

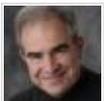
Finding Fascinating Food - and Frank Lloyd Wright - in the Chilean Countryside

Seeking out the tasty in Chile's desert and mountains

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Tierra Atacama, courtesy David Hammond



By **David Hammond**

Last spring, I reflected on [Frank Lloyd Wright's influence on the Arizona Inn](#), a gorgeous and historically significant resort in Tucson.

In Chile a few weeks ago, I stayed at Tierra Atacama, a resort in the northern desert that was also influenced by the work of Oak Park's most influential architect.

Tierra Atacama's most obvious Wrightean influences are in the low design of the earth-colored buildings, the concealment of front doors, the landscaping with prairie grasses, and the integration of structures into the natural landscape of the desert.

As Wright drew inspiration from the prairie, the kitchen at Tierra Atacama draws ingredients from the desert. I'm fascinated by the foods people find in the desert. Some parts of the Atacama desert have not seen rain in 400 years, and the landscape is rocky, dusty, and apparently inhospitable to life. Still, stuff grows in even the most hostile environments, and people eat it...mostly, I'm guessing, because they have to, though that doesn't mean the food isn't tasty.

Driving through the desert toward the hotel, we stopped the car for pictures and I was attracted to a kind of gnarly plant, looking a little like old oregano, growing here and there along the road. I was told it was Rica Rica, a wild bush that apparently grows only in this region. With what must be a taproot going down dozens of feet, the Rica Rica, which translates as "tasty tasty," is used in the kitchen to infuse pisco, the regional brandy used in the famous Pisco Sour. The Rica Rica has a taste somewhere between sage and basil.

On the breakfast menu at Tierra Atacama's restaurant is the tuna, or fruit of the prickly pear. The fruit is slightly citrusy, a little like a kiwi. It was a challenge negotiating around all the seeds; I think this fruit would be best juiced. There are several places around Oak Park where you can get a prickly pear: I've seen them at many local Hispanic markets in Berwyn and Cicero.

On the way back from the Valley of the Moon, a desert area of incredible if somewhat forbidding lunar beauty, we stopped the van to take photos. Our guide pointed out Pingo Pingo, which is another plant that grows wild in the Chilean desert. Pingo Pingo is used in an infusion that, I was told, "is good for the prostate gland."

In the more southerly end of Chile, we stayed at Antumalal, another hotel that shows some influence of Frank Lloyd Wright. Again, we saw the low-lying structures integrated into the environment, but also the rigorous horizontality of the buildings and open interior spaces. The windows overlooking the lake and volcanoes also reminded me of the Farnsworth House of Mies Van Der Rohe, another architect who did a lot of work in the Midwest and who used huge windows to open interior spaces to the world and create a connection between inside and outside.

Just as Wright reflected the regional environment in his building materials, so did Jorge Elton, the architect of Antumalal, use the wood of the indigenous Monkey Puzzle tree to panel some rooms, including the dining room, where we ate a lot of food harvested locally.

One of the most memorable dishes was a seaweed chowder, or "chupe," that utilized the native cochayuyo, an aquatic vegetable that was also used extensively by the native Mapuche. The seaweed had none of the iron notes and green flavor of what we Midwesterners might expect to see on our maki rolls; rather, it was more earthy, almost mushroom like, with a good deal of abalone-like texture.

With something like 2,600 miles of coastline, Chile has access to a lot of seafood. At Antumalal, I had some superb salmon and what will go down as the gold standard of trout. They say "The Excellent is the enemy of the Good," and this trout is probably going to wreck much of the trout I eat for the rest of my life: it was that excellent.

When traveling, I'm always ready to try new things, but it's also fascinating to see how some familiar things -- like the architecture of FLW and Mies, as well as foods like trout -- are reflected through the prism of another culture.