Defrance (2006) The Sixth Toe - The Role of the Guinea Pig in Peru

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The text of this entry is 871 words! Far too long!!

In this article, Defrance explains the preparation of Cuy Frito (Fried Guinea Pig) and discusses the difference of acceptance of the cuy as a food source in two different towns in southern Peru. Cuy, or guinea pig, is a relatively inexpensive animal to raise in the Peruvian midlands. Defrance lists the selling price of a ready-to-eat young cuy as S/.5, and the alfalfa needed to feed that cuy for a week as S/.0.5 (in July 2010, 1 Peruvian Nuevo Sol was worth about 29 cents USD, making the entire cost of a cuy and its food from birth to meal preparation about 5 USD). Cuy raised in commercial cuy farms are bathed and examined for illness monthly, and fed sweet corn and alfalfa every three hours during the day. They are kept in small abode cuy homes with family groups of about eleven cuy where they stay cool out of the sun, and the adobe floor absorbs and eliminates moisture from cuy urine and excrement. In local family homes, cuy inbreeding often leads to polydactylism (having 6 toes on each front foot instead of 4). Cuy with extra toes are traditionally thought to have richer meat, and greater medicinal values to the person eating or owning them. Commercial cuy farming is relatively new to the Peruvian economy, with the introduction of _cuyrias_, restaurants that specialize in cuy dishes.

The cuy is one of the oldest domesticated food animals in the Andes, and in the past, held an important role in indigenous culture and cuisine. Today, views on the eatability of cuy varies in Peru, as DeFrance demonstrates in her discussion of two cities in southern Peru: Monquegua and Ilo.

Monquegua is a medium-sized town located in the lower regions of the Andes, and is largely agricultural. In contrast, Ilo is located on the coast, and benefits from an increased influence of modern technology and industry. Most people living in both Monquegua and Ilo identify themselves as Mestizo, a mixed indigenous Aymara or Quechua and Spanish descent, or phenotypically “white”. However, the residents of Monquegua usually belong to multi-generational families that can trace their lineage back for many years living in the area of Monquegua. The residents of Ilo are usually unable to do so, most families settling into the town and their children leaving to find better opportunities. The typical immigrants to Monquegua are high-land peasants that the residents of Monquegua do not wish to identify with, and the typical immigrant to Ilo is from the upper middle class, and of a high educational, occupational, or socio-economic status that the residents of Ilo strive to achieve.

In Monquegua, cuy culinary dishes fall into two categories: cuy that are raised and eaten by the lower classes, and cuy that are served as a community-fostering meal prepared and served in _cuyrias_. DeFrance states that the residents of Monquegua who eat cuy in restaurants do not associate themselves with the campesino immigrants that raise and eat cuy at home, and the prices of restaurant-served cuy tends to discourage the poorer classes from visiting the _cuyrias_, marking a divide between those who eat the meat for sustenance, and those who eat the meat during social events. In Monquegua, going to a _cuyria_ is seen as embracing a person’s heritage, and partaking in a special bonding time with friends. The popularity of _cuyrias_ is apparent, as there are 15 _cuyrias_ in and around the town. In contrast, there is not a single _cuyria_ in the town of Ilo. While cuy may be eaten in the town, the families who raise and eat cuy do not share the knowledge publicly, and the residents generally look down on the eating of the “rodents.” In the more-industrialized Ilo, the influence of outside global cultures has changed the traditional values of the Peruvians living there, and it is the general opinion that those who eat cuy are less civilized, or from the less developed and poorer mountainous regions of Peru, and therefor inferior.

I found this article interesting, mostly because on my recent trip to Cusco, Peru, I ate cuy with my host family on two occasions. The first was a traditional festival, where sharing the cuy meat was a gesture of friendship extended to everyone who visited during the weekend fiesta, the second time was at home, and the cuy was given to my host-mother as payment from a client, as she was unable to afford that month’s tuition for her daughter’s schooling. The cuy was accepted graciously by my host-mother, and she explained that by offering the cuy as payment, the woman was humbling herself by making it known she did not have much money, in much the same way the residents of Ilo saw the people who ate cuy to be of a lower socio-economic status. On another occasion, I spoke at length to a Peruvian boy about the differences between American and Peruvian culture, and he expressed disbelief that we would keep cuy as pets, but slaughter cows for meat. Quite puzzled, he asked me “Why would you eat a cow, when they can give you milk and help you farm? Why wouldn’t you eat cuy? They are always pregnant, and they can’t do anything to help the family.”