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## Lake Titicaca's Isla Amantani in Peru harbors ancient culinary traditions

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IMELIANA CALCIN, clad in a traditional floral-embroidered white blouse and head scarf, bends down and stuffs more wood into the stove in her one-room adobe house. I sit at the table with her young son, the two of us eating choclo, boiled native corn that was harvested that morning by his father, Esmael.

The Calcins, like the other 800 or so families living on Lake Titicaca's Isla Amantani in Peru, are subsistence farmers, eking out a meager existence by growing quinoa, trigo (emmer wheat, known as farro in Italy), corn, potatoes, oca (a type of sweet potato), sheep, chickens, pigs, alpaca and cuy (guinea pigs, a typical indigenous dish). They make a mild, salty queso fresco from the milk of their cows and sun-dry part of their potato crop to make chuno, which can be reconstituted in soup and stews for sustenance throughout the harsh winter. When he is not tending to his crops, Esmael can be found down by the boat dock selling blended fruit juices.

Amantani, like its neighbor Isla Taquile, is a small, natural island on the Peruvian side of the world's highest commercially navigable lake (not to be confused with the famous reed-constructed "Floating Islands" located elsewhere on Titicaca). The residents of Amantani and Taquile speak Quechua, a language that is used by several different cultural groups throughout parts of South America. The islanders are more closely related to the Aymara, however, a distinct ethnic group inhabiting the Altiplano of the Central

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Since 1985, agritourism has helped to provide income to the islanders. Visitors stay in rustic adobe accommodations or share a dwelling with farm families, partaking in family meals and even helping with seasonal

crop harvest.

Sea kayaking and hiking are ideal ways to explore the island in the dry months, and there are frequent dances and festivals that provide visitors with a chance to interact with islanders and learn more about Amantani's culture.

There are no restaurants, bars or real tourism infrastructure "" the farm stays are arranged by tour operators in the lakeside city of Puno, or through outfitters such as Bio Bio Expeditions.

I visited Amantani last July as an extension of a whitewater/Inca Trail trek I did with California-based eco-outfitter Bio Bio.

Piero Vellutino, a Peruvian friend of mine and a whitewater guide for Bio Bio, and his wife, Patty, several years ago started a partner company, Terra Explorer Peru. Based in Cusco, TEP runs Bio Bio's Peruvian trips.

Regular readers of this column might recall that I did an asado story based on a Bio Bio whitewater trip on Chile's Futaleufu River two years ago. I was thoroughly impressed by the company's honest commitment to preserving the ecological and cultural integrity in the regions they host trips, as well as their efforts to hire locals and promote and use regional and traditional foods from family farms when possible.

When Piero suggested I visit his native country and do an extension trip to Lake Titicaca to stay on a farm, I jumped at the opportunity. Part of the partner companies' mission is to expand upon the culinary aspects of their Peruvian trips, and they now offer everything from customized cooking classes in Cusco to pisco tasting, market tours and farm stays and sea kayaking on Amantani and Taquile.

As Piero explained to me, "Water is the same everywhere. It's the cultural aspects that make places special and distinct from one another. I don't want to have a factory of tourism. I work with people I know personally, and do the trips myself. Our goal is to offer highly personalized tours."

Thus I found myself, with an Amantani-raised guide as translator, staying in a tiny adobe guest room on the Calcins' farm.

I watched and took notes as Imeliana prepared our lunch of sopa de quinoa, made from ingredients grown by the family. Imeliana, who possesses one of the most dazzling smiles I have ever seen, had changed into traditional dress in order to show me the intricate embroidered cloth for which the island is renowned. Through my guide, she told me how to prepare the soup and described what the islanders ate for typical meals "" primarily some type of grain-based soup or stew, rice and boiled potatoes and corn.

When lunch was served "" the brothy quinoa soup loaded with greens, potato, carrot and onion and accompanied by fried queso fresco and sliced cucumbers and tomatoes "" several of the Calcins' six children straggled in from school to pick up their lunch.

Imeliana portioned their meals onto aluminum plates, wrapped them in cloth, tying the ends into a handle, and sent them on their way. The meal concluded with a tea made with muna, a mintlike herb prized for its medicinal properties. After lunch, I hiked to Pachatatata, the highest point on the 9-kilometer island. There lies a small temple that is used for private rituals and feast days.

Spread out beneath me in all directions lay terraced farm plots of quinoa, potatoes and trigo. Far across the lake, the snow-covered Bolivian Andes were visible. It was a breathtaking sight, wild and lonely and emblematic of a way of life that has changed little in thousands of years.

For my part, I found it enlightening and heartening to see such enduring pride and retention of cultural values in the face of what is essentially a hardscrabble existence. While there are definitely aspects of the Amantani experience that cater to commercial aspects of tourism, the overall feeling of the island is that of a cohesive, traditional agrarian society. I highly recommend a visit to anyone wanting to experience and help preserve a vanishing way of life.

Laurel Miller is a freelance writer, cooking teacher and owner of the Sustainable Kitchen. Contact her at [www.sustainablekitchen.com](http://www.sustainablekitchen.com).

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