

CATERING AN AMAZON PARTY: THE FINE ART OF CULINARY MAGIC IN THE JUNGLE

There are no roads into Iquitos, Peru, in the heart of the Peruvian Amazon. While some people and goods are flown in, the primary method of travel to and from the city is via the Amazon river and its tributaries. The easiest way to picture the locale is to imagine—correctly—that the Amazon river travels south to north through Peru until it hits a hill and abruptly turns east, toward Brazil and the Atlantic. That hill is the place on which the city of Iquitos is built. My restaurant, the Cold Beer Blues Bar sits at the very top of that hill, across the street from the city's fabled river port, Mastranza—a muddy slope up and down which comes and goes an enormous amount of incoming and outgoing passenger and cargo traffic in Western Amazonia. I picked the spot because of the local color: my clients include dockhands, riverboat travellers, oilfield workers, ex-pats from around the world, American military and DEA personnel—in Iquitos to assist local police and military in drug interdiction—and a Runyonesque band of latter day Amazon dreamers, schemers, do-gooders and n’er do wells.

Among the dreamers is my friend Jim King, a regular at the bar whose only black mark in my book is the seven or eight hundred dollar tab he’s always going to pay next week. Fifty-fivish and ruggedly good looking, Jim is a bear of a man with a square jaw, a thick mane of boyish blond hair, a smile that belies his calculating blue eyes, and forearms as thick as thighs. Originally from Minnesota farmland, he worked for several years for the US State Department as a trouble-shooter in trouble spots in Africa before settling with his lovely wife Pat in the Amazon. There, he tried selling lumber, making films, opened a bar and did a number of other things before he stumbled on Iquitos and a potential goldmine: the timber rights to the largest section of land in all of South America. It wasn’t as simple as that, of course, what he’d really stumbled on was a failed Swiss project on the Manitee, a remote river two hours by speedboat outside of Iquitos that involved turning a second-rate swamp into a red-palm oil producing plantation, the rights to which included selling all cleared timber for profit. The Swiss worked the project for several years before local government and populace avarice—several million dollars worth of equipment disappeared, only to reappear in private contractors’ hands—drove them to abandon the region.

By the time I’d opened the Cold Beer Blues Bar, Jim and Pat had fixed up the only western-style house on the Manitee and were living there with several monkeys, numerous parrots and macaws, a family of capybaris—the largest rodent in the world—a sloth and dozens of other animals she’d rescued from the local’s cooking pots, a practice which didn’t endear her to the local hunters. On either side of their house/menagerie were the two villages of the Manitee, both mestizo—mixed blood—communities that were interrelated and hated one another. It was their hatred that drove Jim to ask me to cater a party for them. What happened was that last August, when the water in the river was at its annual lowest, three fishermen working a little lake that hadn’t quite dried up drowned when they came in contact with large electric eels. The first two were disliked by both villages—and their families who lived in them—and so each town agreed to bury one. The third fellow, however, was beloved by both villages, and when the first claimed the body and buried him, the corpse was dug up and reburied in the second. The first village, feeling violated, re-dug up the corpse and reburied him in his original resting spot. The second village followed suit, until the poor fellow had been buried nearly a dozen times yet not allowed a moment’s peace.

It might have been a simple annoyance to Jim, except that he had spent months putting together a visit by local dignitaries and government officials, some of whom were coming from as far away as Lima, to see whether he had sufficiently solved the problems of local corruption and animosity to warrant officially taking over the failed Swiss project. Needless to say, the continual movement of a rotting corpse would not bode well for Jim if an emissary of President Fujimori found it offensive. But the meeting could not be put off, and Jim spent nearly a week in Iquitos trying to come up with a solution.

“What the hell can I do with these knuckleheads?” he’d ask over a cold beer while eating sauteed Amazon bass with a garlic, tomato, cilantro and lime sauce that he didn’t have the money to pay for. “I mean, if this was Africa twenty years ago we’d disappear both villages and that would be that. But this is a democracy and Fujimori would probably frown on that—unless we could get his secret police into the act.”

“No way to get the villages together?” I asked. He looked at me and laughed. “Not on your life. Each village is sure the other is going to try to get the lion’s share of the work the project will generate—including as much gasoline and anything else they can steal. Hell, they won’t even let poor Armando have a decent grave—although god knows they’ve given him several decent burials—so how the hell can I bring in Congressmen and the Mayor of Iquitos and Fujimori’s Minister of Agriculture?”

“Can’t have the meeting here and avoid the Manitee altogether?”

“In a perfect world that would be the solution. But these guys want to see the work I’ve done and want to talk to the village leaders to get their input into how they feel about this project being restarted in their back yard.”

We had nearly the same conversation for several days in succession, until one day, perilously close to the time of the dignitaries’ arrival, he came bounding into my joint, his face alive with excitement. “Peter, I’ve got it,” he said, his blue eyes sparkling. “I’m gonna bury the damned kid myself. Give me a case of beer to go.”

I loaded up a case of cold beer and handed it to him. “Wish me luck. See you tomorrow.”

And with that he left, crossing the street and disappearing with the beer down the muddy slope of Puerto Mastranza to where his boat was moored.

The next day he was standing at the bar door at 8 AM, waiting for me to open. He had the case of empty brown glass fifth-bottles with him. “How’d it go?” I asked, unlocking the door. “Pretty well,” he said, putting the case down and going around the bar to grab a beer on his own from the cooler. “I stopped at Indiana—you know that town—on the way back to the Manitee and picked up a doctor. Paid him the case of beer to come with me and explain that with all the burials and reburials he’d had, Armando’s corpse was probably infected and might kill everyone in the town where he was finally laid to rest.”

“Did they buy it?”

“Buy it? Buy it? I called an emergency meeting of both villages’ leaders and had the doc explain it to them. You should have seen it: The bastards at the village that currently had him met for about two seconds before deciding

to dig up Armando and offer him to the other village as a sign of peace and respect. "And what did the leaders of the second village do?" "They gave him to me. So I took the body and with everybody's blessing had them make a little coffin, loaded in the corpse, filled the box with bricks, tied it all up, ran it out to the middle of the Amazon and buried him at sea." "Brilliant!" "Yeah, but now I got another problem. Now the two villages are accusing each other of poisoning the corpse to try to murder each other." "Sure you want that timber concession?" "Not if I could find another way to make a few million bucks." "So what do you do?" "Well, I got another plan. I've decided to make the meeting with the dignitaries into a party. I'll invite everybody from both villages, feed them good, and pray nobody brings up Armando. I'm going to throw them a party like they've never seen on the Manatee!" He paused to look at me, black pupils narrowing to tiny dots. "And?" I asked. "And you're going to cater it." "I am?" "Got a piece of paper?" I handed him a scratch pad and a pen. "Better give me another cold beer too, this might take a minute." I went to the cooler and took out the coldest fifth of beer—the only way beer's sold in Iquitos—I could find and brought it to the table he'd taken under the shadow of a 22 foot anaconda skin hanging on the wall. Jim sat in silence for about ten minutes, doing figures on the paper and checking them on the pocket calculator he always carried. "Another beer, Peter. And you better get a glass for yourself." By the time I'd gotten another he'd moved to a bar stool. "I've got about 20 dignitaries," he started. "Then I've got about 100 people on the river, and maybe another 50 who'll canoe in when they hear there's free food. So let's say 175 people. I need to feed them lunch and dinner on Saturday, then breakfast and lunch on Sunday. Can you do it?" I made some calculations of my own in my head: he was talking about 700 meals in twenty-four hours in the middle of the jungle. "This is for when? Next Saturday?" "This Saturday. And I've got more bad news. I only have \$1,200 for the whole thing." I poured myself a glass of beer. I'd been a cook for nearly 18 years in New York city, the last ten or so as a chef at some pretty good spots. But no one had ever asked me to cook for 175 on less than two days' notice at a cost of a dollar sixty a plate. "What about money for my crew, my boat, the gas and my fee?" "No. Twelve hundred is for everything." "You're out of your mind." "I'm crazy? You opened a bar in the Amazon!" "What about alcohol?" "No alcohol. The last thing I need is for the villagers to get drunk and start shooting each other's buffaloes. Can you do it?" He knew he had me just by the challenge of the impossible. "Give me an hour. Let me see what menu I can put together and if I can do it." "I'll bring the money," he said, then finished off his beer and left. I spent the next hour making notes, knowing the key would be simplicity: One or two pots feed all. A bottle of beer later I had a basic menu: On arrival we'd serve coffee and masamora, a boiled green banana mash, to keep them occupied while we started lunch, a parrillada —Peruvian style grilled marinated chicken—with sauce and yucca and rice. For dinner I could make Sopa de Carne de Monte: jungle meat soup, for which I'd use large leaf-eating rodents, served with coffee and refresco, Peru's version of Kool-Aid. Sunday morning breakfast would be coffee and regional chicken soup: Caldo de Gallina, made with essentially wild jungle chickens so tough you had to boil them for hours to make them edible, and the big finish lunch would be roast pigs with platanos, rice and yucca. I broke down the menu items and made a shopping list:

50 store chickens	100 pounds of smoked jungle meat	40 gallinas	3 large pigs, minimum 150 pounds each
300 pounds yucca	100 pounds rice	50 pounds potatoes	25 pounds pasta
75 pounds onions	50 pounds tomatoes	15 pounds celery	10 pounds garlic
8 pounds sweet pepper	5 pounds very hot pepper	10 pounds salt	3 pounds black pepper
100 bunches cilantro	10 pounds of assorted fresh local spices	20 gallons cooking oil	500 pounds—7 stems—of platanos
10 boxes—48 bags each—flavored refresco	150 pounds sugar	100 pounds lemons	3 gallons vinegar
25 pounds instant coffee	25 quarts of evaporated milk	10 sacks dry bread rounds	The incidentals list included:
24 rolls—of toilet paper	1,000 paper plates, forks	Plenty of napkins	1,000 cups
600 pounds of charcoal	10—75 pound blocks of ice.	For staff I could do it with one jungle-bred cook, an assistant cook, and two assistants to help serve. Then, of course, I'd need my boat, motorist, his assistant, my gas and so forth.	

I looked over the list: there were certainly some things I'd forgotten but by and large I thought it was a good first pass. I was just finishing when Jim returned, holding the money out. I wouldn't touch it, as I was far from convinced I could buy everything for that amount, much less pay a staff and make a hundred bucks for myself. "Here's the list," I said. "I don't think I can do it for what you've got." "You have to. I don't have any more." He looked over the list. "Skip the plates and forks. They'll bring their own," as if saving that 10 bucks was the difference. "That'll do it for sure...." I noted, just as my cook Cesar came in to start his day's work. "I'll get the pigs and the gallinas too." "That might work," I said. "But you got to bring 12 cases of beer and a case of cheap pisco," he grinned. "Don't give the booze to anyone unless I okay it. I don't need another headache." "You planning on getting the politicians drunk?" "You got it. Can't afford to get the town drunk, so I'll get the big shots drunk. That way they won't remember anything that goes wrong." It was a good shot at reverse drunk psychology. "So can you do it?" "Give me another hour to price it out." "Take your time. I'm not going anywhere." I brought the list to Cesar for pricing. Most of it worked out surprisingly well: platanos were only two dollars an arm in the market just then, yucca was 5 dollars for 100 pounds, 150 pounds of sugar was 25 dollars, chickens were two dollars each, and carne de monte would

run about a buck a pound. Altogether the bill came to just over \$700. If my gas and motorist came to another hundred and the rest of my crew would do it for another hundred, I could buy the beer and the pisco—Peru's equivalent of tequila, but made with grapes—and still have about a hundred and twenty left for myself—not New York wages, but okay for Iquitos. "Okay," I said to Jim when we finished. "We can do it." "I knew you could." "What about cooking pots? I don't have anything large enough." "Peter, they have pots big enough to cook half a cow. Don't worry about pots." The next day and a half at the Blues Bar were mayhem. I enlisted my waitress, Gasdalia, who'd been born and raised on a river not far from the Manatee and knew jungle cooking, to be my cook. She, in turn, promised to enlist a couple of girlfriends to come along for the fun of it. I sent my manager, Jonny, out to my motorist's home with word that he'd be working the weekend and to have my boat brought around to Mastranza on Saturday morning, then sent everyone from my cook to my mother-in-law to the city's markets to buy supplies. By Thursday evening my restaurant was beginning to look like a market itself. My two largest tables were covered with sacks of sugar and rice, yucca, coal, platanos and so forth, a back area was filled with flats of paper goods and the kitchen was stacked with vegetables and plastic containers of freshly butchered chickens, which Cesar and my mother-in-law were busy marinating. My wife, Gilma, had taken over running the bar so I could oversee the party, and as is always the case when there is activity in a restaurant, we were enjoying one of our busiest days. Friday was no different, except that the tables were piled higher and the smell of 25 freshly smoked pacas—large tasty rodents—was somewhat overpowering. Too, my two-year old girl, Madeleina, got into the flat of toilet paper at some point and had managed to open nearly all 24 rolls before anyone noticed that the toilet was backed up because she'd hidden a number of them in there. Gallon buckets of the sauces I needed—cocona and lime/onion/vinegar—were piling up fast, while the slowly melting blocks of ice I'd bought made little streams on the restaurant floor. Throughout the day Jonny would reappear every half hour with another load of dry bread or something else from the market. In all it was a sort of glorious mad house, during which my wife managed to serve our regular and forgiving clients. Jim showed up about eight o'clock on Friday night. A person not familiar with the appetites of the people who live on the river might have asked "What's all this for?"; but Jim simply asked, "You got enough? We can't afford to run out." "We'll make due," I answered. "Good. Give me a beer. Boy will I be glad when this is over. I've spent the day getting the dignitaries settled in. Fujimori sent two mid-level cabinet guys, and three secret police. Do you believe that? This better go well. Are you ready?" "Hope so," I said, although I wasn't really sure at all that we'd pull this off. Just then Jim's lawyer on the project, Teddy, came in with three or four regular members of Jim's coterie. Teddy had once been noted as the chief lawyer for the cocaine mafia in Iquitos, but a couple of years earlier his clients had all gone to jail—they'd been replaced in minutes, of course—and Teddy had been reduced to associating with future-hopefully-rich clients like Jim, who never actually had any money with which to pay him. "Better bring some glasses," Jim called to my wife. "We're all going to hide out here for a couple of hours." By the time we shut down Friday night we were as ready as we were going to be. What food could be prepared had been prepared. My boat was moored across the street with a full 55 gallon drum of gasoline. My motorist, Mauricio, and his son Hector, were already sleeping in it to make certain no one stole it during the night. Gasdalia and one of her nieces, Letecia, who often pitched in at the restaurant, as well as her girlfriend Lasy promised to be at the bar at 7 AM, as did my friend Jorge, a good hand in the jungle. An American friend of mine living in Iquitos, Alan Shoemaker, was coming along as well, just for fun. Everyone seemed in good spirits, as though it were a fait accompli, while I was the exception, secretly terrified that something disastrous might happen, Jim would never get his concession and subsequently never be able to pay his bar tab. Saturday morning was overcast, and the streets of Iquitos were still puddled from rain during the night. I was at the bar by 7 AM, and by 7:30 everyone else was there as well. Jorge took charge of getting my boat—a 30 foot long, 6 foot wide, roofless wooden hull with a 40hp motor—loaded, hiring half-a-dozen dockhands to carry our two tons or so of goods from the bar to the port. I moved around the bar checking off items as they were carried out against my master list, double checking that I'd packed enough hammocks, mosquito nets and blankets for the crew, and remembering last minute items we'd overlooked. By 9:00 the boat was loaded, but Alan brought bad news. "Pete, your boat's riding pretty low in the water. I'm not sure how many people can go with it without sinking it." "It ought to be alright." "Well then come take a look." I crossed the street with him and walked down the muddy slope. I took one look at the enormous pile of goods packed into the boat and knew he was right. It's outside wave board was beneath the water line, and that was with only Mauricio and Hector in it. Another half-ton and it might sink where it was. "Why don't you go with the boat, while I go with the crew in Jim's boat?" Alan suggested. "I thought his already left." "It did, but he's got to make at least one more run. He'll find room for us." "Okay," I said, heading back up the slope. Twenty minutes later Jonny had showed up to open the bar, and I made my way back down the slope. Jim's boat—a sleek aluminum run-around with a 155 hp outboard and a roof—had returned and my crew was boarding when I reached water's edge. "Okay, you guys, good luck," I said, then added: "Listen, Gasdalia: You're gonna beat us out there by an hour, so see if you can't get some pots and get a fire started. That way we can give them coffee as soon as I arrive." "Si, Mr. Peter," she laughed. "What do we do if your boat sinks?" "Run for cover." Two minutes later they roared off, while Hector and I were still struggling to push my overloaded boat off the muddy bank. We'd taken off our shoes and pants and were up to our thighs in water and mud, delighting the rough crew of dockhands who stood at the top of the hill and encouraged us with genital obscenities. When we did finally get the hull cleared we pulled ourselves on board while Mauricio started the motor. In minutes Iquitos was

several hundred yards behind us, and in a few minutes more we made the bend around Padre Island and lost sight of the city altogether. I sat up front, calculating the time of the trip—probably closer to three hours with the boat so full—and enjoying the muddy Amazon river passing beneath us. Every once in a while I heard Mauricio call to Hector to scoop out a bucket of water that had managed to seep in through invisible cracks or washed over the side. I didn't pay any attention to it really, since every boat needs to have a little water scooped out now and then, until I realized that Hector kept scooping. "What's up?" I called to Mauricio over the din of the motor. "Nada importante. Nothing important," he reassured me. "Then why so much water intake?" "It's just a little hole." "What little hole?" I asked, then climbed over the sacks of yucca and the stems of plantanos to see what he was talking about. I was imagining a seam between planks that needed a little tarring, or something of that nature, but when I finally reached Hector what I found was a gaping 4-inch-in-diameter hole in the top board. "What's this?" I fairly screamed. "Your boat got hit the other day," Mauricio said, not looking me in the eye. "Why didn't you tell me?" "I didn't think we'd load the boat up so high that the hole would be under water." The water weight had in fact increased the weight of the boat to where half the hole was beneath the water line and Hector could hardly keep up. In another ten minutes we'd certainly sink, and being in the Amazon river half a mile from either bank meant we'd certainly die. "Exactly when were you going to tell me? After we sunk?" "Better to sink than to have you yell at us," Mauricio said. He was just being Peruvian and he was right. The culture eschews yelling to the point that he would rather have taken his chances in the river than be yelled at. I, on the other hand, knew there was no chance for me if the boat sank, so I began tossing things overboard. First went two stems of plantanos, then a 50 pound bag of rice and a sack of sugar. Next went a sack of yucca. I looked at the hole: the boat had risen to the point where the hole was almost above water line. Another arm of plantanos went over, then another sack of yucca. Hector, watching me throw perfectly good food into the river, got the idea that something serious was happening and began bailing furiously, and within a few minutes we were out of danger. I told Mauricio to head back to Iquitos, as there was no way we'd make the trip to the Manatee in our shape. Of course we still had the party to do, so when we rounded Padre Island I had Mauricio point us in the direction of the private dock of Amazon Tours, the largest touring agency in Iquitos, whose owner, Paul Wright, was a friend of mine. Twenty minutes later we pulled into Paul's, and after some hasty negotiations we'd secured an oversized aluminum dinghy and were transferring our goods from my boat to it. Passing the 50 and 100 pound sacks in the choppy water was not altogether simple and we lost another stem of plantanos and the last sack of yucca when they slipped our grips. While we sent one of Paul's men to restock the things we'd lost or tossed, Mauricio, Hector and I siphoned the gasoline into an empty barrel on Paul's boat, then worked at passing the outboard, which was very difficult, as the boats—neither of which had anyplace to tether them together—kept separating with the shifting of weight. After several failed attempts, during which we nearly lost the motor more than once, we finally managed it and a short while later were ready off. By then it was nearly 11, and I was beginning to panic. There was nothing we could do to change that, however, so I tried to accept the fact that we were going to be serving a late lunch. The new boat, while not as charming as my wooden hull, was much quicker. Mauricio had gotten over the shame of nearly sinking us and was enjoying himself once again. Hector wasn't bailing, so he was enjoying himself as well. "If we use the channel we can save maybe half an hour," Mauricio called after we'd been out about that long. "Think it's passable?" "With the rain last night it should be high enough to pass." "If you can save us time, do it, captain," I called back. I knew the channel we were coming on, I just wasn't sure it would be passable, but if it were it would save us nearly four miles, as we'd otherwise have to go around a large island. A few minutes later we reached the channel opening and we all deemed it passable. Mauricio slowed the motor to minimize problems with sunken tree branches that might be just beneath the surface, and we slid through the narrow swamp effortlessly. We'd just reached the far end of the channel and rejoined the Amazon—and had begun to celebrate by opening one of Jim's beers—when there was an awful screech from the hull and the boat came to a sudden and absolute standstill. Mauricio cut the motor. We all knew what the sound meant: the hull had gotten stuck on a sunken tree trunk. If we used the motor to free ourselves we risked renting a hole in the hull, so that was out of the question. We tried shifting our weight in the hope that the hull might slide off, but that didn't work, leaving us the uncomfortable option of climbing overboard and trying to use our leg strength and weight to free us. Of course nobody likes to jump into the Amazon, and we took our time trying to come up with another solution. There was none, and finally Hector and I shed our pants and shoes and clambered over the side into the river. I wrapped my hands around the top of the aluminum boat's hull and clung on for dear life: the river normally moves about seven knots around Iquitos; after a rain the surface water gets up to near 10. As soon as my lower body entered the river the current swung my legs up underneath the hull, and I had to work to keep them in a line with my upper body as I moved around the hull trying to find the obstructive tree trunk. Hector, normally an otter in the water, was just as cautious. When we finally reached the trunk we both pressed our feet against it while pulling the hull toward ourselves, trying to unbalance the boat. The first few tries were unsuccessful, and we decided to spin the boat on the trunk, looking for a better angle. Again our first tries were futile: The boat spun easily enough, but wouldn't budge until we'd nearly gotten it back into exactly the same position it had been in when we got stuck. There, suddenly, it gave a few inches, and Mauricio, forgetting for a moment that Hector and I were still in the river and exhausted, enthusiastically started the motor and threw it into reverse. The boat slid easily off the encumbrance, while Hector and I slid easily off the boat. Mauricio noticed his error and quickly brought the boat up next to us, idled it and tossed a line attached to the motor. Both of us grabbed it and slowly pulled ourselves back on board. Noting that I was probably going to yell at him, Mauricio cut off the potential confrontation by pulling a beer out of one of the cases and, after taking the cap off with his teeth, handed it to me before I'd even caught my breath. "Beer,"

he smiled as I took the bottle, then turned us toward the Manitee and opened the little motor up. Glad to be back on the boat, I let the broiling Amazon noontime sun dry me. Though we'd lost the half-hour we'd meant to gain, we were only about an hour and a half from the Manitee, and from there just 20 minutes from Jim's place. There were no more mishaps. The day was hot and beautiful, the sky bleached nearly white. We would be late, very late, but that was that. They would wait for the food, that's all there was to it. We'd travelled nearly an hour when an aluminum speedboat appeared in the distance, coming our way. Within a few minutes we could see someone onboard waving frantically to us, and in a few minutes more Jim's boat, manned by his motorist, Arjenio, and another man I didn't know, had pulled up alongside us. "Jim says to come with us," Arjenio called over the roar of both motors. "The people are getting hungry." I grabbed two five-pound tins of coffee, a sack of sugar, a case of evaporated milk, a case of beer and two sacks of bread. I passed the goods, along with a package of cups, to the man I didn't know, then climbed from our boat to Jim's. As soon as I was seated, Arjenio opened up the throttle on the 155. Relative to the over-weighted dinghy, Jim's boat was a Maserati, leaping along the water, touching down just long enough to gather it's strength to leap again. In less than 10 minutes we'd covered what would take 45 minutes for Mauricio. Jim and Teddy were waiting as we pulled up dockside. "Arjenio will show you where the cook house is. Teddy'll take the beer to keep the dignitaries happy." "Nice to see you too," I said. "It will be, after the locals get some food." Arjenio and the other man from the boat grabbed the things I'd brought, and we made our way up the muddy river slope onto a flat, field where several buffalo and a huge white Brahma bull were grazing. On the field's right was the local schoolhouse—painted an identifying blue—on the field's left was a small hut, which Arjenio headed for. I followed behind, hoping Gasdalia had managed to get a fire going and to borrow some large pots. She didn't let me down: I entered the little two-room, mud-floored building—which was crowded with my crew and several local women—to find her squatting on her haunches, facing a roaring fire set between two six-foot long, two foot high rows of bricks. Sitting on the fire were two 50 gallon aluminum pots full of boiling water. Without turning she reached one hand over her head and said simply, "Coffee." I handed her a five pound tin. She opened it and poured it all into the first pot. "More coffee," she said, then did the same with the second. An older woman, one of the villagers, stirred the pots with a long-handled flat, wooden paddle. Then Gasdalia stood and said hello. "So, you were going to leave us here with no food to cook?" she asked, half joking. "Sorry we're late. Mauricio will be here in a minute." "Sugar and milk, please." I put the sack of sugar on the ground near the pots, and put the case of milk on a rickety table nearby. She cut open the bag of sugar and put about 10 pounds in each pot, then directed the women to put eight quarts of milk in each. Then she turned to Lacy and Letecia and told them to tell everyone that coffee was ready. I took a moment to catch my breath, say hello to the crew, and admire the job they'd done. Aside from the fire place, a work of art, there were three tables set up as work stations, and a fourth near the door to serve as a serving station. She'd secured not only the local women and their huge pots, but several long-handled ladles, a half-a-dozen machetes—preferred over knives by cooks in the jungle—and a number of five-to-40 gallon plastic tubs to serve whatever purpose we might need. There were also two long homemade metal grills fashioned out of steel rods—no doubt left over from the Swiss days—standing in the corner near the fire. Gastalia had things under control: she barked an order at the women, who in turn barked to several men who were lingering outside the half-walled, leaf-roofed building. The men came in and began scooping the coffee with five gallon plastic tubs from the aluminum pots into the large plastic tubs. As soon as the big pots were empty, Gastalia gave them to the men to take to the river, wash out, and refill. In probably five minutes, by the time a line had begun to form for coffee, the refilled pots were back on the fire. Lacy, Jorge and I handled the serving: the villagers simply presented a cup or bowl, or in some cases a banana-leaf holder and we filled it up and passed it back along with a couple of the dry, tasteless pieces of hard bread. We'd probably served the first hundred people when a line of villagers appeared at the hut, carrying the things from our boat. I gave up serving duty and Alan and I had the men bring the things to the rear of the hut and pass them over the half-wall, where we stacked them in the tiny, windowless back room. The marinated chickens, two sacks of yucca, a sack of rice, salt, sauces and a few other things were passed to Gastalia, who had the women begin cleaning the yucca and tossing it into one of the pots. They worked with the machetes with amazing and practiced grace, trimming the ends, marking the thick brown skin, then peeling the leathery hide from the white tuber. In maybe ten minutes they'd finished the first 100 pound sack. Gastalia, meanwhile, had put salt and oil in the second pot, and she and Letecia had cleaned and chopped 10 heads of garlic, which went into the second pot as well, along with a 50 pound sack of rice. Lacy and Jorge had finished serving the regulars their coffee, and while Jorge served seconds, Lacy and Letecia brought a medium-sized aluminum pot full of coffee, along with two bottles of pisco, to the schoolhouse where Jim and Teddy were meeting with the dignitaries and the village leaders. "You've got this down so well you don't even need me here," I said, reaching for a beer. "Not so fast, Mr. Peter," Gastalia answered, taking it away from me. "When do you want to serve the chicken?" "Soon as we can." "Then we need a bigger fire," she said, and called for more bricks. In minutes the locals had added two feet to the fire, fresh hardwood crackling and spitting its resin among the chunks of coal I'd brought. We put the grills on, got them hot, smeared them with oil, then began cooking the parrillada. "When is al muerzo?" someone called, sticking a battered red, plastic plate in Lacy's face. "Lunch is when we serve it!" she answered, refusing to take the plate. "And don't bother the cooks or you won't get fed." I hadn't thought we needed an enforcer, and told her to relax just a little, but at the same time liked her spunk. While the chickens added their sizzle to the crackling of the fire, Gastalia and I set up the serving table with sauce, ladels, cups and so forth. Two local women kept an eye on the food, and two others were busy skinning platanos for the masamora. Two more squeezed lemons and bags of flavored refresco into 40 gallon tubs of river water, to

which Jorge added chunks of the ice I'd brought. When everything was moving to her liking, Gastalia let me have my beer.

'Ahora, si, time for a beer. Everything is going well.' It was going surprisingly well. When the yucca was finished the women called for help to pour off the water into plastic tubs, then had the men transfer the yucca to other tubs. The water, near boiling still, was put back into the large aluminum pot and the platanos were added, along with about 25 pounds of sugar. As the chickens were done—we only had space to cook about 50 quarters at a time—they were tossed into another bucket, and another round was put on the fire. Suddenly, Jim appeared at the doorway. 'How soon, Peter? They're getting restless.' 'Twenty minutes?' 'Not soon enough. They were promised food and they want it.' 'Doing the best we can.' 'Okay then, I'll tell them twenty minutes. Give me another two bottles of pisco and have your girl bring some more coffee and another case of beer, will you?' He started to turn away then turned back. 'Where do you want the pigs?' 'Not here, not yet. Wait till after we serve lunch, then I'll think about where we're going to cook them.' 'Will do,' he said, turning—ever-so-slightly-inebriated—and heading back to the schoolhouse, shouting to the people milling about that the food would be served in twenty minutes. Ten minutes later a line of more than a hundred, all with bowls or buckets or leaf plates in their hands, was already in place. There was nothing to do but serve.

Lacy took the plates, Gastalia threw a piece of chicken and a scoop of rice on them, Jorge tossed on a few pieces of yucca, and I sauced them while Letecia served them either refresco or masamora with a couple of pieces of bread. It was not the same as serving a banquet, but no one seemed to mind. The food was hot, delicious and free. The only complaints came from those who thought beer would be included with the meal, and Lacy handled those with strict authority. 'Give you beer and you'll beat your wife! You're lucky we're even serving you, you no good worthless freeloader!' Like Gastalia, Lacy had been brought up on the river and so managed to get away with saying things to these river people that I wouldn't have dreamed of saying. I was glad she was along.

When lunch, which was a grand hit, was finally served, the crew in the hut had a chance to eat and look over the damage: our floor was a muddy mess covered in bits of platano, yucca, rice, chicken and lemon rinds. Our tables were covered in sauce. It didn't matter. We took a few minutes to relax, then called for several men to come clean up the mess, wash and refill the pots in the river, and began readying for dinner. I had Jorge ask a couple of the fellows to make me a fire pit with a four foot high barbeque spit above it outside for the pig roast, and while Gastalia had the kitchen crew begin peeling onions, potatoes, yucca and garlic and more platanos, I began to hang our hammocks, as we'd be sleeping in the hut. In the jungle you do not leave your possessions. Anything left unattended is considered abandoned and anyone who stumbles on something abandoned may claim it. If we slept anywhere but the kitchen hut, all our stores would be up for grabs, and no amount of complaining after the fact, even to Fujimori's secret police, would make us right in the eyes of the law. Unfortunately, while I'd accounted for my crew in terms of hammocks and mosquito nets and blankets—the jungle gets cold and damp at night—Mauricio's son had forgotten his bag, which meant we were one short. Which meant I'd be sleeping on the muddy floor. Not appealing at all, but it was only for one night, and if I used a couple of empty yucca sacks I figured to be quite comfortable near the warm fire bricks. By the time I'd figured out sleeping arrangements, the kitchen was in full swing. The cut up, sweet smoked paca was tossed into one of the two large pots for the Carne de Monte soup, along with the yucca, potatoes, garlic and spices; platanos were boiling for more masamora, and lemons were being juiced for refresco. Outside, my fire pit was roaring, and the three pigs were beginning to drip their fat onto the fire. Everything looked like it was under control until the rain came. Not your everyday rain, a jungle torrent that the locals call a tempesto, an angry man rain, that in the ten minutes before it stopped had turned the field around our hut into a rice paddy. Several of the villagers—who seemed to me to be getting along quite well—ran to their homes and returned with shovels and dug a 12 inch trench around our kitchen, while other dug run off trenches at the corners to keep the water running away from us.

But while everything ran smoothly during and after the tempesto, the warm lluvia, the nagging woman rain, that began half an hour later brought out the temperamental nature of the people of the Manatee. Though it was only a steady drizzle—which would last all night and perhaps into the next day, hence its name—tempers began to flare. People lined up at our door before we were ready to serve, and others reached over our half-wall to grab what they could. Lacy and Gastalia berated the worst offenders, and the local women whacked several who came inside with their long wooden paddles, but we were overmatched and decided to serve the half-cooked soup if that's what they wanted.

And so we did, and though it wasn't very good, no one complained, and most came round for seconds. By the time Jim sent word that his dignitaries were ready to eat—and for us to send along another case of beer and three or four bottles of pisco—most of the villagers had gone back to their homes for the night. Our hut was an utter shambles and all of the young men who'd been so helpful during the day had disappeared, so we lugged our things down to the river and washed them ourselves. By the time we were done night had fallen and the persistent nagging rain had brought a chill to the air. Too, the fire pit outside had gone out and we were stuck hauling the charred but not yet cooked pig carcasses into the hut with us. It was not going to be a pleasant night. Still, by the light of several kerosene lamps we celebrated our success and all but Gastalia and her niece got roaring drunk on Jim's beer. 'Give me the rest of the pisco!' Jim, suddenly appearing at the door, shouted in a playful drunken way. 'This is one hell of a feast! And you're all drinking the beer!' 'How's it going on your end?' 'Couldn't be better. These yahoos I brought in think I've got these villagers wrapped around my finger. Christ! If I could feed them every day I would! You want a permanent job? Problem is I can only pay you in chickens.' 'Speaking of which,' I said, 'when do you deliver the gallinas?' 'Screw the gallinas! They don't need breakfast. Just make plenty of coffee and masamora and serve the pigs early and let's get out of here before something goes wrong.' Teddy came stumbling up behind him, followed by several of the officials. 'Mr. Jim. We're going

to your house.” “Yeah, well so am I if I can ever get the rest of the pisco and a couple of cases of beer.” I handed him the pisco, and gave two cases of beer each to Arjenio and his assistant. “Okay then, we’ll see you in the morning,” Jim said, turning toward the jungle path at the end of the field that would lead him and his group back to his home. Done for the day, we settled in to sleep.

It was not a comfortable night. Once the activity in the kitchen stopped, mosquitos, born with the rain, appeared by the thousands, and while those with hammocks and mosquito nets slept peaceably, I was uncovered and tossing and turning on the muddy floor. When it became absolutely unbearable I got up and walked outside into the light drizzle. A near full moon had appeared through a break in the cloud cover and the field around the hut was ablaze with its light glinting off the wet grass. The silhouettes of several buffalo and the Brahma bull were clear against the line of trees at the near edge of the field. The serenity of the scene, out there on a little river in the middle of the Amazon jungle was beautiful enough that I almost didn’t mind that I was now soaked through and beginning to be badly chilled. I thought about what we had done. A couple of friends and I had made a party for nearly two hundred on two days notice and we had pulled it off. We still had one big meal to go but that would almost take care of itself.

I stepped back into the hut to warm myself by the coals, and the instant I did the mosquitos began to swarm. I leaned over the smoking fire trough to keep them off my face and ignored the thousands on my hands and the back of my neck as best I could. When I couldn’t, I stepped into the back room, found some garlic, cleaned it and wiped the teeth on all my exposed skin and hair to keep the insects at bay, then sat near the fire again. It was a miserable, sleepless night, morning taking forever to arrive. The drizzle had stopped by the time first light finally broke, and I made my way to the river, shed my clothes and washed. By the time I returned to the hut everyone else was getting up as well, and while I rolled the hammocks and mosquito nets, Gastalia and Lacy cleaned out the fire trough, then began a new fire and put on a pot of water for coffee.

“You must have had an awful night,” she said with the brightness of someone who hadn’t had any beer the night before. “Wasn’t great.” “You should have gone into Lacy’s hammock, or I could have put Letecia with her and you come with me.” “That would have been tough to explain to Gilma.” “It’s the jungle. It was cold. It’s life, not sex.” “Still would be tough to sell to my wife.” “At least come here and let me wash the back of your neck and head with kerosene. You smell like rotten garlic.” I sat at one of the tables while she washed me, the kerosene taking the sting out of the multitude of mosquito bites I had. By the time she was finished the fire was roaring, the little pot of water was boiling and Lacy made coffee for the crew. A short while later the women who’d helped us yesterday appeared with several young men, and while the crew went out to bathe they filled the large pots with water and began to make masamora and coffee for everyone. The ground outside our hut was so muddy that we decided to cook the pigs inside, and Gastalia and I organized the team into a cutting party. We put the pigs on the tables and began just hacking at them with the machetes, cutting the partly cooked carcasses into generous fist sized pieces of meat and bone. It wasn’t pretty, what with bits of bone flying everywhere in the little kitchen, but in short order the deed was done and we had two large plastic tubs of pork ready to barbeque.

Jim appeared shortly, looking awful. “How soon for coffee, Peter? We ran out at my house.” “Nearly there, but we’ve got enough for you from our pot.” I poured him a cup. He ran his fingers through his mop of hair. “How soon do you want us to serve the pork?” “Soon as you can. God I feel awful.” “That was a lot of pisco.” “That was just the beginning. When we got back to my house we finished that up and had Arjenio go find us some aguar diente. God I feel awful.” Aguar diente is fermented cane liquor, and while it can be quite refined, the kind made on the river is generally the equivalent of bathtub gin. “How much did he find?” “About a gallon. And I’m in better shape than most of them.” He turned to go. “Soon as you can have someone send over coffee, will you?”

He turned and left, and I told Gastalia to start the food as soon as the coffee and masamora were done. A few minutes later, Alan, looking as bad as the rest of us, volunteered to deliver the coffee to Jim’s house while the young men washed and refilled the pots. Since there was only one meal to serve and we still had food for two, we had the women go all out, making potatoes, rice and yucca, as well as a sliced tomato salad, to go with the pork. A few minutes after they’d begun getting things ready the first of the villagers arrived for their coffee and banana mash. I expected all hell to break loose when there was no caldo de gallina to go with it, and was pleasantly surprised when it didn’t. I found out later Jim hadn’t told them the menu for the second day, so no one was expecting it. But they were expecting food, and by mid-morning had lined up by the door of our shed and were impatiently waiting for the sizzling pork. We didn’t disappoint. We filled the plates and bowls, the little pots and banana-leaves and whatever else they thrust at us as high as we could before handing them back, sure we had enough for as many as wanted it. Unfortunately, word about the free food had gotten out—how, I don’t know—and an additional fifty or 100 people we hadn’t seen Saturday showed up at our door as well, and Lacy had to go into her stern act to control them when we began to run low on the pork.

“Who are you? You don’t live here! Go back to Indiana or wherever you’re from!” she’d berate them. “Here, take some yucca and rice and coffee, but no pork for you!” Her shrill tone worked, and we managed to get everyone something, while saving enough pork for ourselves and helpers, as well as the officials at Jim’s home. The latter turned out not to matter, as Alan came back when we were near finished serving with the announcement that all the officials had gone home. “Well, they’re gone,” he said, pushing his way through the throng at the door that was waiting for seconds that weren’t coming. “Gone?” I asked. “Jim got them on the boat and out of here right after coffee and bread.” “Why didn’t they stick around for the bar-be-que?” “Too muddy. They just wanted to get out of here.” “Guess that calls for a beer for celebration.” “I checked last night” he said. “We drank it all.” “Not on your life,” I said, going to the back room and pulling out a case I’d hidden. While I poured for the crew, Lacy

relented and served the 40 or so pieces of pork we'd been saving for the officials to the lingering crowd, and then we shut it down. "Well, we did it guys," I said as Gastalia and Lacy made plates for all those who'd helped. "Congratulations everyone. Now, let's eat and clean up this mess and get out of here." Jim and Teddy came by as we were eating and joined us. "God this is good pork!" he said, biting into a meaty chunk and taking a drink of beer. "How did the bigshots feel about the whole thing?" "Same as yesterday only hung over," he laughed. "They're going to recommend I get the project. I ought to be in a position to begin raising funds for it in a matter of weeks. You guys did good." He grabbed another couple of pieces of meat for himself and a full plate for Pat—who hadn't appeared at all because she was watching over a horse that one of the villagers had shot in the hindquarters while drunk—then told us he'd see us back in Iquitos. "Oh, and Peter, buy your crew all the beer it wants tonight when you get back," he called over his shoulder. "Just put it on my tab." We spent the next couple of hours cleaning up and portioning out left-over goods to the women and men who'd helped us, then bundled our own things up and began to carry them to the boat. "Where's your boat?" Alan asked, when he saw the deep green aluminum boat with the Amazon Tours logo on the side. "I'll tell you about it on the way home," I answered, glancing back at the now near-empty muddy field.

About the Author

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