

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Capstones

Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

---

Fall 12-17-2021

### Nikkei and Chifa: Two Styles of Peruvian-Asian Fusion, With Two Different Trajectories

Megan Caceres

*The Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj\\_etds/550](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds/550)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

## **Nikkei and Chifa: Two Styles of Peruvian-Asian Fusion, With Two Different Trajectories**

By: Megan Caceres

If a New Yorker is craving a style of cooking known as Chifa, they can head over to *Flor de Mayo*, a tiny spot near the Museum of Natural History on the Upper West Side. Whether city residents actually know about Chifa in the first place is a different matter, however.

“It’s hard to find out about us because restaurant rating surveys always consider us to be a Chinese restaurant,” but it should be noted that *Flor De Mayo* is not just “another Chinese restaurant,” owner Nelson Cho said during an interview. It is a venue that, like other Chifa spots, fuses Chinese cooking with Peruvian ingredients, a styling of cuisine that arose from Asian immigrant communities in South America.

For about the same price as a takeout spot, you can have Peruvian-Chinese stir fry with squid, shrimp, and ham with ginger. Or a plate of Chaufa, fried rice, for \$12.75. Seating is small and limited and reservations are not required as it is a quick concept gourmet spot.

But if that same diner takes a ride downtown to the West Village, not only does the scenery change, but so does the culture, and style of Peruvian fusion. Nikkei restaurants are more commonly scattered throughout Manhattan, a cuisine that blends Japanese and Peruvian customs and ingredients. Mostly all of them require reservations, because the food does indeed take more time, precision, and intricacy to prepare, which is reflected in the hefty price tag. When you’re eating freshly cut and prepared yellow fin tuna ceviche, or glass noodles with anchovies, just know that the process of getting those ingredients and serving them on your plate was a long, expensive journey that can set you back anywhere from \$25 to \$30 per plate.

Both styles of South American cooking began in the same humble country, but have taken two very different trajectories. Nikkei has become another prominent face of the high-end Japanese cookery that has overtaken fine dining in New York. Meanwhile, Chifas in New York and New Jersey continue to be mistaken for or seen as lower-end, cheap take out spots. In general, it is much more difficult for a Chifa to gain traction and prominence than a Nikkei restaurant, and that can be attributed to the fact that many modern diners wrongly don’t perceive Chinese cooking as ambitious or studied and don’t find value in the ingredients. The obvious rift and lack of Chifa spots or more explicit representation of Chifa fare on Peruvian menus deprives both Peruvian Americans and gastronomically curious locals of enjoying the full diversity of Peruvian culture.

Both Chifas and Nikkei restaurants are important to Peru’s gastronomy. Chifas are places in Peru where you can get all sorts of Chinese-Peruvian dishes ranging from Chaufa (fried rice), Taillarín Saltado (lo mein) and Lomo Saltado (beef stir fried). The name Chifa is a word play that comes from the phonetic sound of “chaofan”, which means fried rice in Chinese. It’s very common to find Peruvians eating at Chifas, due to the fact that their flavorful plates also include a cheap fare. As a child, I remember my own family bombarding the Chifas in search of a delicious brunch for an even better low price.

Each of these cuisines arrived with migrants coming to Peru seeking out a better life, fleeing to Peru due to economic hardship and fears of a powerful Japan. The Chinese arrived in the 1920s, bringing ginger, soy sauce, and scallions to Peruvian kitchens, laying the groundwork for food served in Chifas. The

Japanese arrived later and Nikkei cuisine didn't exist until the 1970s and 1980s, when Nikkei chefs started to fuse more Peruvian ingredients such as potatoes, bananas, and aji, with Japanese products such as squid, raw fish and more, says James Beard nominee and IACP winning writer and photographer, [Nicholas Gill](#). Given the geographic nature of Japan and the cultural difference, the Japanese introduced Peruvians to seafood, specifically sushi, which cultivated and birthed ceviche, which consists of a raw white fish from Peru called Corvina, that is then marinated with red onions, lime, and other spices to create a raw delicacy.

Chifas are by far the most popular type of restaurant in Peru. Every neighborhood has one and they're economically accessible. There's more than 1.3 million Chinese in Peru, not to mention more than 3 million Peruvians of Chinese descent, which accounts for 10% of the total population of Peru, whereas Peruvians of Japanese descent make up just 0.3 percent of Peru's population of 33 million people. You might find fewer Nikkei restaurants in Peru, but this is because they tend to have an edge over Chifas and offer a more costly dining experience. For reference, it should be noted that one Nikkei restaurant, [Maido](#), sits in the top 10 of the world's 50 best list.

On the contrary, New York City is home to a vast series of Nikkei restaurants, with really little to no Chifas in sight. Places like *Nobu*, and *Sen Sakanna*, have not only set the standard of how Nikkei cuisine is presented and consumed by New Yorkers and global consumers, but they also established a tone, one that reflects sophistication and a high price point. Global restaurant chain *Nobu* first opened its doors in 1994, and is considered to be one of the first restaurants to advertise and promote Nikkei cuisine, even though it's menu is mostly Japanese. They brought attention and intrigue with dishes such as tiradito (sashimi) with rocoto sauce, something their patrons couldn't get elsewhere nor experience at the time, especially not the way their renowned chefs prepared it. Their uniqueness to be the first at the time, is one of the reasons why Nikkei is so expensive. Places like *Nobu* also set prices upwards of \$60 a plate, setting the bar higher on what Nikkei restaurants can reasonably charge. Also to consider are the venues that Nikkei restaurants occupy, located in neighborhoods where real estate is more expensive. Generally speaking, Japanese foodways, particularly sushi, have a long history of being allowed to be expensive in New York and around the world.

Such factors also explain why a well-known local Peruvian chef leaned towards opening up a Nikkei restaurant instead of a Chifa. A Chef of Japanese-Peruvian descent, Erik Martinez owns Peruvian restaurant *Llama Inn* and Japanese-Peruvian restaurant *Llama San*. He started his career, cooking American and French food for exclusive restaurants in New York City, and easily excelled in these cuisines, but it wasn't his passion, nor did he have a solidified connection to the foods he was preparing. It was a trip to Peru as an adult that reconnected him with his origins, and he realized that the next big thing to come, at least in the states, was Nikkei cuisine. He went to several trainings, apprenticeships, and seminars in Peru to better educate himself in the preparation and consistency of the Japanese-Peruvian cuisine that he was yearning to bring to New Yorkers. His Japanese-Peruvian spot is located in the West Village, and boasts original Nikkei plates and drinks unique to the establishment and uniquely high in price, especially since the portions are very small. Ramirez began his Peruvian cuisine journey with *Llama Inn*, a mainly Peruvian dining experience, but he quickly went and created a new restaurant, *Llama San*, which would cater to an audience that already enjoyed Japanese food in terms of palette and price, and would therefore crave the new addition, or combination of the two cuisines.

“New York City people that live here, love Japanese food. So when Llama Inn did well as a Peruvian restaurant, we figured it'd be a win-win to kind of combine both of those and do our version of Nikkei.”

But does price always equate to quality? Can you still get tasty, unique palatable experiences and ingredients for less? The answer is yes. You'd probably have to venture out to areas such as Patterson, Passaic, Elizabeth, New Jersey, where large Peruvian communities reside or even a small family business in a random part of New York City, but here you will find authentically delectable Chifa, where large and flavorful plates of fried rice can cost you anywhere between \$9 and \$13.

Nelson Cho, is part of the family that founded and has been running the *Flor de Mayo* restaurants in New York City since 1977. His great grandfather opened this Chifa, and now he's continuing the legacy. The food at this restaurant and the manner that it is served, is very similar to any Chinese restaurant/take out spot you're accustomed to. You can either sit or take your food to go, but ultimately, the food is of high quality, with plates that are custom family recipes made from scratch every day. One unique and popular plate that was created by a family member who serves as chef, was arroz de tamales (sweet fried rice), which contains shrimp, squid, ham, and ginger. Carefully crafted and created by a relative, it's something unique to this restaurant that you won't find at the Chinese spot underneath your apartment. Like this plate, there are other deliciously fused plates that the restaurant prepares fresh daily, but this isn't recognized with rating systems such as Michelin. Cho believes that his restaurant is merely seen by the public and categorized as being just Chinese, not taking into consideration that they serve Chinese-Peruvian platters religiously. Because his restaurant is just thrown into a larger category of Chinese restaurants, he believes that this prevents the *Flor de Mayo* from earning any top rankings or recognition.

Cho recognizes that there is a difference in quality control between the two cuisines. When you're preparing a meal that has Japanese influence, the quality of the ingredients is higher. If you're preparing seafood, sushi, or ceviche, you need to have fresh fish. Fresh fish is expensive, especially if you want the best quality, and traditionally the best fish is always shipped or sought out from different places. Cho knows that Chifas or Chinese restaurants are not going to spend money to seek out the highest quality products because it just isn't in their budget. He says they rather buy “medium” quality ingredients and buy frozen products because they are cheaper and will last longer than something that is fresh for only a day. The luxury ingredients used for Nikkei cuisine, admittedly, are not your typical everyday supplementary ingredients. For \$27, you can savor the delicious flavors and consistencies of *Llama San's* scallop ceviche, which consists of yuzu kosho, pitahaya (dragon fruit), garnished with nori. Pitahaya is mostly found in Amazonian regions, and yuzu kosho and nori are common Japanese exports. On the other hand for \$30, you can indulge on an entree such as Iberico pork tonkatsu, served with udon verde and Tsukemono cucumbers, a nice little take on the Peruvian Tallarin verde and pollo a la milanese, basically pesto pasta and chicken cutlet.

One could also argue that the reason why Chifas do not get the recognition that a Nikkei restaurant receives is due to critiques' lack of knowledge and or diversity of the cuisine. Cho says the concept is similar here in the United States with his restaurant. Although his restaurant is not a fully Chinese establishment, it still follows some things from its cultural roots. Aside from certain plates, the origins of

the take-out concept have been adopted in the United States from China, and are widely used to this day. Just like the stands and vendors in China, *Flor de Mayo*, other Chifas and your typical Chinese take-out spots, have all adopted having workstations with fryers close by, as well as counters where the take out orders await patrons. This atmospheric setup is not consistent with what one would find in a Japanese restaurant or a Nikkei restaurant. In fact, places like *Llama San* are so architecturally intricate, with cedar tables, chairs and walls, and neutral earth tone color schemes throughout the restaurant, that it creates a simple, yet, chic environment. Aside from just the physical layout of the restaurant, smaller details such as menu appearance differ, where *Flor De Mayo* still uses a bi-fold paper sheet menu, and *Llama San* presents their clientele with canvas material booklets, with soft material pages that begin with a drink menu, and end with a fixe prix meal.

“When you think of Japanese food here in New York, you think of *Sushi Noz* and *Masa*,” Ramirez said during a phone interview. Prices at *Sushi Noz* can be either \$225 per person to sit in the Ash room or \$395 a person to sit at the Hinoki counter. Similarly at *Masa*, the Omakase experience starts at \$650 per person and the Hinoki counter experience is \$800 per person.

“Omakase restaurants, you have nigiri and different courses and you know, you also think of Japanese cuisine, as like Japanese food with ingredients that are higher like more expensive, more luxury ingredients than Chinese food,” Ramirez said.

He recognizes that cuisine is not only about what the consumer enjoys on their palette, but also a budget. When considering eating at a Chifa or eating Nikkei, there’s an outstanding difference in price point.

Ramirez, however, goes on to say something a bit more troubling. “I think you find more high level Japanese restaurants in New York City than you do Chinese. Chinese food has this thing, this idea of it being in kind of places like Wohop or Kanji village or Peking Duck House, you know like, affordable places that give you delicious food, you know, more bang for your buck.” This is the type of mentality that prevents Chinese cooking, whether at a Chifa or a purely Chinese restaurant, from thriving and from receiving deserved accolades or recognition in the gastronomical world. You most certainly can find more expensive Chinese places in New York City (Redfarm,, Silver Apricot, and Hutong New York to name a few), but also keep in mind that there aren’t as many compared to super high end Japanese spots.

It’s staple Nikkei pieces like *Llama San* that are taking American society by storm, raising questions over whether they’ll eventually earn coveted Michelin stars. *Llama Inn* already holds a Michelin-Bib Gourmand award, and it’s only time before *Llama San* earns an actual star.

Generally speaking, most of the new Michelin-starred restaurants are Japanese. There isn’t a single local Chinese restaurant, let alone Chifa restaurant, that has earned a star from that French-based publication.

“There’s so many Chinese restaurants, you know, in New York City and the Chifa is not far off from what you get here, right? It’s all very similar. The lines are a little blurred there, right. There are certain dishes that are very distinct that you can’t find on a Chinese menu. But the flavor profiles are all very alike,” says Ramirez.

Ramirez's mentality is that a Chifa is far too similar to a regular Chinese take-out spot, and needs to distinguish itself if it wants to reach the success and standard that a Nikkei restaurant upholds. They need to break out of their mold, and showcase more individuality with their cooking and usage of ingredients in order to set themselves apart from typical take-out spots, a category they constantly get thrown into. For now, New Yorkers who crave this style of cooking will have to go uptown to *Flor de Mayo*... or take a trip to New Jersey for that matter.