

Gastrohistories of Peru: Teaching Migration, Race, and Class Through Food

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Abstract

This article explores the role of food in a critical pedagogy that highlights the intersectionality of migration, class, and race in Peru from 1530 to the present. In a history course focused on Andean foodways, the readings examine Peru's connection to global histories, including the invasion of the Americas, the slave trade, the abolition of the slave trade, and modern gastronomical revolutions. The course design encourages experiential learning via food labs. By preparing Andean dishes, students examine the labor, technology, flavor profiles, time, and ingredients involved. The recipes are recreated for analysis, comparison, discussion, and erudition, but include recipes and ingredients new to most North American students. Participants are encouraged to examine cookbooks as primary sources. These records enable students to break down recipes and instructions, uncovering cultural clues and histories. The class can be deployed in-person or asynchronous online formats, demonstrating that innovative online pedagogy can connect students with the past and develop cultural competency through a focused area studies course.

Keywords: Class, Colonial Legacies, Foodways, Migration, Online Education, Pedagogy, Peru

Introduction

Food is a universal human necessity, but our culinary practices reflect complex historical processes shaped by conquest, trade, and technological change. When teaching an area studies course, food history illustrates how gastronomy



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intersects with all layers of society, including culture, gender, environment, labor, religion, race, migration, politics, and class. Focusing on a subset of Latin America, such as Peru, allows for the exploration of these histories at a national level. By examining Peru's connections to global developments, students follow food as a throughline to illuminate broader historical patterns and social transformations.

Food history is a subfield of cultural history, emphasizing how humans embody food with cultural significance. As with all facets of cultural history, it examines people's lived experiences and the meanings that those individuals attribute to the world around them through ideas, beliefs, customs, art, entertainment, and material objects. Effectively, diet can be deeply connected to social identities and even the construction of stereotypes (Frantzen 2017). Latin American area studies allow us to examine cross-cultural exchanges, Indigenous knowledge, imperialism, trade, and cultural beliefs.

Commodities like sugar provide one such entry point. *Sweetness and Power* offers an interdisciplinary study on sugar's transformation from a luxury good to a mass-consumed staple. In doing so, it links Caribbean sugar production to capitalism, slavery, and European tastes (Mintz 1986). Similarly, April Merleaux's *Sugar and Civilization* examines the history of sugar in the U.S., Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Philippines, and Hawaii from the Spanish-American War through the New Deal (Merleaux, 2015). Merleaux considers how sugar became intertwined with political discourses on U.S. expansionism, race, and civilization. When the U.S. Congress effectively designated these sugar-producing islands as possessions, it allowed lawmakers to bypass constitutional protections that would have otherwise safeguarded their residents from unequal taxation, legal discrimination, and political exclusion (Merleaux, 2015: 5). Thus, the pursuit of control over commodity chains served as both a rationale and mechanism for exoticizing and subjugating these territories.

Marcy Norton's *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures* and more compendia reveal how ingestible stimulants and depressants became sites of cultural appropriation and recategorization in early modern Latin America. Norton tracks the journey of tobacco and chocolate from products initially consumed and used by indigenous peoples in Mesoamerica to highly sought-after goods first normalized among sailors, merchants,



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and other New World travelers (Norton 2010). Her study reveals how Europeans adopted these substances and assigned them new cultural meaning (Norton 2010). More recently, Schwartzhopf and Sampeck’s edited collection on non-essential ingestibles like beer, hallucinogenic mushrooms, chocolate, and tobacco draws on archaeology, ethnohistory, and historical research to show how Indigenous peoples engaged with seductive substances and what made them desirable (Schwartzhopf and Sampeck 2017: xvi). The collection emphasizes Indigenous knowledge, particularly in Guatemala and El Salvador, as well as its role in global commodity exchanges.

Area studies connect place-based food practices to structures of power, labor, commercialization, and cultural transformation. Jeffrey Pilcher has employed culinary dishes, such as tacos and tamales, to critically examine questions of authenticity and the transnational transformations of food practices (Pilcher 2012). His study, *Planet Taco*, argues that industrialization, globalization, and the expansion of fast-food chains have contributed to the industrialization of Mexican staples, including tacos, tortillas, and meats, resulting in dietary changes that diminish the nutritional value of many meals and exacerbate obesity, diabetes, and other illnesses (Pilcher 2012). Also examining Mexico, Robert Weis uses bread and bakeries to assess Basque immigrant bakers in nineteenth and twentieth-century Mexico City. By establishing monopolistic systems, the bakers dominated the bread industry and exerted political agency over its production. Nevertheless, as workers pushed for labor protections such as regular wages and shifts, the bakeries modernized to align with the emerging capitalist marketplace (Weis 2012: 19).

The study of ingredients, cooking methods, preparation, storage, and consumption reveals the distinctiveness of places like Peru and its historical transformations. Since food intersects with the means of production, it offers a tangible way to understand how these forces operate within a specific geographic context. While many ingredients and preparations are unfamiliar to North American students, this unfamiliarity becomes a pedagogical tool for developing cultural competency. Students examine cookbooks as primary sources, engage with the recent scholarship on food history, prepare historically relevant dishes, and write public-facing pieces that bring together experiences and scholarship. In this way, food history and student-



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centered learning intersect to reveal the intersectionality of migration, class, and race history in Peru from 1530 to the present.

First, I will present an overview of the relevant literature on Latin American food history and cooking, incorporating it into classroom discussions with students. Next, I will discuss the advantages of teaching the course asynchronously online, followed by the activities and learning outcomes that students complete. Finally, the food labs highlight how the weekly topics guide students in analyzing how food illuminates several spheres of Andean culture.

Literature Review

Latin American food history

The literature is interdisciplinary and strives to understand a specific segment of cultural history. More recently, scholars have recognized food as formative in identity construction, social hierarchies, and colonial legacies (Kissane 2018; Parahar 2020). Some key themes include the impact of the Columbian exchange and colonialism, Indigenous, African, and Asian culinary practices, and modernization and globalization.

The framework of food and colonialism analyzes how food served as a tool of colonial power, cultural exchange, and identity. Perhaps most recognizable is Alfred Crosby's *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (1972). His work explores how the exchange of plants, animals, and diseases between the Old World (Europe, Asia, and Africa) and the New World (the Americas) influenced global diets, economies, and cultures. He emphasizes how New World crops adapted to new environments, such as the potato in Ireland and maize and cassava in Africa, altering dietary patterns and facilitating population growth. Historian Rebecca Earle also examined the colonial period, arguing that food reflected and underscored colonial hierarchies and relationships between Europeans, Indigenous peoples, and Africans (Earle 2012). Making sense of the Americas reinforced Spanish beliefs that Iberian landscapes and foodways were intrinsically linked with race, health, and identity. Her work highlights the role of food in the social construction of colonial bodies and the



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imperative role Mediterranean foods, such as almonds, pork, olive oil, and red wine, played in sustaining Spanish physical, moral, and intellectual characteristics.

A growing subset of the literature examines Indigenous, African, and Asian foodways, revealing the contributions of these groups to regional cuisines. For example, Judith Carney’s *Black Rice* discusses the role of enslaved Africans in transferring rice cultivation technology to the Americas (Carney 2001). Carney demonstrates that African women held key agricultural knowledge and played a central role in the success of rice in the Americas. Beyond cultivating specific crops, the colonial period infused the culinary practices of Europeans, Indigenous peoples, and Africans together (Martínez Montiel 1997: 169; Martínez 2008). Robert Chao Romero offers another perspective, observing Chinese immigration to California and Mexico, as well as its cultural impact. In California, as in other areas of Latin America, Chinese immigrants gravitated to industrial hubs like mining towns, where they sold food and supplies to laborers (Romero 2010: 21).

Peruvian food history

The literature dedicated to Peruvian foodways is relatively sparse and requires an interdisciplinary approach to appreciate the region’s rich culinary history fully. Food practices reflect the dynamic interaction between tradition and modernization. Scholars emphasize the sophisticated practices of pre-Columbian food systems, the impact of colonialism, and Lima’s gastronomic boom.

Under the Incas and their predecessors, food was strategically cultivated to take advantage of different geographies, climates, and agricultural opportunities and redistributed among communities at various altitudes. John Murra labeled this ecological complementarity the ‘vertical archipelago’ model (Murra 1980). These agricultural zones spanned from the coastal deserts to the high-altitude grasslands, and the steady food supply and redistribution system played a vital role in the Incan economy. Pre-Columbian Andean farmers boosted their yields by prioritizing diversity. In the case of the potato, highland farmers continuously traded for new seed potatoes from different regions and planted multiple different potato plants in the same field (Hastorf 2028). As Christine Hastorf notes, tuber exchanges sustained yields, combated pests, and avoided blight (Hastorf 2028: 112). Her extensive body



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of work underscores the cultural and symbolic significance of food in the Andes. For example, she notes that feasting practices in the pre-Columbian Andes demonstrated political alliances and social hierarchy. Moreover, food preparation and consumption were tied to gender roles and community organization (Hastorf 2016; Moore, 1989).

Food often intersects with class and identity. Susan deFrance examines how guinea pig consumption is a social and racial marker in Peru. Although revered as a cultural symbol, its consumption remains tied to its Indigenous roots, sometimes clashing with modernization efforts in Peru that seek to overwrite its Indigenous history (deFrance 2006). Alison Krögel, who analyzes Quechua folklore, art, cinema, and policy in modern Peru, argues that Quechua communities, especially women, use food to reinforce their cultural identity and resist assimilation into mainstream society (Krögel 2012).

Over the past forty years, elite Peruvian (mostly male and Limeñan) chefs propelled Lima to become a culinary destination. According to Raúl Matta, the shift began in the mid-1980s with the emergence of Novo-Andean cuisine (Matta 2013). Novo-Andean cuisine aimed to reclaim, reinvent, and elevate Andean ingredients and culinary practices by blending them with modern, European gastronomic techniques. By and large, it elevated foods traditionally linked to rural life and poverty, but it often suppressed indigenous and African expertise (Matta 2013).

In the 2000s, Matta notes that the goal was to balance cultural preservation while appealing to international markets, generating economic investment. As he observes, the nuance of Peruvian food was flattened to favor nationalist narratives, and ‘Peruvian cuisine is presented as a product of consensus, social inclusion and harmony’ (Matta 2013). Wary of this agenda, María Elena García criticizes Peru’s culinary boom. She contends that while Lima’s gastronomic fame is lauded as a symbol of national pride and multiculturalism, it is deeply entangled with histories of coloniality, racial inequality, and the commodification of Indigenous and Afro-descendant cultures (García 2021). While she credits celebrity chefs like Gastón Acurio with Peru’s rise to gastronomic fame, she critiques their role in perpetuating unequal power dynamics and profiting from Indigenous knowledge. This dynamic perpetuates racism by



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romanticizing Peru's Indigenous and Afro-Peruvian communities but barring them from full participation in the culinary industry (García 2021).

Advantages of the online, asynchronous format

Food history is an engaging subfield that draws students in, whether in a general education survey or a focused seminar. I have taught food history as the connective throughline in the 'Foundations of Europe/Western Civilization' required general education course required by many public universities. I was also fortunate to teach a 2.5-hour research seminar in an old culinary arts classroom that had been converted into a nutrition studies kitchen, providing both a discussion space and several cooking stations equipped to allow students to create and taste historical recipes. While a kitchen classroom is ideal, even a lecture hall does not deter me from creating an environment for a hands-on cooking experience. I have brought in ingredients, measuring tools, utensils, and electric griddles to lecture halls and asked students to help make Egyptian flatbread or corn flour tortillas. Recognizing the joy of working with students directly in the classroom, it is necessary to acknowledge that teaching a food history class asynchronously and online offers unique advantages over the in-person modality.

Online classrooms accommodate diverse schedules. By completing assignments at their convenience, students can accommodate work, family, and personal commitments. Through a self-paced learning approach, learners can revisit lectures, readings, and course content as often as needed, allowing them to engage more deeply with the materials. It gives students more time to plan and execute the recipe. They can work with the cookbook and recipe, enlist a family member to help, and think through the production process. In-person time is a challenge. In the 50-minute seminars, there is not a lot of time to set up and cook before the period ends. In a 2.5-hour seminar, cooking can still be challenging as historical recipes were intentionally obtuse, written for experienced cooks who would immediately know and understand concise instructions.

Online, students decide which historical recipes resonate with them and what they want to prepare. They can also consider personal dietary needs and select recipes that



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accommodate allergies or explore gastro-curiosities. This results in richer discussions, as students share the recipe and analysis, allowing students to see and learn about a much more extensive range of recipes during the course.

Nevertheless, material costs pose a challenge. The professor can use either personal or department funds to cover the costs of ingredients and materials in the physical classroom. This is not always possible in online classrooms. Some of the budgeting depends on how online fees are accessed and used. At a public university in the Intermountain West, online student fees went to the instructional design and online education unit. From that pool, professors were allowed to request student fees to purchase distinct items for the class (outside of textbooks). In that scenario, I could use up to the total amount charged in student fees to help buy ingredients for online students. At my current institution, fees work differently, but our associate administrative director helped find funding for me to send ingredients to students who opted in. In that case, I offered to mail three distinct ingredients used in Andean recipes: *aji amarillo* (a spicy yellow pepper), *aji panca* (a flavorful, less spicy red pepper), and *huatacay* (black mint). Since these ingredients were likely not in their pantries, this aimed to offset some cost burdens.

Activities and Learning Outcomes

Blog posts

The key activities in the course include writing blog posts, analyzing cookbooks as primary sources, participating in reading and discussion, writing a précis, and conducting food labs. Most of the writing in the course centers around writing four blog posts. The first is an introductory post to help students familiarize themselves with the software (such as Edublogs) and practice specific formatting tasks, including inserting copyright-free images, headings, and hyperlinks. The blog post allows students to articulate both historical thinking and practical communication. The content-driven posts focus on one of three themes: food and social class, food and culture, and food and migration. By keeping the themes broad, students choose how to explore and represent each theme related to an Andean recipe or ingredient.



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Although a shorter, more digestible format, blogs nonetheless support research and analytical skills. Blogs ask students to research, analyze primary and secondary sources, and construct a coherent argument or narrative. Moreover, students determine how to present evidence effectively in a public-facing format. Some research even suggests that blogs can be used as stepping stones to a larger essay, as they allow for more frequent and targeted feedback on a potential research project (Crowder-Meyer 2019).

This assignment encourages accessible and engaging writing, fostering creativity. The shorter length allows students more time to polish their writing and practice essential mechanics that often get lost in the flurry of a longer essay. The instructions require the student to focus tone and organization around a specific issue or argument, ensuring that each paragraph meaningfully responds to the prompt rather than spiraling into diffuse and ineffective language. Like an essay, the argument must be substantiated by secondary and primary sources rather than opinions or anecdotes. In short, the goal is to help the reader become a mini-expert by the time they have finished reading. This approach encourages students to communicate historical arguments and ideas to a broader, non-specialist audience. Moreover, the format invites creativity by asking students to incorporate images, hyperlinks, videos, and interactive content, making the content more dynamic and relatable.

Blog posts promote digital literacy, encourage peer engagement, and build a public history mindset. The posts can be circulated on a class site or posted with the discussion board tool built into the university’s online learning management system. Students gain experience writing for online platforms. Moreover, this format replaces the traditional discussion board. Rather than the mundane flow of reading, posting, and responding, students can view their work in a gallery and as part of a larger historical conversation on the intersection between food, class, migration, and culture. Moreover, the activity mirrors tasks that public historians regularly engage with, where sharing historical knowledge with the public is a central mission of the archive, museum, or institution. Students leave the class more equipped to ‘engage in public conversations, civic life, and work,’ (Holland 2018). This awareness reinforces the relevance of history outside the classroom and continuously reminds students to reflect on their audience engagement.



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Blogs enable classrooms to transition from a model of knowledge consumption to one of knowledge production (Freire 1996). Like an essay, students craft a historical discussion and argument, thereby participating in the production of history. A key advantage, however, is that students envision an audience beyond the instructor and write for one another. They also produce a series of blogs over time, allowing authors to expand the scope and chronology of the course. This format disrupts the traditional information hierarchy, allowing students to explore tangents and histories that spark personal interest, creating ownership over historical narratives.

Cookbooks as primary sources

Cookbooks brim with history that reflects a specific time and cultural milieu. As students create and taste recipes, it is equally important to analyze cookbooks as primary sources. Historians ask the standard questions of any source: who is the author, for whom is the cookbook, when was it written/published, where, and how was it used? These initial questions allow students to identify the basic parameters of a source and its context. The author and audience of cookbooks can reveal who possessed cooking expertise and what they assumed about their audience. For example, in the early modern periods, cookbooks and health guides were often paid for, produced by, and disseminated in elite circles (Wall 2015: 7). As recipe books became more popular during the latter seventeenth century, they assumed an educational tone, using each page to dispel culinary mysteries such as how to select the choicest cuts of meats, the best seasons to prepare certain dishes, and how to stage elaborate dinner parties.

The cookbook I use to teach Peru's gastronomy is Ricardo Zarate's *Fire of Peru*. Compared to other celebrity Peruvian chefs, Zarate's approach is incredibly accessible. He is less concerned with showcasing his culinary skills and more interested in instructing hopeful readers on how to execute Andean dishes successfully. Alongside the recipes, he often includes tips ranging from slicing an onion to making the perfect potato *masa* ready for stuffing and frying.

The next layer of cookbook questions asks us to dig deeper: what language is used; what measurements and ingredients mark its pages? Ingredients and technology



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provide insights into the environment, social class, health, economics, gender, and labor. Asking students to analyze recipes and cookbooks as primary texts encourages critical thinking and source literacy. Recipes reveal the ingredients available and how they are prepared. For example, in Peru, most households are energy-conscious, so very few recipes involve baking or broiling. If, however, someone wants to prepare a dish like *pastel de papa* (a baked potato casserole with cheese, egg, milk, and anise), they carry their dish to a community oven where they pay for the time it takes to bake. This way, the household avoids draining the propane tank used to fuel the kitchen.

Cookbooks, and especially modern Peruvian ones, highlight the networks of immigration and cultural exchange that shape Peru’s foodways. One of Peru’s most popular dishes is *lomo saltado*, a beef stir-fry mixed with ginger, onions, tomatoes, and fried potatoes. The dish is rooted in Chinese migration, specifically, the laborers who worked in areas like mining and building railroads. After working long hours, they prepared quick and energy-efficient dishes. Thus, stir-fries like *lomo saltado* became part of the national cuisine (Lausent-Herrera 2013). Reflecting on the ingredients and technology used to produce a stir fry or other dishes illuminates how different cultures balance sustenance, affordability, and time.

Food Labs

Through food labs, students can taste food and use recipes to understand and taste how complex stories of colonialism and migration shape Peru’s national dishes. Three times in the semester, students execute a food lab. Preparing recipes requires students to assess the larger themes of the course, including migration, race, and class, while also reflecting on the challenges of procuring specific Andean ingredients, distinct cuts of fish and meat, and the unfamiliarity of Peruvian preparations. Not to mention, the students who lack any kitchen know-how are often relieved to find uncomplicated recipes for side dishes like salsa criolla and fried popcorn kernels. Almost any recipe selected from the *Fire of Peru* intersects with the course’s key themes.

A few students challenged themselves by working with some unfamiliar ingredients, such as cow heart and *aji panca*, which are grilled to make the popular street food *anticuchos*. Through further research, they discovered that *anticuchos* have historical



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roots in the Inca culture, which traditionally roasted meat over open flames (Garza 2024). However, the dish has evolved and is now more closely associated with Afro-Peruvian cuisine (Gill 2017)

Until the mid-nineteenth century, cotton and sugar plantations along the Peruvian coast depended on African labor. Allegedly, slave owners reserved choice cuts like beef for their consumption but discarded the viscera. Beef is not the only type of meat that works well with this preparation style. African slaves would use the cuts available at a given time, including alpaca tripe or intestines and even chicken gizzards (Gill 2017). Working with the animal scraps left to them, African slaves marinated beef hearts (or other animal viscera) with vinegar, garlic, cumin, salt, and other seasonings. The meat is then brushed with marinade, skewered, and grilled over a flame for six minutes. The speed of preparation once again illuminates the significance of time and fuel in food preparation. Students note that the dish, beyond sourcing beef hearts, is easy and reasonably quick to prepare. As this is usually the first time students consume this part of the animal, they remark on the unfamiliar flavors and textures. It is a significant learning opportunity to reflect on what it means to have limited/no choice concerning dietary decisions and how the Afro-Peruvian population optimized their food supply.

By the early nineteenth century, *anticuchos* evolved into a street food, hawked by late-night vendors who prepared skewered meats near markets and busy street corners, serving the dish with potatoes or corn. As urban migration increased, street vendors—many of whom were women of Afro-Peruvian or Indigenous descent—popularized the dish across various social classes. This cuisine is now recognized as an iconic part of Peru’s culinary identity, and some of the most popular chefs have earned notoriety at national food festivals or built thriving brick-and-mortar restaurants (Gill 2017).

Preparing *anticuchos* provides insight into the country’s history of race, class, and migration. As mentioned above, the dish has roots in the Afro-Peruvian period, tracing back to the Spanish colonial period when enslaved Africans received leftover cuts of meat, including organ meats, from their European enslavers (Noronha Vaz and Nijkamp 2016: 203). They transformed humble ingredients into a flavorful dish by



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marinating and grilling beef heart with spices introduced through colonial trade. The dish also reflects class dynamics, as the working class traditionally prepared it. The thin slices of meat require much less energy to prepare than larger cuts. Additionally, the evolution of the dish from the Incas to enslaved Africans to a national favorite mirrors Peru’s complex history of migration and cultural exchange, incorporating indigenous, Spanish, and even Asian influences over time. *Anticuchos* involves more than working with unfamiliar ingredients; it is an exploration of how racial and economic inequalities, as well as migration, have shaped Peruvian foodways.

Additionally, *carapulcra* provides a tangible gateway to the past. As one of the oldest recorded dishes in Peruvian cuisine, *carapulcra* originated in Indigenous Andean communities, which developed techniques for freeze-drying potatoes—known as *chuño*—to ensure food security in the harsh mountainous climate. Notably, *chuño* utilizes the sun and freezing temperatures to almost completely remove all moisture, preventing spoilage and microbial growth. *Chuño* remains edible for over ten years and was one of the many foods stockpiled during the Inca Empire, redistributed to mobile armies or communities that faced agricultural shortages (Mumford 2012).

In the early-modern period, the dish evolved through the introduction of new ingredients such as pork, peanuts, and spices, reflecting the forced mixing of ingredients from Indigenous, African, and European culinary traditions (Bradley 2023: 201; Iheka and Taylor 2024: 127). Enslaved Afro-Peruvians, who worked on coastal fields, adapted it further by incorporating slow cooking techniques that enhanced its smoky flavor. In the modern era, internal migration brought rural workers to Lima and other urban centers, and it became a staple across different social classes, even moving into high-end restaurants. By preparing *carapulcra*, students trace culinary adaptation and cultural transformation.

Conclusion

Teaching Peru’s food history through an online, asynchronous format offers unique opportunities to explore the intersection of migration, race, and class from the pre-Columbian era to the present. Through blog posts, cookbook analysis, and food labs, participants confront the historical processes that shaped Peru’s culinary landscape



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while developing cultural competency and digital literacy skills. The course design demonstrates that food history can serve as an effective pedagogy, making complex concepts tangible and relevant.

The experiential learning component, particularly through food labs, allows students to take a hands-on approach. These exercises illuminate how ingredient availability, preservation, cooking techniques, and time constraints reflect broader social, economic, and cultural patterns. Working with ingredients like *chuño* in *carapulcra* underscores how Indigenous technological innovation and food preservation techniques helped sustain pre-Columbian Andean societies.

Finally, the course’s digital components transform students from passive consumers of historical knowledge into active producers. By writing for a public audience, students develop digital communication skills while presenting historical arguments in accessible ways. By the end of the course, students will have gained a nuanced understanding of how globalization shapes everyday practices. Moreover, they develop cultural competency by engaging with unfamiliar ingredients and techniques, challenging their assumptions about food preparation and consumption. The course design suggests that food history, particularly when combined with student-centered learning, can serve as a powerful tool for teaching area studies and promoting cultural understanding in online and traditional classroom settings.



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