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## **Food Detective: The power of pastel de choclo**

BY DAVID HAMMOND

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While traveling in Chile, it was sometimes difficult to figure out whether I was speaking with a native Chilean or a person from, for instance, Venezuela or Colombia. So I developed a little game to help me determine the difference: I'd ask if the person knew pastel de choclo.

If I got a blank stare, I knew the person was just visiting Chile, but if the eyes softened and the smile grew warm, I knew I was speaking with a native.

Cooked in a mandatory clay bowl, pastel de choclo offers a taste of the Chilean countryside and is a beautiful emblem of Latin American "fusion" cuisine, blending indigenous ingredients such as corn with Spanish contributions like beef.

Though Chile remains a society with distinct class consciousness, pastel de choclo seems to cross even centuries-old caste lines. Chatting with a native Chilean in the lobby of the tony Noi Vitacura boutique hotel in Santiago, I was told that preparing pastel de choclo always "brings the family together." There are many steps in the cooking process, so many hands, in homes great and humble, must help.

Ruth Van Waerebeek, author of *The Chilean Kitchen* and executive chef for the Concha y Toro wine company, explained to me that when preparing the dish, you first put down a layer of "pino," browned beef, onions, paprika, oregano and other spices; next, poached chicken topped with sliced hard-boiled egg; two or three olives and raisins, then pureed summer corn, basil and a little sugar. Cook until brown and beautiful.

In pre-Columbian times, pastel de choclo would have been made with local meats such as llama or guanaco, a camel-like creature.

Over the past 50 years, Chile has endured the trauma of Augusto Pinochet's state-run terrorism and the terrestrial turmoil of volcanoes and earthquakes (the last, in 2010, was the sixth-largest on record anywhere). A Chilean teacher I met at one of many peaceful student demonstrations at La Moneda, the presidential palace, told me "Chile isn't the same as it was two weeks ago. No one knows what it will be like tomorrow." But throughout Chile's tumultuous history, the beloved pastel de choclo has endured.

Outside Santiago, I had lunch with an American news correspondent - a vegetarian - at a fancier restaurant that until recently would likely not have served this peasant dish. The captivating casserole, with its caramelized crust and crisped, homey edges, proved too much for her. She put down her salad fork, took a spoonful ... then another and another, her vegetarian resolve melting.

Even if you didn't grow up with it, you'll likely find comfort in pastel de choclo, which you can find at Rapa-Nui, 4009 N. Elston.

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