

OBJECTIVE

To prepare and taste some foods that Bolivians enjoy, and to have fun doing so!

INPUT

Bolivians have some unique foods. As well, one of the foods that has become a staple in many places—the potato—originated in the Andean highlands of Bolivia and Peru.

Dozens of varieties of potatoes are still grown in the Bolivian highlands. Bolivians who move away from home are dismayed by the “slim pickings” of potato types available elsewhere. Evelyn Peters Rojas, a Mennonite Central Committee staffperson in Winnipeg, relates that her Bolivian husband, René, was used to some 150 varieties back home. (In any given market, though, a shopper would probably find only 10 to 30 varieties.)

Potatoes, corn and rice are staples of the Bolivian diet that we are also very familiar with in Canada and the United States. Bolivians have a few additional staples, however, that have not made their way into the North American diet.

Quinoa seeds and oca roots are both important in the Bolivian diet. They are from plants native to Bolivia and are not cultivated—except in small, often experimental plots—outside the Andean region.

Quinoa is a highly nutritious grain, rich in protein. For the ancient Incans, quinoa was second in importance only to corn. Today quinoa is made into flour for baked goods, breakfast cereals, soups, desserts and even for animal feed. When cooked in water it swells and becomes almost transparent. It has a mild taste and a firm texture. Most often, quinoa is served as a side dish—as we would serve rice, or used to thicken soups. Some varieties of quinoa are also popped like popcorn.

The quinoa plant has large seedheads and broad leaves—it looks something like a cross between sorghum and spinach. It is an especially valuable highland crop because it resists tough growing conditions—cold and drought. A downside is that most varieties of quinoa seeds contain substances called “saponins” that give them a bitter flavor. People must wash out the saponins in cold water, or have them milled out.

Those curious about quinoa can probably find this grain in a local health food store. Clean it carefully in water, rubbing it between your hands to remove the bitter part. Cook in water until dry and eat like rice or stir some into a soup.

Oca is a thin starchy root that grows from 5 to 10 centimeters/2 to 4 inches long. It looks something like a small, pink sausage. Bolivian highlanders freeze-dry oca as they do potato. Both oca and potato are often served with a cheese sauce.

Another food not known in North America is *chuño* (CHUNE yo), which is Bolivia’s national food. *Chuño* is probably the world’s oldest “freeze-dried” food—it was prepared by the Incans.

To prepare *chuño*, Bolivian highlanders set out small potatoes to freeze in the cold night air. (The air can get very cold where they live at some 3,000 to 4,000 meters/10,000 to 13,000 feet of altitude.) The next day, when the sun warms the potatoes, the highlanders stamp out the moisture. They repeat this process for several days—freezing, thawing and stomping out moisture. What is left are darkened, hard “freeze-dried” chunks of potatoes that can be stored for years. When needed, they are cooked in water.

CONNECTING ACTIVITIES

Try some of the recipes provided. Before eating, sing “*Alabaré*.” See page 26 for music and words.

This popular song was sung by the children of the Stansberry Children’s Home in Santa Cruz as a meal grace before they dug into a delicious meal of barbecued meat. The words, “*Alabaré a mi Señor*” mean “I will praise my Lord.”

Maní Confitado (mah NEE cone fee TAH doh), Sugared Peanuts

Maní confitado, or sugared peanuts, are sold on street corners in Bolivia. The vendor sells them in small paper cones that he or she has made from small squares of newspaper. Buy some sugared peanuts and with your students make some paper cones. Serve the peanuts in the cones.

To make paper cones, cut paper (such as white office paper) into squares about 6-inches/15-centimeters long and wide. Grasp one corner of the paper and roll it into a cone. Secure with tape or by folding up bottom tip. After filling with peanuts, fold down the top of the cone.

Refresco de guineo con leche (reh FRES coh deh GHEE nay oh cone LAY chay), Banana-milk refresher

Beat until smooth in a blender:

3 medium bananas, cut in chunks

2 cups cold milk

1 tablespoon sugar

1/4 teaspoon vanilla

Serve immediately.

LEVEL: PRIMARY

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Fried plantain

Use the large, ripe yellow or blackened type of plantain. (The blacker the peel, the sweeter but also the softer the fruit.) Peel and cut into slices on the diagonal, each slice about 6 to 12 millimeters or 1/4- to 1/2-inch thick. Fry on one side in a shallow layer of hot oil in a skillet until golden brown, then flip and fry the other side. Drain on brown paper bags. (Latin Americans use newspaper. Paper towels are OK but the fried plantain may stick to them.) Allow to cool and eat plain or with a slice of a semisoft, mild white cheese, such as Monterey Jack or farmer cheese.

Fruits

Fruits enjoyed in Bolivia include apples, avocados, bananas, grapes, mangos, oranges, papaya, pineapple, strawberries, tangerines and watermelon. Cut up and serve some of these fruits, individually or combined in a fruit cup. Papaya would be served with fresh lemon juice squeezed over it.

A SOUTH AMERICAN HYMN

This is a favorite hymn throughout much of South America. It is written in Spanish. You can sing the hymn too. The words mean "I will praise my Lord."

Alabaré a mi Señor.
(ah-lah-bah-RAY ah me seen-YOR)

ALABARÉ

A - la - ba - ré, a - la - ba - ré,
a - la - ba - ré a mi Se - ñor.
A - la - ba - ré, a - la - ba - ré,
a - la - ba - ré a mi Se - ñor.

Salteñas (sahTAY nyahs), Meat Turnovers

Salteñas, or meat turnovers, are a popular Bolivian "fast-food," sold by street vendors and in market stalls. *Salteñas* can be quite spicy; you can choose how much "firepower" to put in yours by altering the amount of onion and ground red pepper. Make your own pie dough or purchase it readymade. This recipe makes eight meat pies.

In a medium skillet, brown:
1/2 pound lean ground beef
1 small onion, chopped (about 1/2 cup)

Add and simmer together for 5 to 7 minutes:

1/2 cup kernel corn
2 tablespoons raisins (plumped in hot water for a few minutes and drained)
1/4 cup sliced, pitted olives (green or black)
1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon ground hot red pepper (cayenne)
salt and black pepper to taste
1/4 cup water

Let mixture cool a bit and add:
2 hard-cooked eggs, peeled and chopped

Prepare enough pie dough for two 9-inch crusts, or purchase a package of two 9-inch refrigerated pie-dough rounds. If using homemade dough, divide into eight pieces and flatten into circles 3 millimeters or 1/8-inch thick and about 14 centimeters or 5 1/2 inches in diameter. If using purchased pie dough rounds, cut each into four "pie" pieces and shape into circles as described.

Place about 1/3 cup of the filling in the center of each round. Fold the dough over the filling and seal the edges of the half circle by twisting slightly several times.

Place the meat pockets on a greased baking sheet *with the sealed side up!* It will look like the body (without head or tail) of a stegosaurus. Well . . . a little bit anyway! Reseal the turnover if it came "undone" in the moving from tabletop to baking pan. Brush the dough tops (dinosaur bodies!) with milk or a beaten egg.

Bake in a preheated 190-degree Celsius/375-degree Fahrenheit oven for 15 to 20 minutes or until nicely browned.

Serve hot or cold as a meal or snack.

Sopa de maní (SOH pah day mah NEE), Peanut Soup

This soup is the first course at many Bolivian celebrations. It is usually served with French fries floating on top. Delicious!

Soak overnight in water to cover:

2 cups raw peanuts, skinless preferred*

If peanuts had skins, remove them. In a blender, grind the peanuts into very fine pieces. This is most easily done by blending 1/2 cup peanuts with 4 to 5 tablespoons water at a time. The result looks like small-curd cottage cheese.

Put in large pot:

the chopped peanut paste (or 1 cup peanut butter*)
2 quarts chicken broth (or 2 quarts water and 2 chicken bouillon cubes)
1 large onion, chopped
4 large potatoes, peeled and diced
4 carrots, diced

Cook 30 minutes over medium or medium-low heat, so that soup gently simmers, stirring occasionally.

Add:

1/4 cup uncooked rice
1 cup green peas
salt and pepper to taste

Cook 15 minutes more.

Serve hot. If you wish, garnish the top of each bowl of soup with:

fresh parsley, chopped
French-fried potatoes (purchased canned potato sticks work well)

**Note: Although this recipe is authentic with chopped or preferably, crushed, raw peanuts, substituting 1 cup peanut butter (creamy or crunchy) is MUCH easier, and is recommended for cooking with children. As well, kids will probably prefer the smoother texture the peanut butter gives the soup.*

