



The Ayme family in their kitchen house in Tingo, Ecuador, a village in the central Andes, with one week's worth of food. Ermelinda Ayme Sichigalo, 37, and Orlando Ayme, 35, sit flanked by their children (left to right): Livia, 15, Natalie, 8, Moises, 11, Alvarito, 4, Jessica, 10, Orlando hijo (Junior, held by Ermelinda), 9 months, and Mauricio, 30 months. Not in photograph: Lucia, 5, who lives with her grandparents to help them out. Cooking method: wood fire. Food preservation: natural drying.

Pobre Pero Sana

ONE WEEK'S FOOD IN SEPTEMBER

Grains & Other Starchy Foods: \$17.40**

White potatoes, 100 lb; white rice, broken, 50 lb, *cheaper than whole rice*; ground wheat,* 15 lb; corn flour, 10 lb; white flour, fine, 10 lb; green pea flour, 8 lb; white flour, coarse, 6 lb.

Note: The Aymes normally grow their own potatoes and corn, but have none to harvest at this time of year. They have eaten the last of their homegrown barley.

Dairy: **

Milk, 1.8 gal, *from family cows; only part of the week's supply is shown in the photograph.*

Meat, Fish & Eggs:

none.

Fruits, Vegetables & Nuts: \$11.25

Plantains, 13.4 lb; yellow bananas, 6.2 lb, *purchased over-ripe as they are cheaper that way*; oranges, 3.6 lb; lemons, 2.5 lb;

Andean blackberries, 1 lb; lentils, 10 lb; carrots, 3.6 lb; red onions, 3 lb; leeks, 2 lb; lettuce, 1 head.

Condiments: \$2.90

Brown sugar, 11 lb, *purchased as a cake, used for sweetening coffee and eaten as candy*; salt, 1.5 lb; vegetable oil, 16.9 fl oz; cilantro, 1 bunch.

Beverages: **

Stinging nettle, 1 small bunch, *gathered wild for tea*; corn silk, 1 handful, *boiled in water for both tea and medicine*; water from a nearby spring, *carried by hand, for drinking and cooking.*

* Homegrown

Food Expenditure for One Week: \$31.55

**Market value of homegrown foods, if purchased: \$3.20

IT'S NO SURPRISE THAT ERMELINDA Ayme SICHIGALO would rather leave her children at home in Tingo, their small village in the central Andean highlands, than bring them down the mountain to the weekly market in the much bigger town of Simiatug. Her youngest children, especially, want everything they see and she has little money for extras. The 4-year-old, Alvarito, "is the most troublesome," she says, "but he can't be left behind without an argument." It's difficult to imagine anyone arguing with the authoritarian Ermelinda—until we meet Alvarito.

With eight children to raise—including the baby riding in a sling on her back—plus doing field work, tending a flock of sheep, cooking, doing the laundry and the marketing, as well as practicing midwifery and medicinal healing, Ermelinda doesn't have much time to indulge the children. Her husband, Orlando Ayme, who also goes to market, turns out to be the go-to guy for parental largesse—usually Alvarito gets to go shopping. Even without the patter of little feet, the Aymes' food forays aren't easy. There are no shops or markets in Tingo—only neighbors and family to borrow from and share with. The hike down the mountain from Tingo to Simiatug is three miles long; then there's the vertical walk back.

Although Ecuador is situated on the equator and the growing season is long, the Ayme family's fields are 11,000 feet up in the mountains, far removed from the rich tropical lowlands. "Our land is dry, and the wind is harsh," says Orlando. "so it's not that good for planting. The land farther down is much more fertile, but it's too expensive." Despite the difficult climate, they manage to live through most of the year on what they grow in their fields: potatoes, *oca* (a root vegetable), corn, wheat, broad beans, and onions. The only animal protein they eat is guinea pig and chicken, and that only a few times a year. They have a milk cow that produces about one quart a day.

Food security comes in the form of their other enterprise—their flock of 50 sheep, which the Aymes own jointly with their extended family. They raise the animals not for food, but to sell in the market—to tide them over during the dry season, when there's little or nothing to harvest. In addition, Orlando is the Tingo representative to *Pachakutik*, a national political party named after a legendary Inca emperor. He makes \$50 a month for

ECUADOR

- Population: **13,212,742**
- Population of Tingo village: **80 (est.)**
- Area in square miles: **109,454** (slightly smaller than Nevada)
- Population density per square mile: **121**
- Urban population: **62%**
- Life expectancy, male/female: **68/74 years**
- Indigenous population: **38%**
- Fertility rate (births per woman): **2.8**
- Literacy rate, male/female, 15 years and older: **94/91%**
- Caloric intake available daily per person: **2,754 calories**
- Undernourished population: **4%**
- Annual alcohol consumption per person (alcohol content only): **1.7 quarts**
- GDP per person in PPP \$ (Purchasing Power Parity: an adjustment for what equivalent local goods would cost in the U.S.): **\$3,580**
- Year in which Ecuador formally adopted the US dollar as legal tender: **2000**
- Total annual health expenditure per person in \$, and as a percent of GDP: **\$76/4.5**
- Overweight population, male/female: **40/51%**
- Obese population, male/female: **6/15%**
- Meat consumption per person per year: **99 pounds**
- McDonald's restaurants: **10**
- Number of volcanoes: **17**
- Cigarette consumption per person per year: **232**
- Available supply of sugar and sweeteners per person per year: **106 pounds**
- Population living on less than \$2 a day: **41%**

the work, but \$15 of that pays the rent on the small room in Simiatug where he stays when he's doing community business. The remaining \$35 helps, but it doesn't go very far with a family of ten. Money has been especially tight since the year 2000, when Ecuador, trying to hold back exploding inflation, adopted the U.S. dollar as the national currency. The move slowed inflation, but prices escalated as vendors took advantage of the switch—and the ensuing confusion—to round off prices to the nearest dollar. Suddenly, many small purchases cost at least \$1—not a trifling amount considering that more than four out of ten Ecuadorians live on less than \$2 a day.

The Aymes spend most of their time in Tingo, farming and raising the children. They lead a physically demanding life—Ermelinda more so than her husband, as Orlando himself admits. In addition to farming, she is the village healer, gathering nettles, corn silk, horsetail, mint, chamomile, plantain seeds, and *paico* (a relative of goose-foot) to make tonics and healthful teas. "It's difficult to keep all these children healthy," she says. "We have no money for doctors and medicine." But Orlando thinks she's selling her efforts short. "We are *pobre pero sana*," he says—poor but healthy.

During our September visit, the last of the potatoes—their staple crop—have been eaten and there's nothing else growing. They're selling two sheep this week to buy food—some for this week and some for later. Orlando thinks he can get \$40 for the two at the Simiatug market, if middlemen from the bigger town of Ambato come to the market with their pickup trucks to buy animals.

CASH COWS—AND SHEEP

The valley town of Simiatug, accessible only by means of a long, winding dirt road and hillside trails, is the sole food-shopping destination for everyone within a 30-mile radius. The descending bright-red ponchos dotting the mountains foretell the arrival of market-bound Ecuadorians, the Aymes included, with Alvarito in tow. Indigenous sellers arrive early to arrange their tables of produce: onions, peppers, carrots, and tomatoes. Potato and rice dealers sell their 100-pound bags from the backs of their trucks. A trader from the tropical lowlands lays out avocados, oranges, papayas, and bananas on fresh banana leaves. One woman has a selection of hats for sale.

The animal market—really just a clearing—is below the schoolhouse, on the edge of town. The Aymes stop here first, to sell their

sheep. Many of their fellow villagers are doing the same, except that, in addition to selling sheep they are selling alpacas, llamas, cows, bulls, and piglets. There are no hogs for sale—"People buy piglets and keep them until they're big enough to eat," Orlando says. "No one sells a hog." The animal market is a social gathering spot—mostly for the men, who catch up on the week's events while hoping to sell their animals. An ice cream vendor walks among them, hawking cones, and another man stands around waiting to collect sales tax for the local government.

The wholesalers from Ambato try to press dollars into the sellers' palms to close the deals, but they bid less than anyone wants to take. Finally though, someone takes an offer, jump-starting the morning. Orlando accepts \$35 for his sheep—not as much as he wanted but enough to go shopping. The wholesalers throw the sheep down and tie their legs together, "to keep them from breaking in the truck," says Orlando. Money in hand, it's time to go shopping, and Alvarito is obviously sensing an approaching opportunity.

The Aymes always buy their most important staple foods first, and then they keep spending until the money is gone. Orlando and Ermelinda buy 100 pounds of potatoes for \$3 and ten pounds of lentils for \$4. Next they buy about 50 pounds of flour—corn flour, white flour, green pea flour, coarse white flour, and ground wheat—at the indigenous food cooperative. "They give us good prices," says Ermelinda. She also buys what she calls "broken rice," which is cheaper than whole white rice, though of poorer quality. They can get 50 pounds for about \$6—less than half the price of whole white rice. Momentarily, everyone stops to enjoy the show when Alvarito, who has spied a cake in the glass-fronted case at the co-op, causes a commotion when told he can't have it.

Back on the street, plantains are next—13 pounds for \$1.80. An 11-pound wheel of *panela*—brown sugar—tightly wrapped in cane leaves—is another \$1.80. At home, everyone will chip off chunks throughout the week and eat it like candy, or dissolve it in hot water for a sugary drink. The entire cake of sugar will be gone before next market day. Fresh fruits and vegetables, last on the shopping list, are only purchased if there's extra money. They buy carrots, leeks, onions, and some fruit today, because they sold the sheep. Then the money is gone, so the shopping is over. Orlando lashes as much food as he can onto the horse he borrowed from his father-in-law, and they carry the rest up the mountain themselves. Alvarito carries nothing but disappointment.

He wanted a red wool poncho like the ones his brothers and sisters wear, but there wasn't the money for it. He stomps up the trail.

By the time they get home, the wind is howling outside and it's almost dark. Ten-year-old Jessica, who has been out on her own with the sheep all day, has corralled them for the night in their make-shift pen and left the dog there to scare off marauding wild animals. In the kitchen house (the family has two small adobe huts, one for the kitchen, the other for sleeping), Ermelinda kindles the embers to bring the fire to life. Chickens scurry through the doorway and scratch around until Ermelinda tells Alvarito to shoo them out, which he and 30-month-old Mauricio do gleefully. The chickens race back inside each time someone opens the door, so the boys are kept busy throughout the dinner preparations. Natalie, 8, takes the baby from her mother without complaint. He doesn't like his feet to touch the dirt floor and cries when they do. Finally, Natalie bounces him on her knee until he falls asleep.

Ermelinda adjusts the wood so that the embers remain at a constant temperature for cooking—much like a modern stove, except without the knobs. There's no ventilation in the cooking house, so the ceiling beams and walls are black with soot. The room is warm but smoky. Orlando is one of the few husbands we've met in the developing world who helps in the kitchen. He peels onions for Ermelinda's potato soup, which is simmering on the fire, and doesn't appear to be doing it for the first time.

Cuy (guinea pigs) have the run of the room but generally stay near the warmth of the fire, and away from the chickens. When the little rodents grow big enough, they will be eaten—probably at Easter time. The Aymes' scrawny, rat-size *cuy* bear no resemblance to the *cuy* for sale in Ecuador's bigger cities. City *cuy* are fed alfalfa and vitamin supplements and grow as large as small dogs.

No one has to be called for dinner. Even the eldest daughter, Livia, who has been doing schoolwork in the family's sleeping house, has appeared. Everyone sits on the dirt floor or on little benches and eats their fill of the starchy soup they have most nights. There's enough for visitors as well—a taste of the culture of sharing that still predominates in the rural Andes.

When asked about favorite foods, the couple is a bit stumped. After some thought, Orlando chooses pea-flour porridge with potatoes. "I really love that," he says. "He loves lollipops," teases Erme-

linda's sister Zulema, who has stopped by for a visit. She and Erme linda's other sisters often drop by for a meal and to talk, all the while working on colorful handiwork for Simiatug Samai—the artisan's cooperative based in the town. Ermelinda says she likes everything they eat and can't choose a favorite food.

The Aymes generally call all packaged and processed food "Swiss," a sure sign that Nestlé, the giant Swiss multinational, has successfully muscled its way onto the rickety shelves of the developing world's markets. Is there anything they like to eat but don't, because it's too expensive? "Yes," says Orlando, "canned sardines and packaged cheese." Has anyone in the family ever eaten fast food? "One time, when I was at a course of study in Ambato," says Orlando. "It was meat on bread [a hamburger]. It was okay, but a bit strange. And I wasn't able to see how it was made."

There are no appliances, no clocks, no furniture, no running water, and no modern kitchen utensils. Earlier, Ermelinda watched Peter open our cases to extract the equipment he needed for the photographs. "I never thought I'd ever see anything so expensive here," she said. There was really nothing we could say in response.

The wind has picked up, and family members begin drifting over to the sleeping house a few yards away. Although it's 10 o'clock at night, it's not time for bed yet. The radio blasts Ecuadorian music, and the children bound back and forth from one bed to another as Livia works again on her schoolwork at a makeshift desk in the earthen room. She attends high school in Simiatug only a few days a week, because of the distance. There is a grammar school in Tingo, which the younger children attend, unless it's their turn to tend the sheep. Ermelinda attended high school for two years but had to quit when the babies started coming. She wants all her children to finish school.

When they do finally sleep, the children are head to head, five or six to a bed. We sleep on the floor next to everyone, on fresh straw and in warm sleeping bags. The fierce wind peppers the corrugated metal roof with sand and gravel throughout the night.

Breakfast time comes all too quickly. Ermelinda's up early with the baby and feeds him while she grinds barley with the large hand grinder. She combines the barley and wheat in a basket on the floor and then stirs it into boiling water on the fire to make morning porridge. She adds brown sugar and waits for the children to awaken.

FIELD NOTE

On five previous trips to Andean countries in South America I had failed to partake of the biggest delicacy the Andes has to offer: *cuy*, guinea pig. I had seen the creatures in the kitchens of rural highland dwellings, where they have the run of the house and yard. On several occasions I had tried to order *cuy*, only to discover that at many restaurants it must be ordered in advance—*cuy* is often reserved for special occasions, such as the courtship negotiations that precede a wedding, the wedding itself, christenings, and a boy's first haircut.

On this trip I was determined to try *cuy*. So I asked Oswaldo Muñoz about it right at the beginning of our visit, as we were driving out of Quito. "I'm glad you asked me about that," he said. "I've got a great place for you."

Two hours later we hit the small city of Ambato, where we pulled up to a storefront restaurant that Oswaldo swore was the best in Ecuador: Salon Los Cuyes II (loosely translated, "Guinea Pig Hall II"). Despite my long interest in *cuy*, I was startled by the sheer size of the beasts. They were the biggest guinea pigs I'd ever seen—the size of small dogs. Cooked whole on the rotisserie, they were like big dachshunds with fat rat heads, complete with protruding incisors and crispy rodentlike ears.

The light-pink *cuy* meat, served with a traditional potato, onion, and peanut-sauce stew, was delicious. It tasted like a cross between suckling pig and rabbit and was just as rich; three of us split half a *cuy* and still couldn't finish it (Faith didn't try very hard). *Cuy* for 3 was only \$20, including tip and soft drinks.

— Peter