

So, what's the right one: cebiche, ceviche, sebiche or seviche?

¿Cómo es la nuez: cebiche, ceviche, sebiche o seviche?

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ABSTRACT

What is it: cebiche, ceviche, sebiche, or siviche? seeks to explain, using normative documentation of the Spanish language and journalistic sources, why a concept is spelled in four ways, given that, in the search for information for the development of the study, no similar case was found. The work does not seek to criticize or correct the spelling of the name of one of the most emblematic dishes of Peruvian gastronomy, neither by standard, nor by custom, nor by history. To achieve this objective, the methodology employed was based on the review of valuable and current public information. The result is that there is no consensus about the origin of the dish, nor its spelling, although there is an idiomatic and historical explanation. Finally, it was concluded that both society and academia accept the spellings cebiche, ceviche, sebiche, or seviche.

Keywords: Seviche, sea beach, gastronomy, fish, lemon.

RESUMEN

¿Cómo es: cebiche, ceviche, sebiche o seviche?, busca explicar, desde la documentación normativa del idioma español y periodística, el porqué se escribe de cuatro formas un concepto, toda vez que, en la búsqueda de información para el desarrollo del estudio, no se ha encontrado un caso similar. El trabajo no busca criticar o corregir la escritura del nombre de uno de los platos más emblemáticos de la gastronomía peruana ni por norma, ni por costumbre o historia. Para cumplir el objetivo, la metodología empleada se basó en la revisión de información pública valiosa y actual. El resultado es que no existe consenso acerca del origen del plato, ni de su escritura, aunque sí la explicación idiomática e histórica. Finalmente, se concluyó que, tanto la sociedad como la academia aceptan que se escriba cebiche, ceviche, sebiche o seviche.

Palabras clave: Seviche, sea beach, gastronomía, pescado, limón.



INTRODUCTION

One of the concerns of linguists is to analyze the evolution of language use, which manifests in various ways and in terms that change over time, both in meaning and pronunciation. For example, the word *causa*, meaning “foundation or reason for something” (Real Academia Española (RAE), 2024), has evolved from its original sense to refer to a representative dish of Peruvian cuisine and even to be used as a synonym for “friend” (peru.travel, 2020).

However, language evolution occurs not only conceptually but also phonetically. Regarding the arrival of Spanish from Castile to the American continent, it was already part of the evolution of Latin, a language that reached the Iberian Peninsula around 218 B.C. with the Romans. By then, languages such as Iberian, Celtiberian, Basque (or Euskera), Tartessian, Lusitanian, and languages derived from Phoenician and Greek, associated with Phoenician and Greek colonies, were already present (Fernández, 2018).

Later, in 711, with the arrival of the Muslims, the Arabic language was introduced. For eight centuries, Arabic coexisted with the languages of the peninsula, leaving around four thousand words of Arabic origin (Blanco, 2025).

By the end of the 15th century, with Columbus’s arrival in the Americas and Francisco Pizarro’s conquest of the southern part of the continent in 1532—specifically in what is now Peru—the Spanish brought by the conquerors encountered native languages, unknown, new, and unfamiliar to the Europeans, which had no Western influence. Quechua, the language of the Inca Empire, predominated; it was experiencing internal succession conflicts

while expanding northward across the sub-continent. However, although the Cusco people dominated their vast empire, the conquered cultures retained their customs and languages. In other words, multiple languages were spoken.

The objective of this research is to show how something everyday and emblematic of gastronomy can become “unknown,” generating linguistic questions that justify studies of this nature, particularly regarding the distinctions between the terms *cebiche*, *ceviche*, *sebiche*, or *seviche*. It should be noted that the aim is not to differentiate between various preparation methods, ingredients, or consumption sites, but rather to establish distinctions and similarities in spelling.

Regarding this topic, there are many studies, some older and others more recent, from both academic and popular sources. Therefore, this article reviews the literature on the subject, which, although incomplete, seeks to analyze what is considered most relevant about the spelling of one of the most internationally recognized dishes of Peruvian cuisine, and to contrast it with descriptions collected through conversations with various intellectuals over time.

DEVELOPMENT

Spelling

Language use occurs through the combination of orthographic rules, established by the Real Academia Española (RAE) in the case of Spanish, with the practices or customs in speech and writing, which are accepted by language users in different specific contexts. Additionally, it often requires criteria for using certain terms, which are subject to historical, cultural, and educational reasons.

For example, normatively it is San Juan, while the custom in towns of the Peruvian Amazon is to say san fan. Although the spelling remains San Juan, the pronunciation differs in that part of Peru. Should the pronunciation be changed? This would be absurd for two main reasons. First, it is cultural; it is the product of the cultural encounter between Spanish and the native languages of the Amazon. Second, beyond pronunciation, the concept is understood by Spanish speakers in the region.

Normatively, in the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española (DLE)* of the RAE, the word is spelled *cebiche*, defined as “A dish typical of some American countries, made with raw fish or seafood cut into small pieces and prepared in a marinade of lemon or bitter orange juice, chopped onion, salt, and chili” (*Diccionario de la Lengua Española (DEL)*, 2025). The same dictionary lists *ceviche* and *seviche* as synonyms.

Similarly, the *Diccionario panhispánico de dudas* of the RAE (2005) records the word as *cebiche*, defined as “A dish made with raw fish or seafood in a marinade, typical of several American countries.” It notes that it can also be spelled *ceviche*, and valid variants include *seviche* and *sebiche*.

Meanwhile, the *Diccionario de americanismos* (2025) indicates that in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Spain, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay, the word is spelled *cebiche* and is defined as “A dish prepared with small pieces of raw fish or seafood, marinated in acidic lemon or bitter orange juice, and seasoned with chopped

onion, salt, and hot chili.” It also notes that using *ceviche*, *sebiche*, and *seviche* is correct.

Terrés (2016) noted that the first document to mention the word *sebiche* dates back to 1820, in the song *La chicha*, sung by Peruvian soldiers: “Venga el Sebiche, la guatia, en seguida que también convida y excita a beber. Todo indio sostenga con el poto en mano que a todo tirano hay que aborrecer.” The first written reference to *seviche* appears in *Guía del viajero en Lima* by Manuel Atanasio Fuentes, in 1860. It is described as:

“Small pieces of fish, or shrimp, placed in bitter orange juice, with plenty of chili and salt; they are kept this way for a few hours, until the fish absorbs the chili, and is almost cooked by the caustic action of it and the acidity of the orange” (Fuentes, 1860, p. 184).

Later, Federico More (1952), cited by Arrizabalaga (2020), stated that the word derives from *cebo*, since it refers to fish cut into small pieces (Figure 1). More’s proposal was supported by Martha Hildebrandt (1962), who added that the Mozarabic suffix *-iche*, meaning “cebo” (food, delicacy) combined with the diminutive or form suffix *-iche*, is common in other Americanisms such as *caliche* and *boliche*. This is the reason why it is spelled *cebiche*, although it is also accepted with *s* and *v* (*seviche*).

On the other hand, in the online dictionary (2025) of the Peruvian Academy of Language, *cebiche* and *ceviche* are listed as Peruvianisms. Meanwhile, according to Javier Pulgar Vidal (Guargüero, 2023), the word comes from the Quechua term



Figure 1. Cebiche, ceviche, sevicehe o sebiche dishes

Note: Taken from Minaya, 2025

siwichi, meaning fresh or tender fish. This Quechua term changed through phonetic evolution, since for Iberians and Spanish speakers in general, Quechua or any foreign word is read and pronounced according to Spanish pronunciation.

Also, in Guargüero (2023), it is noted that the National Institute of Culture established the spelling *sevicehe*, with ‘s’ and ‘v’, in reference to Ricardo Palma and Juan de Arona, founders of the Peruvian Academy of Language in 1887, and to the writers Manuel Atanasio Fuentes and Carlos Prince. Ariansen (2016) referred to the fact that when English sailors arrived at Peruvian ports, they looked for the typical dish they called “sea beach” (fish on the beach), and in his view, the word comes from that phonetic combination /seabich/, which over time evolved into *sebiche* due to the adaptation from English to Spanish. In the same publication, historian Juan José Vega explains that the origin of the word *sevicehe* comes from the Arabic word *sibech*, meaning acidic food.

Other words, such as *restaurante*, are an adaptation of the French word *restaurant*, used since the 16th century to designate food that restores (Infobae, 2022). Pronunciation changes occur through lan-

guage contact. For example, *pacae*, recorded in the RAE dictionary (2024) with that pronunciation, is pronounced by most Peruvians as /pakay/, derived from the Quechua word *pakay* or *paqay*, meaning “to hide,” according to Martha Hildebrandt (2018). In other words, they speak Quechua without realizing it. Similarly, *quinoa* is the Spanish adaptation of the Quechua word *quinua*.

That is, words not native to Spanish first undergo alterations in pronunciation and later in its writing. Most likely, the Quechua term *siwichi* /sibichi/ over time became *cebiche* / *sebiche*, or *sea beach* / *seabich*/ evolved into *cebiche* / *sebiche*, due to the cultural fusion that has occurred and continues in Peru.

Finally, it is based on the principle that writing is merely the representation, according to established conventions, of the oral form of a language. Writing only approximates speech and pronunciation; it is not an exact reflection. This premise underlies the analysis of the spelling of *cebiche*, *ceviche*, *sebiche*, or *sevicehe*.

In Spanish pronunciation, syllabication is used to first distinguish vowel and consonant combinations and second to locate the stressed syllable, which can affect pronunciation and sometimes meaning.

The Real Academia Española (2019), in its *Libro de estilo*, notes that in most of the Hispanic world, there is no distinction between the consonants /s/ and /z/, and words written with s or with z or c (+ e, i) are pronounced /s/. However, for orthographic reasons, some words are “written with the letter c before e or i to represent the phoneme /s/ (with the [s] sound for those who sesean)” (Real Academia Española, 2019). This explains why c combined with e is pronounced /se/.

Regarding the pronunciation of v, the Real Academia Española (2019) notes that “there is no difference in Spanish pronunciation between the letters b and v. Both now represent the voiced bilabial phoneme /b/.” Therefore, vi or bi are always pronounced /bi/.

As for spelling, the type of fish, its condition, or its origin, as well as the seafood used, does not determine how this emblematic Peruvian dish is prepared, whether served from a street cart, a small eatery (*huarique*), or a luxury restaurant, nor the education level of those presenting the menu. Cebiche, ceviche, sebiche, or seviceh will always sound the same: /se-biche/. Historically, seviceh represents Peruvian identity more closely, although the other forms are now accepted by both the Academy and popular speech.

Finally, with the advent of the Internet in its various forms, language use is rapidly changing, particularly among young people, who prioritize communication over strict adherence to norms. If the message is understood, that is sufficient. At the same time, the Real Academia continues to accept emerging or altered terms. In this case, cebiche, ceviche, sebiche, or seviceh is

conceptually clear, while the spelling becomes secondary for diners, cooks, and restaurant owners.

History

It is difficult to determine the exact origin of the dish, although history and logic place its origin in the north of what is now Peru. After the Spanish divided on the *Isla del Gallo*, today the Bay of Tumaco in Colombia, to seek fortune and expand the Spanish crown's domain, Pizarro and a group of twelve to fourteen men headed south across the continent, as Durwin (2023) records: “On this side you go to Panama, to be poor; on this other, to Peru, to be rich; let any good Castilian choose what best suits him.”

While the Spanish invaded the subcontinent from the north, the Inca Empire was engaged in an internal war between Huascar and Atahualpa over the succession of the Inca throne left by Huayna Capac, who had initiated the empire's northern expansion. Any traveler in Peru will find that the most imposing Inca constructions are in the south, with few in the north.

This group of conquistadors did not arrive only with horses and weapons; they also brought provisions and various tools necessary to survive in unfamiliar lands. It is not the purpose here to describe all of them, only to highlight what is relevant for this research—specifically the lemon, a citrus fruit incorporated into the Iberian diet after eight centuries of conquest of the peninsula by Arab, Syrian, and Berber Muslims, which began in 711 and ended in early 1492 (Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2025). The case of the lemon deserves separate study, since the lemons brought by the Spanish, when planted and

harvested in northern Peru, specifically in what is now Piura, produced a new variety: *Citrus latifolia*, known as the Persian lime, or Peruvian lime.

By that time, in the northern coast of the empire—today Tumbes, Piura, and Lambayeque—there was a dish consumed by local fishermen made with pieces of fish whose main purpose was not for human consumption but as bait to catch larger fish. To this, the juice of tumbo (*Passiflora mollissima*), a citrus fruit that grows in the Andes, was added, and it gradually began to be consumed. As Crisólogo (2017) noted, chili, already in use for centuries—as evidenced by remains found in Guitarrero, Yungay, Ancash, dating back 8,000 years—was added to those fish pieces with tumbo juice.

The Spanish also brought onions, commonly consumed across Europe, which over time were added to cebiche, ceviche, sebiche, or seviceh. From a dish of fish and seafood marinated in citrus, other ingredients were later added: onion, zarandaja, yucca, fried plantains (*chifles*), and boiled corn (*choclo sancochado*). Further north,

in Ecuador, tomato was added; in central Peru, it is combined with *papa a la huancaína*; in Lima, varieties range from the classic fish-only version to combinations of fish and seafood, sometimes fried in oil and coated with flour. Other additions include ice, evaporated milk, lettuce, seaweed, and toasted Andean corn. In short, there is as much variety in the dish as there is creativity among those who prepare it.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the sound and pronunciation of the word, in its four written forms, do not vary, custom has led to its spelling as cebiche, ceviche, sebiche, or seviceh, and conceptually it does not cause confusion.

The Real Academia Española, in its various dictionaries and documents, recognizes all four spellings: cebiche, ceviche, sebiche, or seviceh.

The origin of the word will continue to be discussed—whether from the Quechua *siwichi*, the English sea beach, or the Arabic *sibech*—all phonetically similar, which over time have merged in pronunciation /sebiche/ and evolved in spelling to cebiche, ceviche, sebiche, or seviceh.

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