S.D. LUKEFAHR

IN PERU THEY EAT

GUINEA PIGS

Peruvians raise the nutritious rodents in their bedrooms—and consume 70 million of them a year

By Noel Vietmeyer

WHEN PEOPLE WANT TO PLEASE OR IMPRESS A VISITOR IN SMALL TOWNS IN THE HIGHLANDS OF BOLIVIA, COLOMBIA, ECUADOR OR PERU, THE SPECIALTIES SERVED IS GUINEA PIG. THE TASTY MEAT, SOMETIMES STUFFED WITH MINT AND MARIGOLD AND ROASTED ON A WOODEN SKEWER, HAS BEEN A REGIONAL SPECIALTY FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, WELL BEFORE THE FLOWERING OF THE INCA CIVILIZATION. FOR SPECIAL OCCASIONS, THE DISH IS SERVED WITH POTATOES OR RICE, AND A SAUCE WHICH CAN BE MADE FROM ONIONS, PEPPERS OR PEANUTS. AT RESTAURANTS, DINES MAY SAVOR PICA DE CUY, A GUINEA PIG STEW LOADED WITH HOT PEPPER, OR CUY CHACTADO, A BREADED GUINEA PIG THAT IS FRIED WHILE SANDWICHED BETWEEN STONES. AT HOME, CAMPESINOS OFTEN EAT THEIR GUINEA PIG DEEP FRIED. IN FACT, REPORTS SCIENTIST AL SCHLUNDT OF SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, “MANY CAMPESINOS EAT GUINEA PIG MORE FREQUENTLY THAN ANY OTHER MEAT.”

The animals, which are descended from gentle rangeland rodents called cavi, are especially important food source in the high Andes, but they are also eaten in the city of Lima itself, where residents from mountain regions rear them in apartments. “It's not uncommon to find guinea pigs roaming people's kitchens and living under their owner's bed in cardboard boxes,” says Schlundt, who recently spent three years in Peru studying rangeland livestock production.

To North Americans, the very idea of eating guinea pigs may seem repulsive. Yet animals that are small, prolific, tractable and easy to care for—traits that nature has generously supplied to guinea pigs—may play an important role as “indoor livestock.” Guinea pigs are fed table scraps and fresh alfalfa and can produce meat more efficiently in the poorest parts of the world's poor countries than cattle, sheep, pigs or goats. Moreover, scientists are now breeding new super strains that grow big and fast.

The guinea pig was domesticated for food use at least 7,000 years ago. Its original wild habitat is believed to have been the central highlands of Peru and Bolivia, where animals such as llama and deer were too few to supply prehis- toric Andean peoples with red meat. By the time the Spaniards arrived in the 1500s, the guinea pig, or “cuy” (pronounced “coo-ee,” like the faint cry it makes) had become a major food from Argentina to the Caribbean.

The Spaniards took note and introduced cuy into Europe where, for a while, the small rodents were also considered a delicacy. The cuy gained a new English name in the process when ships bearing them from South America to Europe stopped in West Africa, or “Guinea,” for water and supplies. Subsequently guinea pigs became house pets and laboratory animals.

Now the cuy is once again winning recognition as a food source. Reason: a meat shortage in the world's poor countries. For example, from the mid-1970s until 1981 Peru banned the slaughter of cattle for 15 days each month. Predictably, that action awakened research interest in Peru's traditional guinea pig.

At the National Agrarian University, located some ten miles from Lima at La Molina, Peru's first major push to improve the cuy began in 1972. “Practically all the guinea pigs eaten in Peru are home-grown,” says program participant Benjamin Quijandria, “and we observed that the bigger cuy were generally winding up in the stew. That left only the smaller ones for breeding. Inadvertently the people were making the animals smaller.”

The La Molina researchers brought together many kinds of cuy from throughout Peru—black, white, yellow, brown and even purplish. They bred the biggest, meatiest ones, with big results. At first, the animals had averaged one-and-one-half pounds, but after the breeding program they averaged almost four pounds. Their growth rate increased too. “The cuy took 15 weeks to reach market size when we started,” notes Quijandria, “but we sorted out the fast growers and now our animals need only about 8 weeks.”

The project was so successful that La Molina University now offers courses on guinea pig and has awarded degrees for guinea pig research. The government's food ministry has carried on the work by setting up a cuy improvement center. Located at Cieneguilla (a small, barren plain 18 miles south of Lima), this government farm produces guinea pigs like chickens. Thirty sheds, each containing 1,200 guinea pigs, can yield as many as 100,000 animals annually.
More than a pet: prolific and easy to raise, the guinea pig is becoming an inexpensive source of protein for poor families from Peru to southern Mexico.

They are of the “improved” variety and are sold nationwide to farmers for breeding, fattening and eating. Already the average size of the nation’s guinea pigs is increasing dramatically. Experts predict that the new super breeding stock could eventually double the size of the average cuy raised in the villages.

For food, Peru today produces an estimated 70 million cuyos annually, a number that should rise as the current efforts increase the supply. The vast majority of Indians living in highland Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador continue to keep cuyos, regarding them as an essential food. Except for an occasional egg, cuy is often the only source of animal protein for such campesinos.

One of the few outsiders to have studied this indoor livestock is geographer Daniel Gade of the University of Vermont. He says, “In most places, guinea pigs seldom leave the hut. There they find warmth during cold Andean nights and protection from enemies, particularly weasels and dogs. The guinea pigs, with their squealing voices and their constant chattering, quarreling and scurrying about also provide companionship in the bleak dwellings.”

Guinea pigs require so little space that the ideal production occurs in a small cage or pit housing about ten females and one male. Females can become pregnant when only three months old and can produce as many as four litters a year. Cuyos can care for themselves almost immediately after birth; they wean themselves in only three days. In principle, a farmer starting with one male and ten females could see his herd grow in one year to 5,000 animals.

Cuyos are fed cabbage, lettuce and carrot scraps, wild grasses, and dried corn stalks and leaves. Some barley and alfalfa is grown specifically for cuyos; it is cut green and sold in local markets in small bundles. Women and children are the animals’ usual caretakers.

Predictably, Peru’s super cuyos are beginning to gain an international recognition. They have been introduced into the highlands of Honduras, where the Indian cuisine also includes guinea pig. The United Nations recently shipped some Peruvian cuyos to the Dominican Republic and has requests from other Caribbean nations. In addition, Bolivia, Ecuador and Colombia have all begun their own guinea pig improvement programs. At Ibarra, Ecuador, a United Nations study found that guinea pigs were much more profitable to rear than either pigs or dairy cows on small mountain farms.

What is happening amounts to a new recognition of an important resource for much of the food-short world. For the first time since the collapse of the Spanish empire, el cuy is getting official attention as a source of food.

The low cost of such small animals makes them freely available even to landless peasants. Twenty females and two males can produce enough meat to provide an adequate meat diet for a family of six. The small animals also make sense where meat cannot be stored because of lack of refrigeration.

Skill in rearing small animals is also easier to develop. The starting investment is low and the economic risks are minimal. So the guinea pig and its relatives hold promise of becoming the fast, tasty and nutritious food needed in response to the gross lack of meat in Third World countries. It couldn’t be more timely. Today, Third World people get less meat in one year than Americans and Europeans eat in a month.

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