



*Criollo*, the Argentine barbecue

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#### Dinner in Buenos Aires

The finest beef in the world is from Argentina, and the very best Argentine steaks are found in the capital city of Buenos Aires. There are countless barbecue bistros known as *parillas*; how can I choose from so many? An Argentine friend tells me to “Eat at a place with a cow out front. Those are all good.”

A cow in front. Right.

Walking along the widest street in the world, the Avenue of the 9<sup>th</sup> of July, I turn onto Lavalle pedestrian mall. And sure enough, on my left I see a cow. A brown-and-white stuffed cow, standing beside a picture window, calling attention to a *parilla* named La Estancia. But the best advertisement for La Estancia isn't the cow, it's the gargantuan man cooking in the picture window. Here is a man who clearly knows how to eat; surely he would not be seen cooking in an establishment of less than the highest quality.

With his low-crowned black hat, his plain white blouse and colorful scarf, the man is dressed like a professional gaucho. On his feet are the *botas* of the horseman of the pampas, worn as much to show superiority to earthbound mortals as to control the stirrups. The wide black belt that supports his extravagant belly has—yes—silver conchos.

When this fat gaucho dies, it will not be due to a fall from a horse; there is no physical possibility that he could ever mount one in the first place. And if a

remuda saw him coming, they would all run wild-eyed to the opposite end of the corral, each one fighting for the position farthest from the approaching load. No, my gaucho will eventually be a victim of the glutton's curse, constriction of the arteries.

The cook sweats profusely in the heat as he waddles between the open fire of the *criollo* and the rotating grill of the *asador*. His practiced eye evaluates the impaled carcasses. There are no minuscule adjustments, no nervous repositionings to turn the meat and cook it just so. This expert has placed each piece perfectly so that it requires only one turn to equally expose the other side to the fire.

I enter La Estancia in eager anticipation. The place is almost empty because it's 8:30 PM, a ridiculously early hour for dinner in Buenos Aires. I hold up a single finger and am escorted to an excellent table with a view of the barbecue. The waiter comes. He is almost as old as my father, but the devaluation of Argentine currency has struck hardest at the elderly; everyone who can find a job must work. And many in this proud country cannot find even the most menial employment.

I mix my *turista* Spanish with English. "I don't want too much. *No tengo mucho hambre esta tardé*. How big is this steak, the house special?"

The waiter holds his thumb and forefinger as far apart as the width of a nice New York strip, a little less than three inches.

"*Bueno*," I said shaking my head with relief, "*Ta bien*." I'm tired of telling waiters that I'm not hungry (by Argentine standards) and still having them bring me a steak the size of a roast.

I order a typical meal, mixed salad with *chorizo* and *morcilla* sausages and *bife de lomo* and a ten-year-old *vino tinto* from Mendoza to wash it down. All beef with a little roughage: the Old West is alive and well in Argentina.

My waiter brings the wine and sets a small plate of empanadas in front of me as an appetizer. Empanadas are a simple food, but the taste of these is astounding, confirming my faith in the oracles of the stuffed cow and the giant gaucho. Then come the salad and the sausages, perfect point and counterpoint.

But when the steak arrives, it turns out to be a hunk of beef large enough for a family of four. Or maybe six. I point to the meat, shake my head and open my arms in protest. The waiter shrugs and holds thumb and forefinger a little wider than before, but this time the separation is vertical. I sigh in defeat. Bait-and-switch wins again.

I take some comfort in the fact that this colossal portion of beef is nonetheless healthy. The *bife* of Argentina could pass muster in the strictest of lean-meat diets because it has so little marbling. Apparently the cattle run wild on the pampas, eating only the native grasses and never, in the penultimate act of life, being subjected to the ignominy of the feed lot. This makes the beef similar to wild game in both taste and nutrition.

But what a portion! While I know that I can't possibly eat it all, I worry that what I can eat will grow cold before I finish. Fortunately, the Argentines have thought of a solution: the waiter brings my own little personal hibachi with a sizzling metal plate to keep half of my steak hot. I spend a pleasant hour exercising my jaws and delighting my palate, working at my impossible quest. Finally, like a defeated wrestler, I wave a hand to the waiter in submission.

He brings the *cuenta* for thirty-eight pesos and departs with my credit card. When he returns, I face a common problem in Argentina: the tip is included in the price of the meal and there is no blank line to add to the total. It is customary to leave a few pesos in cash to show appreciation for the service, and because of the difficult economic times I would like to give him a large *propina*

of fifteen per cent, or six pesos. But I have only a fifty and a two; one is too much and the other too little. I sign the invoice and explain my problem to the waiter. He breathes a sigh of relief that I, an *extranjero*, am aware of his extra due. He takes the fifty-peso note and returns with two twenties and a ten. I still have a problem. The waiter knows it.

Actually, the decision is easy. I leave the ten-peso note on the plate with the cuenta, thank the waiter graciously, and smilingly bid him *buenas noches*. I have had two excellent sausages and a pound and a half of the finest beef in the world, plus a half-liter bottle of aged cabernet sauvignon. All for thirteen US dollars. The tip was a ridiculous three dollars and fifty cents, but the waiter gives me a look of sheer gratitude. We both understand the situation exactly.

I wave farewell to the gaucho in the window as I walk out onto Lavalle with a plastic bag containing my six ounces of prime Argentine beef. I have to walk almost two blocks, an unusual distance, to find what I'm looking for. A young man sits on a stoop searching patiently through bags of garbage. He removes paper and puts it into a pile to sell for recycling. Someone else has already taken the cans and bottles. I approach him and he looks up listlessly.

"Señor," I say quietly with a slight bow. "*Le gusta el bife de lomo?*" I hold out the bag and he accepts the still-warm beef appreciatively but without a word. He sets it aside with the salvaged paper; rather than eating it himself, he will take it home to the family. He returns to digging through the trash.

I turn back toward my hotel and walk away. It is raining, and my face is wet but also salty. I cry for you, Argentina.

Submitted by Kevin Allison, March 22, 2023

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