

**PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Casa do Saulo Tapajós' pool area overlooking the beach; Pousada Alter's herb garden; Camarao ao Alho e Azeite (shrimp with garlic and oil) by Casa do Saulo Tapajós; Piracema's sunny interior; Tribal's easy-to-digest menu; Open air jungle chic at Tribal; Alter do Chao sculpture; TY's Jindaira cocktail; Casa do Saulo's welcoming dining room; Jardim Vitória-Régia's waterscape of water lilies; Piracema's entrance sign; Casa do Saulo Tapajós' Tapioca Cubes in Cuparacu jelly. **MAIN PHOTO** A fanciful mural adorns Alter do Chao's main shopping street.



Brazil

WHERE ON EARTH



LETTERS FROM THE EDGE



# Elements of the AMAZON

by ELYSE GLICKMAN



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Pousada Alter's patch of beachfront heaven on a Tapajos tributary; A chill space in Pousada Alter's "living room"; One of Pousada Alter owner Denize Resende's "greeters."



«Açaí. That little word conjures up images of a breakfast or dessert treat, either frozen with a sorbet-like texture or chilled with a creamy yogurt-like consistency. Given its vibrant colour (it resembles a blueberry) and a choice of sweet or fruity toppings, it's easy to picture yourself enjoying it mid-morning at a Copacabana Beach snack bar in Rio de Janeiro or a trendy coffee house on a fashionable street in one of Brazil's larger cities. And you can do just that almost anywhere in North America.

However, in Para State, in the northeast corner of Brazil, the "right" way to prepare açaí is to puree it and serve it heated. It falls somewhere between a side dish and a condiment, and many locals insist it's a part of the "correct way" to eat locally harvested freshwater fish. First, you take a mouthful of the purple puree and follow it immediately with a bite of fish or your protein of choice. The term "side dish" is reserved for things like rice with *jambu* (a herbaceous, watercress-like leaf that temporarily numbs the inside of your mouth), steamed *jambu*, simple green salads,





and *Molho a Campanha*, a salsa-like mix of finely chopped vegetables. There is also yellow *tucupi*, an all-purpose seasoning sauce and by-product of casava/manioc flour that's fermented and boiled for several days, served with every meal. Every family and restaurant has its own recipe, and will add varying amounts of chicory, garlic, salt and herbs.

My first impression of Para's cuisine, *açaí* notwithstanding? Despite its simplicity, there is far more to it than meets the eye... and it is your senses of taste and smell that reveal its true complexity. And in Alter do Chao, a rural enclave in the far reaches of the city of Santarém, we don't see *açaí* accompanying fish as much as we will later in Belém. Here, we not only venture into the Amazon jungle but also into wonders of the culinary landscape beyond the small purple berry. This includes numerous uses of casava (or manioc) flour and extremely rare fruit such as *cupuaçu*, related to cacao, with a rich, fruity flavour and a high fat content. Passionfruit, a favourite across Brazil, is known locally as *maracuja* and used in some regionally specific ways not found in the larger metropolises.

Along Alter do Chao's main street, a visual hybrid of beach town and jungle oasis, my guides Vitor and Carolina select Tribal Restaurante Indígena for my first dining experience at the "Gateway to the Amazon." The restaurant is splashed with colour and decorated with local crafts in a way that makes it the perfect backdrop for a YouTube video covering eco-travel in Brazil. Many of these small restaurants in the region have a similar aesthetic, but within minutes of being seated, Tribal serves as a classroom for Para Cuisine 101. Vitor and Carolina use this dinner to go into some food-focused myth busting and explain why Para is one of Brazil's most important culinary destinations.

"Let's start with the main ingredients, *jambu*, an herb we will find in most dishes, even when recipes come from other places," says Vitor. "In addition to Para, you will find it in dishes from across the Amazon, including (Brazilian states) Amapá, Maranhão, Tocantins, Mato Grosso, Amazonas and Roraima. You know *jambu* is in the recipe because you will feel a sensation for about five minutes. It enhances the flavours of the other ingredients, especially when you add yellow *tucupi*. One of Para's most famous dishes is *Pato No Tucupi*, or baked duck in *tucupi* sauce."»



SERVES 3

## Fish with Plantains & Shrimp

THIS DISH from chef Saulo Jennings highlights the rich flavour of Brazil nuts and the harmonious combination of seafood and plantains.

**Milk**  
2 L, divided

**Brazil Nuts**  
200 g

**Coconut Milk**  
120 ml

**Cornstarch**  
100 g

**Heavy Cream**  
120 g

**Salt**  
20 g

**Olive Oil**  
50 ml

**Garlic Paste**  
30 g

**Shrimps**  
300 g

**Fish Fillet**  
400 g

**Ripe Plantain**  
400 g, sliced

**Scallions & Brazil Nuts**  
for garnish

**1 MAKE** the sauce: Lightly blend the Brazil nuts with 1 litre of milk in a blender. Set aside.

**2 DISSOLVE** the cornstarch in the remaining milk and set aside.

**3 IN** a saucepan, sauté the garlic paste in the olive oil.

**4 ADD** the blended Brazil nuts and the coconut milk to the saucepan. Gradually add the dissolved cornstarch to the mixture, stirring constantly, until the sauce thickens.

**5 FINISH** by adding the heavy cream, adjusting the salt as needed.

**6 GRILL** the fish fillets until golden brown. Grill the shrimp until cooked and golden. Grill the plantains until slightly caramelized.

**7 TO** serve: Place the fish fillets in the centre of a serving dish and pour the Brazil nut sauce over the fish.

**8 GARNISH** the dish with the grilled shrimp and plantain slices. Decorate with chopped scallions and pieces of Brazil nut for added flavour and presentation.



PHOTOS THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE  
FROM TOP LEFT Ponta de Pedras' beachfront restaurant owner; Rolling on the Tapajós River through Alter do Chao's "Enchanted Forest"; Fishing boats in the bay near Love Beach; A Boto Gelato frozen delight made with local ingredients; Isca de Peixe appetizer at Casa do Saulo Tapajós.



“Of course, we use it a lot with fish,” adds Carolina as a waitress brings *Isca de Piraruku* (fried fish sticks), *Bolinho de Piraqui* (piraqui fish croquettes). “We have this fish stew, based on Portuguese caldeirada. But when we make it, it becomes *Moqueca* when we add tucupi and jambu leaves.”

Vitor and Carolina debate on what to order, as the meals that will follow will involve the same fish and raw ingredients, but in different iterations — fried, baked, grilled, stewed, smothered in sauce, or served with a variety of flavour- and texture-enhancing extras, from yellow and black tucupi to mayonnaise, *farofa* (toasted manioc flour, found throughout Brazil), and *molho*, a salsa-like vinaigrette that, like tucupi, is served with everything. Ultimately, we decide on *Piracu ao Molho* for the primary main course, baked in butter and topped with lightly roasted onion, peppers, potatoes and carrots, accompanied with *molho*, potato salad, polenta-like *pirão*, and jambu rice.

Carolina adds in a small portion of moqueca for me to try, made with coconut milk, tomatoes, onions, garlic, coriander and dendê oil. It is a must as we may not have it again until we head to capital city Belem. The reddish dendê, derived from a palm tree brought to Brazil from Africa in colonial times, is an essential ingredient in moqueca no matter how an individual adapts the recipe to his or her personal taste.

The conversation shifts back to the appetizers, as french fries (*batata frita*), fried yucca and *Pão de Queijo* (cheese bread balls) arrive piping hot, and we are drizzling tucupi on piraqui croquettes as they cool. “I have a lot of memories making these with my family,” Vitor reminisces. “When piraqui is purchased (for the household), kids are responsible for cleaning all of the fish bones from the flesh. While we did not enjoy this, you knew that when your mother or grandmother was going to make *bolinho* and other dishes, you were in for something good.”

As we help ourselves to the main courses, Vitor explains he prefers Para’s freshwater fish over ocean fish because of its cleaner mouthfeel and moist texture, particularly when the fattier parts of the fish are used. Regardless of preparation, seasoning and marinading should be kept simple. A small amount of garlic, black pepper, lemon juice and salt will ensure the dish is flavourful and harmonizes with whatever you serve alongside it. In some dishes, dendê oil will enhance and compliment the fish’s natural flavour.

Breakfast at eco-lodge Pousada Alter, our home for the week, follows a similar approach to other restaurants we visit at all price points. Denize Resende, Pousada Alter’s founder, describes what comes out of her kitchen as simple food made with love when crafted with indigenous ingredients and those just harvested from the on-site herb garden. Guests can choose freshly squeezed juices made from native fruit, freshly sliced fruit, mild cheese and bread rolls or gluten-free pancakes (*Pão Tapioca*) made with tapioca, served with butter or stuffed with fried eggs, cheese, or

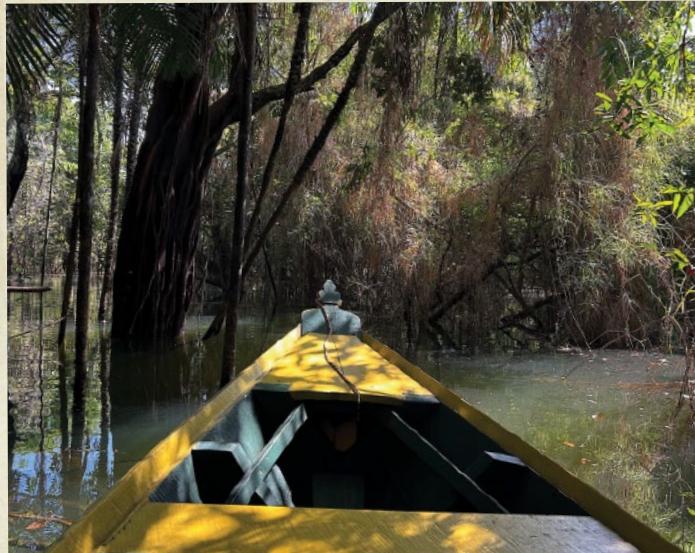
## ...Para is one of Brazil's most important culinary destinations...

*Carne Louca* ("crazy" beef braised with peppers, tomatoes, garlic and herbs). The exclamation point on her menu, however, is the ever-changing bolo, or cake of the day, that partners well with strong but smooth coffee that goes down like espresso minus the acidic edge.

The setting of the outdoor dining area, a lush patch of jungle framed by a small beach, shows what can be accomplished when an off-the-grid experience can also be executed with elegance and pride. Over breakfast on the second morning, Resende discusses how she left her successful career in the cosmetics industry to bring her vision of sustainable retreats to life. She recalls becoming inspired when she had dinner with a friend at the restaurant next to the plot of land where Pousada Alter now stands. While she enjoyed that restaurant's take on local cuisine, she also observed it was full of travellers from Brazil and abroad taking the experience in as a sensory whole.

"The energy in (Alter do Chao) is all about sustainability as well as the power of the sun in helping natural ingredients (from this part of the country) thrive," she details. "I realized I could develop a place to stay, as well as a beach and a bistro where people could relax, reflect, and appreciate everything that surrounds them." With her intentions set, the resort is a work in progress, and she looks forward to perfecting it and making it a destination for families, yoga retreats, and any other traveller who wants to learn how to approach daily life with mindful sustainability.

An organized tour through the Jari Canal to Jardim Vitória-Régia is fascinating as travellers are instantly immersed into a completely different land and waterscape than what lines Alter do Chao. At the end of the passage, travellers emerge into a clearing with over 130 giant water lilies surrounding a small house on stilts. Like Pousada Alter's Resende, owner Dulce Oliveira brought her vision for an Amazon conservation site to life. With support from »



SERVES 3

## Fried Fish with Açaí

*Peixe Frito com Açaí*

AT VER-O-PESO, Brazil's most famous market, açaí is served as a savoury side dish with fried fish, often *pratiqueira*, a freshwater species of mullet. This recipe is from noted Para-born author and chef Thiago Castanho.

**Pratiqueira, Mullet or Trout Fillets**

300 g

**Lime Juice**  
2 tsp

**Toasted Casava Flour or Fine Breadcrumbs**  
100 g

**All-Purpose Flour**  
100 g

**Salt & Freshly Ground Black Pepper**  
to taste

**Eggs**  
3, lightly beaten

**Corn Oil**  
for deep frying

**Açaí Pulp**  
for serving

**1** IF using *pratiqueira*, it should be cleaned and gutted. Season the fish with salt, black pepper and lime juice. Pat dry with kitchen paper. In a deep-fryer or heavy-based saucepan, heat the oil to 170°C.

**2** **PREPARE** three shallow bowls for the coating; one containing all-purpose flour, one with the beaten eggs, and one with the casava flour. Dip each fillet into the flour, then into the eggs, and finally, into the casava flour to ensure they are well-coated.

**3** **DEEP-FRY** the fish, in batches if using *pratiqueira* or one at a time if using fillets, until golden brown.

**4** **REMOVE** from the oil and drain on kitchen paper. Serve hot with a bowlful of unseasoned açaí pulp at room temperature.

# Amazonian River Fish: *On The Fins Of Giants*

While poultry and beef are widely available in the region, fish native to the Amazon are staple foods and the foundations for flavourful dishes influenced by the region's agricultural bounty and traditions rooted in its indigenous and African populations.

**Filhote:** The native Amazonian catfish can only be called *filhote* (literally “young offspring”) when it weighs less 110 pounds. It has firm flesh with delicate flavour, which can be used for several preparation methods: roasting, frying, grilling, stewing and braising. Most of its consumption is confined to Pará and other parts of Northeastern Brazil as it not easily found in other markets around the country.

**Pirarucú:** The world's second largest species of freshwater fish, which has inhabited the Amazon River basin for millions of years, is prized for its firm, white, and moist flesh, which makes it one of the most versatile fish that lends itself to grilling, roasting, baking, steaming, smoking and pan-searing.

**Surubim:** This catfish species is prized by professional and sport fishermen for its size and versatility, occupying river and ocean habitats all over Latin America.

**Tambaqui:** This member of the piranha family can grow to impressive sizes of up to one metre and weighing over 30 kilograms. Its size and laterally compressed body make it ideal for grilled and baked-preparations, while its seed and fruit diet helps give it a reputation of being one of the best-tasting freshwater fish in the world.

**Tucunaré (Peacock Bass):** This fish, compared to snapper or grouper in its flavour and suitability for certain recipes, has white flesh which is sweet when cooked. It is neither too bony nor too oily, and is featured in moqueca fish stews, recipes with coconut milk, and fried with spicy accompaniments.

**Freshwater Dorada** (a.k.a. the River Tiger for its strength): Not to be confused with the similarly named saltwater fish (mahi mahi), it gets its name from its golden colour and is enjoyed grilled, fried, or baked. 





SERVES 5

## Pará-Style Okra & Shrimp Curry

*Caruru Paraense*

ACCORDING TO chef Thiago Castanho, this dish from Bahia state is influenced by both native Indian and African cultures. It is often associated with the Afro-Brazilian religion, Candomblé.

**Whole Dried Salted Shrimp** 700 g  
**Olive Oil** 40 ml  
**Onion** 50 g, finely chopped  
**Garlic** crushed, 1 Tbs  
**Green Bell Pepper** 15 g, diced  
**Tomato** 35 g, chopped  
**Mild Yellow Chiles** 2, chopped  
**Okra** 400 g, cut into 1 cm rounds  
**Bay Leaf** 1  
**Fine Untoasted Cassava Flour** 250 g  
**Ground Cumin** a pinch  
**Freshly Ground Black Pepper** to taste  
**Dendé (Palm) Oil** 20 ml  
**Culantro** torn, 1½ Tbs  
**Basil** torn, 1½ Tbs  
**Pará Cress or Watercress** 150 g  
**White Rice** to serve  
**Dried Salt Shrimp** 50 g, heads removed

- 1 **SOAK** the whole dried shrimp in plenty of cold water for 4 hours. Drain and peel, reserving the heads and shells.
- 2 **PUT** the heads and shells in a colander and rinse well under cold running water. Transfer to a blender, add 1.4 litres of water and process until smooth. Pour the liquid into a large saucepan and bring to the boil over high heat. Boil hard for 10 minutes to make a full-flavoured broth. Strain and set aside.
- 3 **IN** a separate saucepan, heat the olive oil and sauté the onion, garlic, green pepper, tomato and yellow chiles until softened.
- 4 **ADD** the peeled shrimps and okra and sauté for 1 minute. Stir in the shrimp broth and heat until simmering.
- 5 **ADD** the bay leaf, the gradually add the cassava flour, stirring constantly with a whisk to prevent lumps forming. Cook for 7 minutes or until thickened.
- 6 **STIR** in the cumin, black pepper and dendé oil. Lower the heat and cook for 4 minutes.
- 7 **ADD** the cilantro and basil, stirring to combine. Adjust the salt to taste and keep the caruru hot while you prepare the garnishes.
- 8 **RINSE** the dried shrimp under cold running water to remove excess salt. In a saucepan of boiling water, cook the shrimp for 4 minutes then drain and set aside.
- 9 **BRING** another saucepan of water to a rolling boil, add the cress and blanch for 1 minute. Drain and refresh in a bowl of iced water to stop the cooking and keep the leaves green. Drain before plating.
- 10 **TO** serve, place a spoonful of cooked white rice on serving plates, add a portion of caruru and garnish with the cress and shrimps.

PHOTOS THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Impressionist vibes at Jardim Vitória-Régia; Chef Saulo Jennings; Piracema's shrimp starter; A half-dozen ways to savour the versatility of water lillies at Jardim Vitória-Régia; Pousada Alter's jungle corridor.



«noted academic Rosa Helena Veras Mourão (Institute of Public Health of the Federal University of Western Pará's Laboratory of Bioprospecting and Experimental Biology), she set out to not only preserve and cultivate this unexpected Amazon ecosystem but also serve up an actual taste of what water lilies have to offer beyond their beauty as they are classified as a “PANC” (Non-Conventional Edible Plant).

Once we are seated at a table with a view right out of an Impressionist painting, Oliveira brings out two trays of sweet and savoury snacks made from different parts of the plant including stems, seeds, flowers and leaves. “(This water lily species) has a high fibre and protein content,” she says as she places the different plates in front of us. “Its nutritional value means that if enough of it can be grown, it can be an alternative for people who do not eat meat and need a source of protein. There are also antioxidant properties with the presence of polyphenols found in the leaf and the petiole.”

We not only marvel at the range of vegan edibles she serves, including savoury chips, pickles, tempura, peanut brittle, brownies, churro-like bites, and a tasty swap for sometimes problematic peanuts, but also the fact that we are clamouring for seconds. The next meals that follow — beachfront restaurant at Ponta de Pedras and a private dinner with entertainment on a small private island — are showcases for frilled freshwater fish, hearty deep-fried snacks, and different uses of cassava/manioc flour and locally grown

produce. Vitor embraces the opportunities to point out the optimal ways to prepare, season, and cook the fish.

“The secret for creating perfect fish is all about how you cut it,” he informs the group as large plates of tambaqui and piraruku are placed on a table for the evening’s makeshift buffet. “Let it marinate in a little lemon juice with little bit of black pepper and garlic. If you deep fry it, instead of using wheat flour mixed with egg, you use (a fine-milled) manioc flour because of its nutty flavour and nutritional value.”

In more upscale restaurants, the chefs and cooks bring modern twists to time-tested recipes while endeavouring to maintain the integrity of the ingredients. Thanks to the



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star power of chef/ restaurateur Saulo Jennings, Casa do Saulo has locations in Belém and Rio de Janeiro. However, Casa do Saulo Tapajós, though slightly hard to find, is worth seeking out for its beach club setting, chef's garden, beachfront views that read as ocean more than river, and stylish appetizers and main courses. He describes his menu as *Tapajônica* cuisine, inspired by his avid cook parents as well as micro-regional ingredients such as Santarém beans, *aviu* (shrimp mainly found in the Tapajós region), and appetizers made with either manioc or *piracuí* flour, made from dried salted fish.

The appetizers, which made up most of our family-style meal, are testament to the fact that chefs like Jennings can use the ingredients he grew up with in inventive ways. We gravitated toward garlic-y *Camarao ao Alho e Azeite* (shrimp with garlic and oil) served with rustic bread and *Camarao Caboco*, large shrimp breaded in casava, tapioca, or bread flour served with a honey dipping sauce. And we had to try everything else Vitor and Carolina spoke highly of — a *Crab Coxinha* (a stuffed teardrop-shaped appetizer breaded in panko crumbs), *Isca de Peixe* (fish strips), tapioca cubes with cuperaçu jelly and cheese, artisanal sausages, and the chef's take on steak strips and an Italian burrata starter.

The main dish Vitor insists we sample is the signature Casa do Saulo fish topped with shrimp, plantains, garlic, scallions and a creamy sauce. The menu says its for two, but it takes about six or seven people to clean the metal dish it is served in.

Perched in a prime spot along Alter do Chao's beachfront road, Ty Comedoria e Bar is so polished and stylized that it can be assumed it was created more for travellers than local diners. But people who live in Santarém frequent the place and love the contemporary cocktails, nicely plated main courses, and updated appetizers. While the desserts also earn high marks, we opt for dessert at Boto Gelato, opposite the town's main square, whose distinctively regional flavours (açaí, jambu, passionfruit, cupuaçu, pimento peppers) and silky consistency ensured the only regret I had was not ordering a larger cone with multiple flavours.

Before heading to the airport for our flight to Belém, we drive toward Santarém's city centre for lunch at Piracema, whose owners were as proud of their fresh vegetables, salads, and chilled ceviche as they were of the *Pirarucú Defumado* (smoked pirarucú made by co-owner "Dona Vera") and elevated treatment of shrimp, tambaqui, filhote, surubim and fresh pirarucú in both main courses and playful appetizers that were deep fried but worth the splurge.

Food is a part of the culture no matter where one travels in the world. What makes this corner of Brazil so compelling is observing how the building blocks of local recipes shape and are shaped by the Amazonian lifestyle. 



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