

Discovering Cuenca: The Route Of Mills & Bakeries

written by [Fundacion Municipal Turismo Cuenca](#) April 5, 2017



Culinary Cultural Heritage

According to the UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted in Paris in 2003, intangible cultural heritage refers to uses, representation, expressions, knowledge and techniques, which communities recognize as part of their identity. It is transmitted from generation to generation, constantly recreating itself for groups as a function of its surroundings, interacting with nature and its history. For UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage is at the same time traditional and contemporary...it constitutes living heritage.

Safeguarding intangible heritage is important in the measure that it promotes respect for cultural diversity, promotes human creativity, strengthens identity and continuity, and contributes to social cohesion.

According to this convention, five contexts exist which comprise this type of heritage. One of them refers to knowledge and uses related to nature and the universe, which includes a series of wisdom, techniques, competences, practices and representations, that communities have created in their interaction with the natural environment. Corresponding to this context, among others, is gastronomy, as it reflects the enormous diversity of knowledge, habits, products and beliefs, which are the result of human creativity.

In this context, an important action and safeguard is the creation of a tourist product, which includes creation of a mills and bakery route and continued support for the Bread Festival, initiated by the Sisters of the Order of Our Lady of the Conception Museum. It not only seeks to recover Cuenca's old recipes of traditional bread making for the enjoyment of locals and tourists. It also seeks to contribute to neighborhood solidarity and to strengthening the city's cultural identity in a city where craft occupations have played a fundamental role from

the moment of its founding and which are reflected until today in the urban physiognomy, very closely related to the craft occupations of its inhabitants.

The History Of Gristmills And Bread-Making In Cuenca

The arrival of wheat to what is now Ecuador in the decade of the 30s of the 16th century is attributed to Brother Jodoco Ricke, a Franciscan, who five years later was also in the area of the Cañaris.

Soon growing wheat began above all in areas of Cañar. These landowners, just as the gristmill owners, became known in Cuenca as wheat lords and gristmill lords.

The early cultivation also explains why just a few years later the first gristmill was installed in the future town before it was founded in 1557. The owner was Rodrigo Nuñez de Bonilla, an agent of the crown and miller who arrived from Quito.

Milling grain in the town of Cuenca during the colonial period was done along a section of the left bank of the *Tomebamba* River, especially in two areas: *Todos Santos* and *El Vado*. This situation would last until the beginning of the 20th century.

Making bread with wheat flour began at the same time as the beginnings of the colonial city of Cuenca. In this atmosphere and in these times, it is presumed that the first establishments for making bread were in homes, without persons identifying themselves as bakers. In any event, from the first third of the 17th century, the first stores that sold bread exclusively appeared in the *Todos Santos* area. Not in vain did this semi-urban section become known for the city's gristmills.

At times it is possible to be informed of certain details with respect to the tools that were available in homes, for example, when one finds some data that shows the following: troughs, planks to set out bread, baskets to carry bread to the market for sale, sieves with their troughs for sifting flour; or data about the type of foodstuffs that were prepared for sale, as in the case of the Indian women who prepared *alfajores* and "*rosquetas*" in the convent of the *Conceptas* in the second decade of the 17th century under the watchful eye of Sister Doña Santa Lucia, a member of this community.

These goodies were given to an intermediary, Diego Diez Franco, for him to sell. In any event the importance of bread was such that in the 18th century, a bread market, known as *Tandacatu*, had formed just to the east of San Sebastian.

The 19th century better illustrates this branch of food crafts. On the one hand, there are references to persons who can be perfectly identified by their work. In any event it appears to be a constant that women should perform this function, a situation which would not become the exception in Cuenca until the beginnings of the 19th century, when men came to be included.

In addition it is noteworthy that all during this period, craftsmen in bread-making in Cuenca did not associate themselves, for example, in a professional guild, such as occurred in the nearby city of Azogues, where at the close of the last century in question, bakers requested that rules be drafted for their activity, a clear demonstration of how they came to identify themselves, as well as a demonstration of their self-esteem.

All during their history, female and male bakers of Cuenca have firmly established their presence in different ways, especially in the traditional quarters of the city: *Todos los Santos* and *El Vado*, giving rise to certain chronicles. And in the sphere of local music, Cuenca's bakers have merited songs dedicated to them.

Diego Arteaga

“Fátima Industries” Chocolate Mill

This family business offers one the possibility to discover the traditional process to obtain one of the products most desired by locals and foreigners alike: pure dark chocolate, the base for preparing innumerable exquisite recipes.



Don Luis Honorato Peralta Piedra started the business in 1942 to answer a need the locals had at the time for a cacao mill in the city. As a skillful craftsman who had distinguished himself in branches such as brass work, jewelry making, and carpentry, it was not difficult for him to design his own machinery, using materials such as wood and brass. He built roasters, mills and fans, which at first were completely hand driven. These picturesque machines continue to function in the factory until today, although some have now been adapted to run on electricity, allowing greater processing speed.

Catalina Peralta, the daughter of Luis Honorato Peralta, now manages her deceased father’s business. She explains that cacao is obtained from different places on the coast, such as Machala, La Troncal and Manabi. The first step in the process is selecting the beans, choosing only the best quality. Then the beans are roasted, crushed and winnowed in order to completely remove the husks. Finally the pieces of bean are ground to obtain the prized liquid, which after cooling is poured into molds or onto “*achira*” leaves (a large-leafed plant of the *cannaceae* family), depending on the desired presentation of the final product.

Fatima Industries’ chocolate is 100% natural and is sold in different markets, stores and supermarkets of the region. In addition to discovering close up all the processes for making chocolate, tourists who visit the factory can sample it and confirm its delicious flavor and aroma.

Address: El Batan 4-56 between El Oro and Remigio Tamariz

Telephone: 288-0109 / 099-071-8782

Hours: Monday to Friday from 9h00 to 16h00 (preferably with a prior appointment)

Price of the visit: \$3.00 USD per person (includes sampling)

Todos Santos Heritage Complex



The Order of the Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary was founded in Cuenca in 1892 by Father Julio Maria Matovelle. Since then the nuns of this congregation have dedicated their lives and efforts to serving the most unprotected children through education. Their convent functions beside the emblematic *Todos Santos* church, built between 1820 and 1924 on the site where a ceremonial “*Usno*” of the Incas had existed and where later the city’s first hermitage was built. Now the church and part of the convent of the Oblate Sisters form part of the “*Todos Santos*” Heritage Complex. These spaces were restored thanks to the aid of the Municipality of Cuenca and other organizations and private institutions, which recognized their authentic cultural treasures, such as the decorative elements of the temple and its bell tower, the gardens and heritage trees, the convent’s old laundry area, and of course, the oldest wood-fired oven in Cuenca, where delicious traditional breads are made, such as knees of Christ, *las costras*, *las cholos*, *los mestizos*, ground corn kernel bread, etc.

The Oblate Sisters have played a fundamental role in the history of the *Todos Santos* quarter of the city. In their desire to obtain resources to educate the children in their care, they dedicated themselves to baking, among other work, developing an authentic culinary legacy that today is part of the identity of this quarter. In fact, some of the bakers of the quarter learned the trade after having worked for the sisters making bread.

The bakery is now open to the public, and visitors can discover the secrets to prepare the *Cuencanos*’ authentic bread and exquisite traditional sweets, such as *quesadillas*, *alfajores*, truffles and cookies. Also part of the Heritage Complex are the “*Gastro Todosantos*” restaurant, an art gallery, a river overlook, an event hall and the “*Puro Café*” coffee shop. There are guided tours of these areas.

Address: Calle Larga y Vargas Machuca

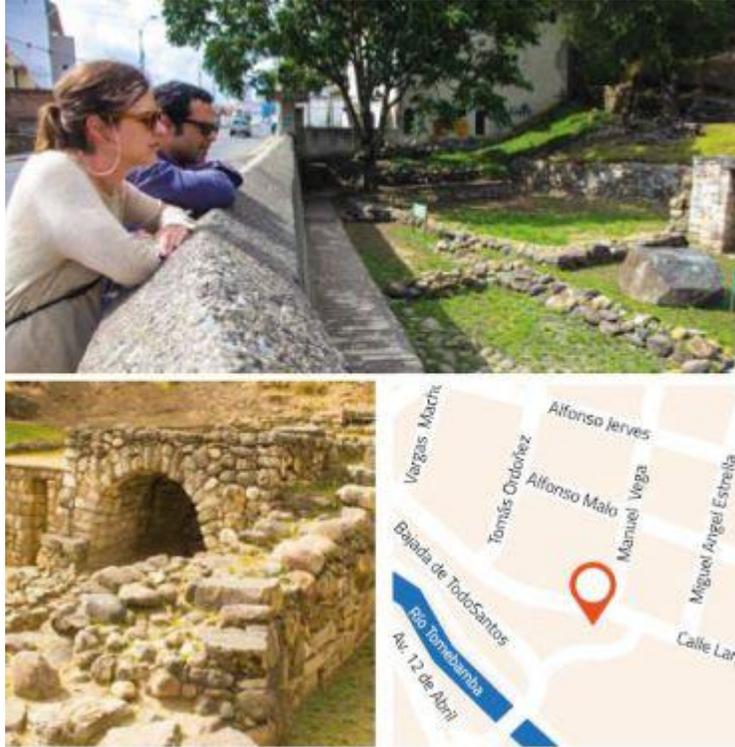
Telephone: 2839100

Hours: Tuesday to Saturday from 8h30 to 17h00

Price of the visit: 0.50 USD for children / 1.50 USD for students / 2 USD for adults and foreign visitors

The Todos Santos Gristmills (Manuel Agustin Landivar Museum)

On the site corresponding to the *Todos Santos* archaeological complex, the Spaniard Rodrigo Nuñez de Bonilla, one of the first to arrive in these territories, constructed a gristmill in the year 1536 to process wheat. The mill's



structure consisted of a chamber in which there was a wheel in the form of a propeller. An aqueduct that began from higher ground channeled the water that powered the mechanism to grind the grain. This mill was constructed using stone lintels of Incan origin, possibly taken from *Pumapungo*.

Later other gristmills were constructed in the same place, which from 1600 became the property of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. Their administrator, Presbyter Martin Marchan, constructed for them a chamber with a drive wheel, which was installed in a room with a wide half-barrel vault.

The canal that fed water to the gristmills was definitively suspended in 1929 to permit construction of the sewage system for Calle Larga. Consequently the gristmills were closed and remained forgotten for a long time until 1972, when the Estrella family discovered the archaeological site while excavating for the foundations of a home. Now this site is under the administration of the Azuay Branch of the Ecuadorian House of Culture, through the Manuel Agustin Landívar Museum.

Address: Calle Larga and Manuel Vega

Telephones: 282-1177 / 099-552-0186

Hours: Tuesday to Friday from 10h00 to 18h30 and Saturdays from 10h00 to 14h00.

Price of the visit: Admission is free.

The “Todos Santos” Traditional Bakery



In one of the most picturesque places of the *Todos Santos* quarter, one finds this successful business that for more than 20 years has produced bread using craft methods. The heart of this locale is the great wood-burning oven, which burns continuously. Here indefatigable bakers knead and bake more than fifteen varieties of bread. The oven's structure was built using a mixture of materials that includes brick, yellow earth, syrup, glass, bones and other materials, which help to maintain the right temperature.

Augusto Tenemasa, proprietor of the business, explains that traditional recipes are used to this day because clients request them the most. Although flour comes prepared by different industrial mills, chemical ingredients that can be prejudicial to health are excluded from the bread's preparation.

A few meters from this locale one finds small businesses, which delight tourists and locals with traditional delicacies they still prepare, such as "Chilean apple" jelly, figs in syrup, *humitas* and ground corn or corn flour tortillas.

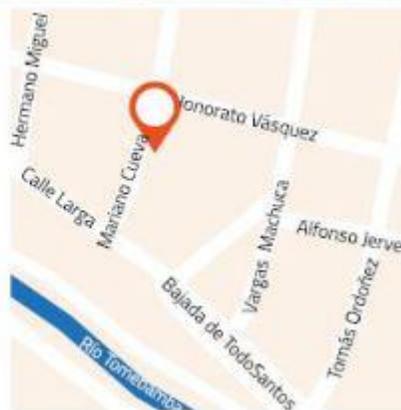
Address: Mariano Cueva 4-101 between Honorato Vazquez and Calle Larga.

Telephone: 282-5989

Hours: Monday to Saturday from 7h00 to 20h30.

Price of the visit: A voluntary contribution is suggested.

“Traditional Wood-Fired Oven Bread” Bakery



History and tradition are the two words that

define this business, which in spite of the passage of time, has been able to sustain the difficult but satisfying trade of baking bread in a wood-fired oven. The proprietor, Angel Domingo Tenemasa Mendieta, relates that everything he knows today he learned from his benefactor, Doña Mercedes Velez, a famous baker, who took Angel in when he was still a child.

The bakery has one of the oldest wood-fired ovens of the city, which has a base of 1.3 meters, constructed in the following manner:

- A layer of iron of 10cm
- A layer of cattle bones of 30cm
- A layer of broken glass of 30cm
- A layer of rock salt of 20cm
- A layer of bricks

The oven is heated to a temperature of 180 degrees centigrade using eucalyptus wood, obtained from places where wood is prepared for home construction. Small bread rolls take 15 to 20 minutes to bake, while large loaves require approximately 40 minutes. Traditional recipes are used to make *cholas*, *gusanitos de queso*, *rositas de huevo*, *mestizos*, *costras*, corn bread, and shortening cookies, among others.

Address: Mariano Cueva 4-90 between Honorato Vazquez and Calle Larga

Telephone: 282-6173

Hours: Monday to Saturday from 7h00 to 20h30.

Price of the visit: A voluntary contribution is suggested.



The Mentidero Bakery

Using ingredients of the highest quality, this bakery makes a delicious bread with Argentine recipes. The traditional *Cuencano* touch comes from the wood-fired oven, whose design is based on local construction techniques that employ materials such as adobe, refractory brick, rock salt, sand, bone, steel and glass.

Visitors to the bakery have the opportunity to observe the process by which delicious recipes are prepared, such as Argentine peasant bread, flavored bread, focaccias, empanadas, apple crumble, etc. In addition, one can sample bread recently taken from the oven with delicious organic coffee from Loja. Complements to this establishment are the “Marea” pizza parlor that functions at night, plus occasional cooking classes, tastings and culinary discussions. Tourists and families can assemble and bake their own pizzas on Sundays.

Address: Hermano Miguel 4-79 and Honorato Vazquez

Telephone: 282-7827 Ext. 102

Hours: Monday to Friday from 8h00 to 15h00 and from 16h00 to 1800; Saturdays and Sundays from 8h00 to 15h00

Price of the visit: A voluntary contribution is suggested.

Sisters Of The Conception Museum



There is historical data indicating that from colonial times the sisters of the Order of the Immaculate Conception engaged in baking. According to research by the historian Diego Arteaga, it is known that in this convent in 1626, some Indian women prepared *alfajores* and *rosquetas* under the supervision of Sister Doña Maria de Santa Lucia. These foods were delivered to an intermediary named Diego Diez Franco to be marketed.

Although the sisters do not prepare bread for sale nowadays, they still make bread for their own use. The traditional recipes, which use natural ingredients, are maintained. The utensils employed are rudimentary, and one can still find large wooden troughs and wood-fired ovens in the convent's kitchens

In the Sisters of the Conception Museum, a room has been arranged to exhibit photographs, attesting to the intense culinary labor of the nuns, who in addition to bread, prepare products such as *agua de "pitimas"* (a beverage made with valerian, carnation petals and rose petals) and *quesadillas*, the only products the nuns currently sell to the public through the Museum.

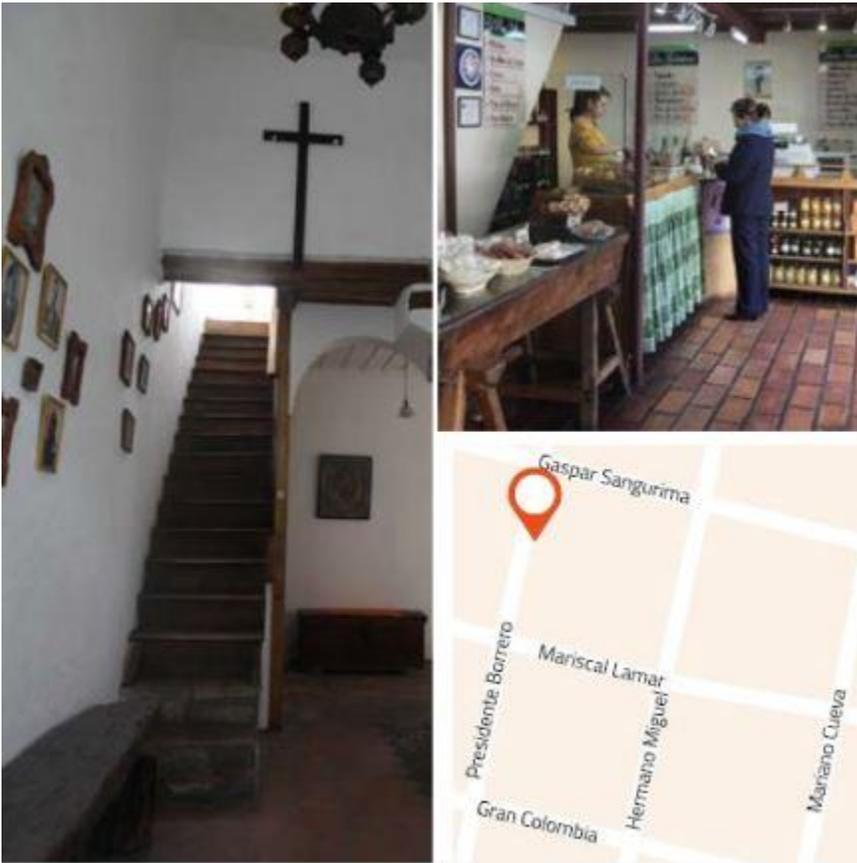
Address: Hermano Miguel 6-33 and Juan Jaramillo

Hours: Monday to Friday from 09h00 and 18h30; Saturdays from 10h00 to 13h00

Telephone: 283-0625

Price of the visit: students \$1.50 USD / university students and senior citizens \$2.50 USD / national and foreign visitors \$3.50

“El Pan De Las Villacís” Bakery



“El Pan de las Villacís” is much more than a

bakery: it is a family tradition that began more than 120 years ago with Doña Alegria Villacis, a skillful baker who learned the secrets of her trade when she worked at one time for the celebrated Cuencan matron, Hortensia Mata. Her descendants, grandchildren and great grandchildren, continued the business, always with the promise to offer the public natural products of excellent quality.

The bakery still functions in the almost 200-year-old family home, which preserves the characteristic charm of popular colonial-type buildings: tile roofs, adobe walls, internal patios and picturesque nooks decorated with family heirlooms. In one of the rooms at the back of the house, one finds the ancient wood-fired oven. Although nowadays it is no longer used every day, it still functions using traditional methods, which include lighting the wood to heat the oven and removing of ashes with a broom made of herbs.

The Villacises’ bread is known by all Cuencans for its exquisite flavor and as a healthful product, for the natural ingredients used in its preparation. Traditional recipes are used, which have not varied at all in spite of the passage of time. In this magical place, where time seems to have stood still, other products in addition to bread are prepared and sold, such as roasted coffee beans, cordials (sugar cane liquor with macerated fruits and herbs), kneaded cheese, fruit jams, handmade candy, milk caramel, etc.

Address: Antonio Borrero 12-54 and Gaspar Sangurima
Telephone: 282-7914 / 099-303-2350
Hours: Monday to Saturday from 7h30 to 19h00
Price of the visit: A voluntary contribution is suggested.

Feature Photo Credit: John Keeble

https://www.gringotree.com/gristmills-bread-route/?utm_source=GringoTree&utm_campaign=25768e11f8-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_04_05&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_abb51ee8d2-25768e11f8-11118241