

PERU

Cafetín El Moshe: Location, Location...

by Daniel Alarcón

For Carlos Luján Martínez, it's not hard to imagine the day when someone shows up at the high security prison he temporarily calls home just to taste his most famous dish: Spaghetti a lo Luján. He says this with a playful smile, as if such a thing were obvious. As he sees it, the dish that bears his name is light, tasty, but above all, addictive. The recipe comes from Brazil, *stolen* — Luján uses this very word, grinning ironically — from a woman he met on one of his many trips throughout Latin America and the United States. The dish might seem simple, but it's all in the preparation: thin noodles, a splash of olive oil, green onion, red pepper, chicken breast, salt, parsley. Not anyone can make it, and like any good chef, Luján won't reveal his secrets. He offers me a taste. Delicious.

There are clouds above Lima's Miguel Castro Castro prison today, taking the edge off the typically sweltering summer heat. It's lunch time at the most successful privately-owned restaurant in the Peruvian penitentiary system, and head chef Luján revels in the chaos. He keeps his black hair short, the ends frosted a metallic golden color, although in the interests of hygiene, he wears a hat when he cooks. His cargo shorts are baggy, his black t-shirt a little tight and his three piercings (both ears plus his right eyebrow) all match. Luján gives me a brief tour of the half-built kitchen, speaking of the unfinished space as if the improvements were already complete. Soon there will be a second refrigerator, a pizza oven and a separate counter where he can work out his recipes in private. Naturally, Luján hopes to be free long before the kitchen is done. For now, he and his helpers — all of them inmates — make do as best they can in the tight space.

Like any kitchen in the midst of lunchtime rush, many tasks must be completed all at once to satisfy the hungry customers. One man crouches over an electric hot plate, frying an egg for steak *a lo pobre*, while another quickly dices tomato on the cramped counter top. A man digs through the freezer for ground beef, stepping over another, who sits on the floor peeling potatoes. Luján and his sous-chef, Roberto, a shy young prisoner doing a 15-year sentence for kidnapping, share two electric hot plates jerry-rigged from a single outlet, the boiling red coils sunken into a cement countertop. It's hard to figure out where best

to stand without getting in the way. There is a prisoner manning the window, taking orders from the customers, writing everything down in a notebook. Someone turns up the volume on the stereo, and suddenly a burst of music fills the space. Techno. Everyone perks up at the sound, and the pace of work quickens, if only for a moment.

Officially, this is the hall for lawyers, a space for inmates to meet with their legal representatives. According to the menu I'm handed, it's the "Cafetín El Moshe." For many years, the inmates at Castro Castro and their lawyers shouted at each other in a depressing auditorium with awful lighting and terrible acoustics — the echo was so bad it was often impossible to carry on a simple conversation. Last year, after long negotiations, the prison authorities decided to open up a new space, and the Moshe was born. The administration in charge of the national prison system (known as INPE, its Spanish acronym) worked with private investors, using inmate labor to build the restaurant. The wood, press board and nails alone cost nearly \$5,000. Taking into account the kitchen equipment, electrical wiring, tile flooring, lighting, tables and chairs, the cost must have been many thousands of dollars more.

Until he is freed, Luján runs the Moshe. As he cooks, he tells me of his adventures and assures me that, though he is imprisoned now, he considers himself a very lucky man. He's seen something of the world (California, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Miami, Brazil); he's learned from a lot of people along the way; and the optimism and energy he exudes come from experience. He knows how to deal with a prison sentence. This is his fifth time inside, and he's never been in for too long. Eighteen months was his longest stretch, and that was for his first conviction. As for the details of his current case, his explanation is quick and quite deliberately obscure. I only manage to make out a few phrases: "April 29th," "Los Angeles," "some Hindus," "Chase Manhattan Bank." He doesn't seem too concerned. He'll be out soon enough.

"This time," Luján assures me, "I'm innocent."

In any case, his career in and out of prison has taught him to value certain privileges. "One of the things you miss the most is the food," Luján says. What the Moshe attempts to mimic is the atmosphere and the taste one might find in a good restaurant anywhere else in the city.

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Carlos Luján Martínez shows off his specialty, Spaghetti a lo Luján.
Photo by Claudia Alva.



Photo by Claudia Alva

The kitchen of El Moshe.

in some cases, copies made in the prison's own ceramics workshop. Luján notes with pride that his cooks use real olive oil, something you won't find in any other restaurant in Castro Castro. "This is Asia," Luján says, referring to the stretch of opulent beaches south of Lima, pronouncing it in English, as some ridiculous people around here often do: *Ei-sha*.

The restaurant is named after Moshe Abdalla, an Israeli prisoner doing a 30-year sentence for drug trafficking. He is not, Luján is quick to point out, the owner of the restaurant, and in fact, who the actual owners are is a little unclear. One person explained it this way: "The Moshe belongs to everyone and to nobody" — a typically cryptic prison riddle of the sort often used on outsiders. Moshe, the prisoner, however, functions as a sort of unofficial mascot of his namesake restaurant. He doesn't work there exactly, but should anyone order the Arab salad a lo Moshe, he'd be the one to make it. In two months, no one has ordered it. While I talk with Luján and the others, Moshe slinks about, coming and going from the kitchen as if it were his living room, eventually settling into a corner where he sits, smoking and reading a crime novel in Hebrew. Every now and then, he looks up from his book and shouts at a cook to keep his hat on. "*¡Gho-rha! ¡Gho-rha!*" he yells in his exotically accented Spanish. He moves like a shadow, appearing briefly by my side to serve me a cup of orange soda before disappearing again. He has a thin, sad face, curly hair and the beginnings of a salt-and-pepper beard. Eventually he says to me, "You ate at the Arab restaurant in Miraflores, right? The one on Diagonal, in front of Kennedy Park?"

"Yes," I say, though that must have been at least six years ago.

Since Luján's customers can't go out into the street, he brings the flavor of the street to them. In just two months, it has become the preferred meeting place for inmates from all sectors of the prison, a place to relax and enjoy the warm breeze, a place to see and be seen. If it weren't for the iron gate and the barbed wire at one end of the dining area, it might be possible to forget you're surrounded by killers, terrorists and drug traffickers, some of whom have been inside these walls for a decade or more.

There are no prices on the menu, though some of these dishes cost as much as \$6, an extravagant price given the location. This is precisely what sets the Moshe apart from its competitors. If you want to eat cheaply, there are ten other eateries, places where you can have lunch for slightly more than a dollar. The Moshe is in another category and appeals to a more exclusive clientele. Here, an inmate from the U.S. lunches with an inmate from Nigeria, while both of them wait for their respective lawyers. Well-known

convicts, be they former ministers or ex-generals or drug traffickers, drink coffee and chat discreetly with their friends. It's not uncommon to see the head of prison security hunched over a plate of Spaghetti a lo Luján, should his hectic schedule allow the indulgence. I heard tell of one inmate, a man doing 25 years for terrorism, who petitioned the authorities for special permission to dine at the Moshe. He was receiving a visit from a family member he hadn't seen in 15 years, and he wanted to take her somewhere special.

These sorts of stories are important to Luján. When it was suggested he run the restaurant, he agreed, on certain conditions. He had to run it his way; it had to be his sort of place. Quality food, fresh ingredients, a place where everything was prepared professionally. No chicken wings with the feathers still on them. The chicken breast may be frozen, but it's still good quality. Even the plates themselves have a modern design — sleek and square — from Luján's own personal collection, or

He shrugs. “I remember your face.”

Sometimes one feels that prison is a different and separate world, that one has nothing in common with the men whose bad decisions or bad luck brought them here. That’s a mistake and an incomplete picture of society. If you are Peruvian and you enter any high security prison in your country, you will inevitably recognize certain faces from television or the newspapers, and you’ll hear certain names that sound familiar. If you stay long enough, you’ll likely run into someone you know: a family member or someone from the neighborhood, the friend of a friend of a cousin you haven’t seen in years. It’s another universe, but it’s still Peru, a living reflection of everything that goes on here. Everything we’d like to hide is buried here: the terrorists, rapists, kidnappers, corrupt politicians, killers and thieves with whom we live on the outside, each and every day. All the races and regions of the country are here and, because of the drug trade, a vast foreign contingent as well. There are rich and poor, members of the aristocracy and hapless victims paying for the mistakes of others. There are very educated inmates as well as those who are taking advantage of their time inside to learn those skills the Peruvian educational system never taught them: how to read, for example. Some have wasted their entire youth inside, while others remain loyal to the codes of criminality that landed them here in the first place. All of them are anxiously awaiting release, so they can resume their lives, charting out new paths or retaking the old one. What is certainly true is that there is a constant dialogue between the world outside and the one inside, that everything one sees on the streets of Lima and its provinces will eventually be reflected in the jails.

An example: seated in the dining area of the Moshe, it’s clear that the explosion of interest in Peruvian cuisine has made it to Castro Castro. It’s impossible to imagine that someone could have opened a high-end restaurant inside a high security prison before the sudden interest in Peruvian food. Luján himself is an admirer of Gastón Acurio, perhaps the best known ambassador of Peruvian cuisine to the world, owner of restaurants all over Peru, Latin

America, Europe and the United States. Luján’s partner, Roberto, worked for many years at Los Delfines, one of Lima’s most luxurious hotels, where he perfected his *cebiche*, a recipe that even the dour prison guards assure me is amazing. He’s been in Castro Castro for more than five years now, convicted of kidnapping, but he hasn’t forgotten what he learned there. The two friends share an attention to the details of fine dining, lessons picked up at some of the capital’s finest restaurants and, in Luján’s case, abroad. They pay attention to the look of each dish, and are proud of the attentive service they provide their guests. A few weeks ago, a well-known drug trafficker who didn’t like the taste of his lunch announced his displeasure by shattering his plate on the floor.

And what happened?

A scuffle? A fight? A riot?

One of the Moshe’s workers came out to sweep up the shards and clean up the mess, while Luján prepared another dish more to his client’s liking.

I ask Luján, “What do the prison’s other restaurant owners think of you?”

He responds instantly: “They hate me,” he says.

It’s not easy to bring a culture of fine dining to a prison. When the novelty wears off, it’s possible that many of the inmates will go back to the competition, to the cheap lunches served in plastic bags and made to be eaten quickly. Drug traffickers think that because they have money, they know what good food is, Luján says. But they’re wrong.

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A riot at the Miguel Castro Castro prison.

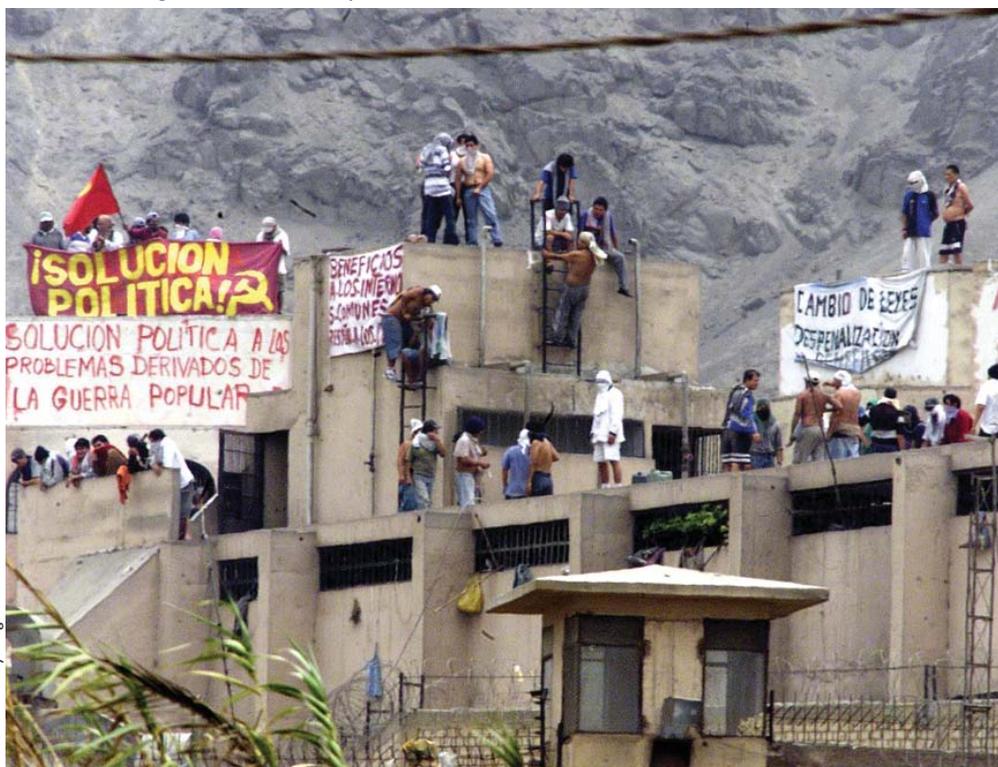


Photo from Getty Images.

They're just pretending. And the common criminals are even worse. They — “The riffraff from Roberto’s pavilion,” as Luján calls them affectionately — don’t like the food at the Moshe. For people like that, good food is simple, the same three or four dishes they know, served in massive portions. *Lomo saltado*, with lots of tomatoes and onions. A mountain of pasta with meat sauce, grated cheese on top — parmesan if you have it, but if not some local Andean variety, and they won’t know the difference. But Luján sees himself as an educator, and little by little he’s reaching them. He teaches them about the different traditions of Peruvian cuisine, about the great variety of ingredients we have at our disposal, the resulting diversity of flavors. It’s an uphill battle, but he enjoys it. Just recently, he convinced a few cautious inmates to try pesto. They liked it, he tells me. Now they even order it.

They can never remember what to call it exactly, but they order it all the same.

The Moshe opened on a Tuesday in January, and that first Saturday, visitor’s day, they racked up almost \$800 in sales. It was a sensation. Some inmates — the troublesome type, the kind who bring problems — don’t have permission to leave their cell blocks. But by now they too have heard of the Moshe, and they have their food delivered. Luján shows me his styrofoam to-go boxes, proof of his unexpected success. Each visitor’s day, he prepares around 10 portions of his famous dish that go outside the prison walls. His Spaghetti a lo Luján is going where he can’t. That’s a first step. The second is for regular *limeños* to come by just for lunch.

There’s a third step too, but for now it will have to wait. When he’s released, Luján wants to open a Peruvian restaurant in Costa Rica, where he has friends and even possible investors. He’ll be out soon, and he’ll go directly to San José. He hasn’t settled on a name just yet, but he tells me it’ll be something “very Peruvian.” Maybe something in Quechua to honor his mother, a native of Ayacucho, a mostly indigenous southern province. But one thing he has decided on is this: he won’t do it without Roberto. They’re a team. He looks over at his business partner, who’s busy preparing a dish for the hungry prisoners. Roberto has a few years left on his sentence, so Luján will just have to be patient. He turns to me, shaking his head with emotion. “Me and that little thug are going to conquer the world.”

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Mamulengo

By Chico Simões

Brazil — a country known for its racially mixed cultural formations — is slowly coming to recognize and display the vitality of its popular cultures. These are the very cultures that the colonizing mentality, which also played a formative role in the nation, had always opposed. *Mamulengo*, or traditional puppet theater, is one example of this long-repressed cultural legacy.

Working in popular culture, and with mamulengo in particular, is a pleasure, a profession and a mission inherited from the masters of this tradition. It is also an effective means of holding up a mirror to the public. By identifying with the characters, their stories, their passions and their creative spirit, the spectator discovers the possibility of confronting life with creativity and humor.

Chico Simões holds the 2009 Mario de Andrade Chair in Brazilian Culture at UC Berkeley. A puppeteer and educator who specializes in traditional forms, Simões is the director of a Ponto de Cultura in Brasília. He gave a presentation of mamulengo at UC Berkeley on April 16, 2009.

Chico Simões performs mamulengo, accompanied by Jeremias Zunguze.
Photo by Beth Perry.