the insurance money he received. He then sold the car and moved to Tulquisán dedicating himself to the cultivation of *frijol* (beans), tomato, and corn on his wife's property. However, with the passage of time, and the lack of sufficient water the family was obliged to sell their land.

Now the family survives by occasionally working as hired hands on other people's property, and by collecting *churos* (small snails) which they sell to Indians or Mishus (also known as mestizos). *Churos* are quite tasty with lemon and onion or in soup and is particularly appreciated by the indigenous community. The search for *churos* is done in large bands (i.e. a mother with her children) and is no doubt reminiscent of the hunting gathering bands spoken of by Anthropologists [cf. my Negrito forest trip with the Aeta of Bataan].

Patricio (his grandson) described a typical excursion as follows:

We leave home in a group of 7 or 8 people (children included) at about six o'clock in the morning. We climb unpopulated hills collecting *churos* as we go, and do not return home until 2 or 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The *churos* (snails) huddle in the grass after a rain and they are easy to find. There are two types of *churos*: the *blanco* (white) and the *grueso rayado* (fat striped). We can sell one *almud* (a unit of measurement) of the *grueso rayado* for 40, 45, or 50 thousand sucres. The *blanco* only goes for 25 or 30 thousand. An *almud* is approximately four cans of snails and it takes about two weeks to collect three *almuds* of snails. When there is no rain we can find the *churos* walking along the road. The people of the town of Primer Paso also organize *churo* expeditions.

If you're interested in preparing a dish, the following recipe may be helpful:

Churos con Salsa de Cebolla

(Snails with Onion Sauce)

Ingredients - two cups of *churos*, salt, onion sauce.

Preparation - 1) wash the *churos* and leave them in cold water with salt for two hours; 2) take them out of the water and drain them; 3) cook them in fresh water with salt and onions for thirty minutes; 4) drain them again and serve with onion sauce. Don't eat the shells! You have to learn how to suck these creatures out of the shells.

The onion sauce is prepared in the following manner.

Ingredients - two finely sliced onions, 2 lemons, 4 tablespoons of finely diced onions, 2 tablespoons of diced parsley and *culantro*, one finely diced tomato, two *tomates de arbol* cooked in salt water.

Preparation - 1) peel, slice, and wash the onion in cold water; 2) add lemon juice; 3) let sit for five minutes; 4) add the diced onion, the parsley, the *culantro*, and tomato; 5) mix these together with the sliced onion and lemon juice; 6) take the peel off the cooked *tomates del arbol*; 7) squash the *tomates de arbol* with a fork and add it to the other ingredients and mix well.

Bon Appetit!

In the evening I noticed that this community is plagued by small flying insects that give you a hell of an itch. This is particularly noticeable when one is obliged to relieve oneself in the bush. After evacuating, it feels (pardon the expression) like your ass is on fire and the pain lasts for quite a while. If the body parts are kept covered, however, the flies are not as bothersome. I believe the problem is provoked by a large artificial pool constructed by the rich *mishu* neighbor downhill for purposes of irrigation. Although the Blacks can not use the water he collects, it is they who must pay the "itching" inconvenience.

Salinas ("salt mines" in Spanish) is appropriately named, for it owes its past economic glory to the salt extracted from its unique soil. In the distant past almost everyone in this Black Andean town was involved in the earth-salt trade. By 1926, however, the introduction of white salt began to wreak havoc and though many townsmen still owed their livelihood to this industry, many others sought other ways to survive.

Today there is only one lady in Salinas (Carmen Morales de Torres) who carries on with the tradition. Doña Carmen, was born in Salinas in 1931 and is married to Germán Torres (a native of Juan Montalvo) who works with her. Carmen learned the trade with her father, who learned from his father. In those days, she said, there was only salt here and each person exploited his or her own lot. The death knoll for the town's salt industry was the introduction of white salt.

When asked to describe the process involved in the manufacture of earth salt, Doña Carmen said:

The salt-rich soil is collected and placed on top of wooden frames called *pipas* (for which see photo on pg. 217 of my [Black & Indigenous Lore of Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador](#)). Water is then poured over the soil and allowed to filter into large buckets (*tinajas*) placed in cavities under each *pipa*. This takes about 24 hours.

This water is then heated over a fire for two hours. Then it is removed from the flame and allowed to cool. This slushy remains is then placed in a bag and washed with water. This is then placed in another bag, sprinkled with water, and pounded with a stick. When dry, it is molded into *bolitas* (balls) and placed in rows. These *bolitas* are then heated so that they dry well. When they are dry they are ready for sale. 1 *bolita* sells for 1,000 *suces*.

Carmen went on to say that one must be skilled in identifying quality salt-soil. Once a location is found, and the top soil is used one can return two weeks later and take soil from the same spot. This is because the soil regenerates its salt content and thus can be reused. When asked why she continued to produce the salt while everyone else had stopped, she replied:

The salt I produce has iodine, vitamins, and other medicinal properties that prevents goiter, eases rheumatism, and eliminates smelly feet odor. It can be used by humans and animals alike, but now it is mostly used for cattle because of its nutritive properties.

Doña Carmen then used her salt to prepare a *quemado* for me to sample. She placed some cane liquor in a glass and added a lump of her salt. She then set the mixture on fire and when the level of the liquid in the glass had burned down, put out the flame, shook it around a little, and instructed me to drink it. What did it taste like, you may ask? Well, would you believe me if I said that it tasted a lot like warm salt water? Unless you have a goiter problem, I'm afraid I can't recommend it. Of course if you had a cow, well maybe that would be a different story. I would hate to see Carmen go out of business for lack of clients.

Despite the woes of the salt-earth industry, the town of Salinas is still a thriving community of about 1,500 persons distributed over some 200 families. In addition to the infrastructure found in most small towns, Salinas has a high-school for those specializing in agriculture, a cuy farm with more than 7,000 of these creatures; and a huge incubation project which produces and sells baby chicks. They are very cute and can be purchased by the public on Mondays and Thursdays.

When I went to take a look at the cuy farm, we (my guide and I) were chased away at the open main gate by a huge vicious looking dog named Rambo. As we beat a hasty retreat we encountered a worker on the road, explained what happened, and asked if he could escort us into the farm. He said he was not going that way, but that there was nothing to worry about adding "All you have to say is Rambo and he'll be quiet". Well, if you, dear reader, are anxious to see the cuy farm, I invite you to go ahead and try.

Back in my accommodation in the Black community of Juncal, Rosa (the wife of Rufo Mendez) informed me that though she was born in Malimpia (in the province of Esmeraldas) she learned how to make a "special rice chicha" (*chicha de arroz*) in Juncal where she has been living for the past 14 years.

This kind of chicha is no everyday beverage; for it is prepared only on special occasions such as baptisms, birthdays, festivals, etc. and is typically consumed with meat and rice, yucca, or potatoes. What follows is a detailed description of how Rosa prepares this exquisite libation.

Special Rice Chicha

Ingredients

1) an assortment of herbs including: *cedrón*, *limoncillo*, *congona*, *manzanilla*, *hoja de naranja*, *malva olorosa*, *menta olorosa*, *halbaca*, and *hierba buena* (about ten of each); 2) a large pineapple (with optional *guanábana* if available); 3) *naranjilla*; 4) three *espingos*; 5) *pimienta olorosa*, *clavo de olor*, *anis estrellado*; 6) three sections of peeled sugar cane; 7) three pounds of rice soaked for one day in cold water; and 8) drinking water.

Preparation

1) remove dust from herbs, then soak in small pan of cold water for at least one day to obtain "spicy water"; 2) boil one pot of ordinary water (*perol* #40); 3) place three whole *espingos* and *canela* (cinnamon) in the boiling water and cook for 30 minutes; 4) add *pimienta olorosa*, *clavo de olor*, and *anis estrellado*, to the boiling water and stir with spoon; 5) add two pots of cold water to the boiling water and allow this mixture to cool; 6) add the spicy water (but not the herbs) to the above; 7) add more cold water to the herbs and allow to sit to obtain more "spicy water" which is also added to the above when ready; 8) peel pineapple, squeeze it, and place in separate large bucket of water (twice the volume of the boiled water) peels and all (*guanábana* can be added if available); 9) squash *naranjillas* and place in same bucket with pineapple; 10) pound sugar slivers and place in bucket with pineapple; 11) take three pounds of rice which has been soaked in cold water for one day and mill it in a liquefier or grinder. 12) add this to the water containing the pineapple and other ingredients; 13) add the mixture from "6" above to the pineapple mixture; 14) cover this concoction with a plastic cloth and allow to sit for at least one day [note that the mixture will keep for 8 days without refrigeration and that a three day sit is tastier than a one day sit]; 15) when ready to serve pour quantity needed through filter and add sugar to taste.

The wealth of ingredients and lengthy preparation going into making this beverage may give some indication as to its quality. Unfortunately, you (the reader) can not actually taste words written down on the page of a book, and so must rely on my own first hand "taste experience" to evaluate the final product for you. Ordinary chicha was considered by the Incans to be a sacred drink and they offered it to their gods in special ceremonies. So just imagine what status "special chicha" must have. Suffice it to say, that I, too, consider "special *chicha*" to be a nectar fit for the gods and that I have never imbibed a beverage that can even remotely compete in taste or nutritive value with it.

On the day of the *chicha* feast, Rufo's mother shelled the *guandules* (peas) and her eldest grand-daughter prepared the rice as I help Rufo grill slivers of marinated beef on a make-shift grill. After excessive drinking and eating, I thanked my hosts for the unforgettable meal as well as for the help and hospitality they tendered to a complete stranger. Indeed, it is only because of the friendliness and spirit of cooperation demonstrated by Rufo and the many other people I met throughout my journeys, that the compilation of the materials in my various publications was made possible.

After eating, I asked Rufo's mother to name some typical Chota Valley plates of her day and compiled the following list: 1) *champus* - a sweet *colada* (thick liquid) made with wheat flour, orange leaves, cinnamon, and cloves; 2) *dulce de sambo* - a dessert made from ripe *sambo*, cinnamon, milk, and sugar; 3) *ensalada de sambo* - a salad made from tender *sambo*; 4) *frejol con sancocho de guineo* - sometimes called *picadillo*, a dish of beans and plantain that can be served either dry or as a soup; 5) *guandules con arroz* - peas and rice either dry or as a soup; 6) *mango* - prepared by adding corn flour to a meat broth; 7) *mano emono* - a sweet potato soup with beans; 8) *molos* - mash boiled potatoes to which one adds cheese, milk, lard, and color; 9) *quimbolos* - made from corn flour, cheese, eggs, and wrapped in leaves; and 10) *sango* - corn flour added to a cheese broth which is eaten dry like a tortilla.

The following morning I pack my bags and depart the Chota Valley in route to Borbon in the Province of Esmeraldas (the heart of the former Sambo Republic).