Taste the Feeling

Heavily associated with cocaine, the coca leaf is going back to its roots to cook up a fresh identity in Colombia.

Written by
Mariana Zapata Herrera

Photographs by
Victoria Holguín

Diners enjoying an indulgent 11-course tasting menu at El Chato—one of Bogotá's most acclaimed restaurants—often end their meal with a vibrant green dessert.

The delicate French toast is served on coconut crumble, topped with creamy ganache and a local delicacy: crunchy *hormigas culonas* (big-bottomed ants). However, diners often find the insects less shocking than the source of the dessert's eye-catching color: coca leaves.

Before coca landed on the menus of high-end Colombian dining destinations, it followed a journey with as many twists and turns as the dizzying roads of the Andes Mountains where it grows. Indigenous groups ranging from Colombia to Argentina have cultivated the plant for over 8,000 years. "Coca was the universe," says Juan Piñacué, a member of the Nasa people in Colombia's southwestern Cauca Department. "It was a very sacred plant, and we had to respect it." Many Indigenous and rural communities brew and chew the leaves, or grind them into a green powder called *mambe*. Both the leaves and powder have medicinal properties, including reducing altitude sickness, improving digestion, and boosting energy. They also play a central role in Indigenous rituals of community connection and knowledge-sharing. However, when the cocaine alkaloid—harmless in small quantities—was isolated and concentrated in nineteenth-century Germany, the sacred plant turned into a party drug mixed with toxic substances like gasoline and ammonia.

Cocaine's addictive properties and popularity created a worldwide illegal market that brought extreme violence to Colombia, souring the country's relationship to coca. Then, a 1961 UN convention threw the baby out with the bathwater, banning the leaf as well as the drug. Colombia signed it, spitting in the face of millenia of traditions, and triggering decades of ruthless anti-coca campaigns. Home gardens growing the bush were criminalized alongside industrial drug trade farms, while United States-backed operations intermittently sprayed fields with glyphosate. The potentially cancerous herbicide contaminated water supplies, harmed biodiversity, and affected the health of entire communities. The shrub survived though, protected by the Indigenous and rural groups that never stopped using it. In the 1990s and early 2000s, change began brewing as new laws gave these communities the right to grow and sell the leaf, and allowed anyone to consume it.

In 1998, Fabiola Piñacué, Juan's pioneering mother, seized the moment and opened Coca Nasa, the first Colombian company to legally sell coca products. Starting simply with tea, the Piñacués soon became one of the first entrepreneurs to cook with the leaves, breaking off from the plant's traditional medicinal and ritual uses. The company, which Juan now runs, released previously unheard-of items, like coca rum and chocolate-covered *mambe* cookies. "Coca Nasa got people in cities to stop talking about coca as if it were a drug," Piñacué says. With every sip or bite, non-Indigenous Colombians started questioning their misconceptions. When people drank the tea, for instance, they realized that it's milder than a cup of coffee, and that its energizing properties are worlds away from cocaine's signature jumpy buzz. Similarly, *mambe* cookies showed customers that, though the powder loses its stimulating effects when cooked, it still brings satisfying bitterness and umami reminiscent of matcha into the mix. As tasty treats seduced consumers into buying the once-taboo ingredient, haute cuisine chefs began incorporating it into their menus, too.

The *mambe* and lemongrass cake at El Chato locks in a rich *mambe* pastry cream that puts Betty Crocker's ready-to-spread tubs in their place. Reduced coconut milk and vinegar meet unrefined whole cane sugar called *panela*, for a smooth-yet-sticky texture reminiscent of toffee.

Green means go to the oven once the *mambe* cake is baked to perfection. This sponge needs to be fluffy enough to soak up cinnamon-and-lemongrass-infused milk, before slices get pan-seared in butter and topped with El Chato's signature ant-infused ice cream (that's *hormigas culonas*, or big-bottomed ants, to you).

Nicol Lopez has been the pastry chef at El Chato—her first fine dining work experience—for over three years now. The kitchen pushes her to put Colombian flavours in the spotlight, and she creates desserts full of stories, sometimes becoming the meal's protagonist.

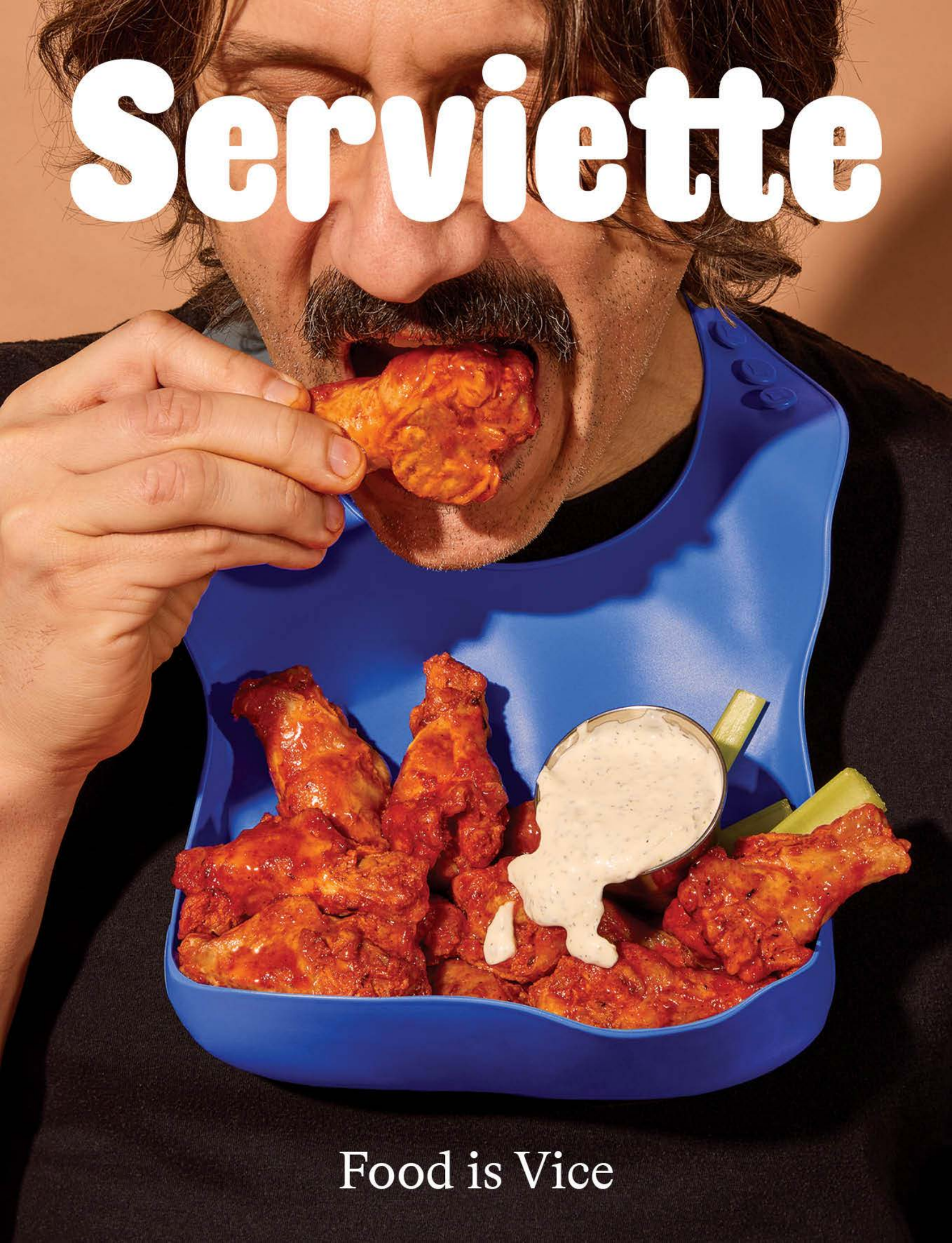
"Ten years ago, Mini-Mal and Leo were likely the only restaurants that dared to work with coca despite the stigma," explains Álvaro Clavijo, El Chato's chef de cuisine and owner. Mini-Mal in Bogotá still bakes up a coca leaf biscuit with *mambe* ice cream, while Leo's tasting menu pours a fermented coca drink to accompany the lemon ants and caiman meat featured in its Amazonian course. These trailblazing restaurants in the country's capital are no longer the only places giving their cuisine a green infusion: Cartagena's famous Celele serves desserts like tiramisu-style cassava and *mambe* cake, and Medellin's La Chagra uses the green powder in its housemade ginger liqueur. Many other dining hot spots are starting to follow suit, creatively bringing coca into the kitchen.

Much of this newfound interest from industry professionals has grown from collective recipe labs called Coca Challenges. Dora Troyano, the coordinator of the Coca for Peace Alliance, has organized these events spanning one or two days, almost every year since 2019, in different parts of the country. The challenges invite professionals to think up new recipes using the leaves, and the events have been a gateway for many chefs into the world of cooking with coca. Mónica Ríos, director of innovation and development at Bogotá's Gato Dumas School of Gastronomy, went from never having used coca as an ingredient to helping organize the award-winning Coca, No Cocaína project. Her team whipped up coca-laced versions of beloved everyday goods like butter, ice cream, and chocolate. Now, she also encourages her students to sub the leaves in for matcha to support local producers.

Pro-coca efforts are spurring change beyond the dinner table, heading back outdoors. According to Troyano, before this culinary revolution, only armed groups looking to produce cocaine bought coca. Nowadays, Piñacué sees how his company's decision to pay more than drug traffickers for the leaves has led some growers to abandon the illegal market. "The coca that we turn into food is coca that we take away from the drug trade," he says. Troyano has seen a similar transformation in Lerma, a rural community in Cauca. "Twenty years ago, only two or three families [in town] lived off of selling clean leaves," she explains, referencing the organic, hand-picked leaves used for food, as opposed to the chemical-ladden industrial ones grown for cocaine. "Now, there are around 10 or 12 families that permanently receive their income from [this crop]."

Coca still isn't everyone's cup of tea, though. The shrub continues to face stronger stigma in Colombia than in Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru (the only other countries where consumption is legal), and chefs have to deal with tasteless drug jokes when they serve coca-based dishes. However, the resilient plant is slowly reconquering the country via new routes. For coca, the way back into Colombia's heart is through its stomach. **S**

Serviette



Food is Vice