

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.

