



ABOVE: Argentinian beef is cooked on a parrilla, which literally translates as grill. But this is no ordinary grill. And it's no ordinary beef, either...

Photograph by Stuart Davey/Getty

WHAT'S YOUR BEEF?

MAIN COURSE 🍴 🍷 🍽️

There's no mystery when it comes to Argentina's finest dish. **Neil Davey** travels to Buenos Aires and learns that the secret to a good steak is, quite simply, good steak



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Sucre restaurant serves steak with fusion flavours; Learn to cook local specialties at El Arte de Amasar; Buenos Aires at night

marinating, no slow-cooking, no smoking, no basting in sauce. What's on the plate is barely diluted, well-aged cow in all its beefy glory.

The philosophy also extends – pretty much – to every other dish we try in Buenos Aires. There's a delightfully straightforward, snobbery-free attitude to food at all levels, and what appears to be a very happy adoption of international cuisines and restaurants. Some get their own unique Argentinean twist – most notably pizza, which here has around a 70:30 cheese:bread ratio that is, obviously, utterly delicious – but, generally, the mantra is “less is more.”

“Argentina has an abundance of cheap and good ingredients,” explains chef Saul Gerson. “You don't have to work too much to have a decent meal.” Saul runs El Arte de Amasar (elartedeamasar.com), a cookery school, from his home in Buenos Aires. “I'm always trying to make the best meal out of the fewest ingredients,” he explains, and has a particular bias towards making dishes lighter and healthier but – are you reading, Deliciously Ella et al? – without compromising the true flavour. We're there to make *empanadas*, a dish that Saul points out is “traditionally said to be eaten with the legs apart because they drip so much fat.” His version still uses lard in the dough – “lard is the best,” he says – just less of it.

Photograph (steak) by Erika Rojas; (city) Getty

THERE'S A DELIGHTFULLY SNOBBERY-FREE ATTITUDE TO FOOD AT ALL LEVELS IN BUENOS AIRES

The resulting pastry is superb, soft, light, but with texture and density, although the comparative healthiness of the results is slightly undermined by their moreish nature – I have to push the plate out of arm's reach after inhaling four – but at least our clothing is never under threat.

Perhaps the greatest lesson in simplicity though comes in Mendoza at 1884, Francis



Mallmann's celebrated restaurant. Before the Netflix *Chef's Table* documentary gave me a full-blown man-crush, I already had a moderate obsession with Mallmann since I picked up a copy of his recipe book *Seven Fires* a few years ago as part of my research for another story.

The catch with *Seven Fires* is that, aside from sandwiches and side dishes (which >

THERE'S A WELL-CIRCULATED 'factoid' that Argentinians consume 70kg of meat per head every year. It's the sort of thing that sounds apocryphal. I mean, 70kg? That's 154lbs. That's 11 stone of meat. That's, what, two Justin Biebers?

It can't be true, you think. And then you sit down to lunch in Buenos Aires and you start to see that, actually, it's very, very possible.

Having flown overnight, we took the advice of friends who are seasoned annual visitors to Buenos Aires: namely drop your bags, have a shower and go straight out for lunch at La Cabrera, one of the city's most celebrated *parrillas* (a traditional restaurant with a charcoal grill). My wife ordered the *ojo* (rib eye), I ordered the *lomo* – tenderloin, basically, a cut we don't really offer in the UK, but I'm told it's sort of sirloin-meets-fillet.

I don't recall being asked for a cooking preference, but that could be hazy, jet-lagged memory, or it could be that, well, this is a country that simply knows steak. We had

found some instructions on ordering in a guide book but swiftly adapted them thus: “If you don't specify, your steak will be cooked *a punto* (medium). To get it pink on the inside ask for *jugoso* (medium rare). *Vuelta y vuelta* or *poco cocido* means rare, and “well done” will, we suspect, get you deported.

Regardless, what arrived was superbly cooked: a deep, caramelised-rather-than-charred brown on the outside, deep purple within. It was also about an inch deep and perhaps five inches in diameter. Here's the thing though: there were *four* such slabs of beautifully cooked cow in the portion. Welcome then to Argentina, where suddenly 70kgs per capita seems like it might be a bit of an understatement.

The thing that really strikes home though? That simplicity. Yes, La Cabrera's USP is that everything comes with a vast array of side dishes, from creamed corn to roasted garlic, to salads, mashed aubergines and some 14 other tiny bowls of things. But the meat? Salted and grilled. That's it. There's no

WHERE TO EAT IN BUENOS AIRES

La Cabrera

Meat, meat and more meat, great wines and a table-filling selection of complimentary side dishes. If you can't get into the original one, relax: the sister restaurant is ten doors away. lacabrera.com.ar

La Brigada

One of the city's most famous *parrillas* and with good reason. Heavily football-themed, constantly heaving, and where the waiters will nonchalantly pull off the place's signature move of cutting your steak with a spoon. parrillalabrigada.com.ar

Parrilla Don Julio

If you haven't booked, you will probably have to queue but that in itself is part of the fun: staff will ply you with

glasses of sparkling wine and the occasional meaty treat while you wait. Home to the richest and best *morcilla* we found. parrillodonjulio.com.ar

Resto

A tiny spot with a choice of set menus. While dishes are creative and beautifully presented, chef Guido Tassi subscribes to the 'less is more' philosophy, allowing each ingredient its chance to sing. Montevideo 938; +54 11 4816 6711

Sucre

The first restaurant of its kind in Buenos Aires, apparently, the menu blends influences from Italy, Spain, Japan and Peru as well as home turf. sucrerestaurant.com.ar

Brasserie Petanque

Petanque feels like a brasserie that's been airlifted directly from rural France. Think French classics made with quality local produce – steak tartare is, inevitably, a knockout – and the occasional Argentine

twist, such as *bondiola*: slow cooked pork in a balsamic sauce. brasseriepetanque.com

Casa Vittoria

This small restaurant sits somewhere between Italy and Spain in its influence – expect bruschetta, garlic-heavy, exquisitely fried prawns, and other tapas-style dishes. Francisco de Vittoria 2363; +54 11 4807-6477

Pizzeria Banchemo

Legend has it that the *fugazetta* originates at Pizzeria Banchemo. Make of that what you will, but the queues speak for themselves. Suárez 396; +54 11 4301-1406

The Parrillas, Puerto Madero

Need a late night sandwich? Head to Puerto Madero and the road alongside the Costanera ecological reserve where you'll find *parrilla* huts dotting the landscape, providing fixes of *choripan* – basically, a sausage sandwich that should be eaten dripping in chimichurri. Look for queues, a clear indicator of quality.





SEVEN THINGS YOU MUST EAT IN BUENOS AIRES

Steak

But then you knew that, right?

Empanadas

Think smaller pasties, with a finer, shorter pastry. *De carne* are stuffed with spiced beef and egg, *queso cebolla* with cheese and onion.

Dulce de leche

You'll find this classic rich caramel (pictured left, in pancakes)

everywhere. Supermarkets sell it in tubs and jars, ice cream parlours (*heladerías*) have swathes of their menus dedicated to variations on the theme, and you'll also find it in...

Alfajores

Basically two round biscuits with a dulce de leche filling, sometimes dipped in chocolate, and available pretty much anywhere you'd expect to buy a snack. The Cachafaz brand is pretty ubiquitous, but I preferred the ones from Havana, a chain you'll find everywhere from high street to Buenos Aires airport.

Pizza

Comes with a thicker bread base than you'll be used to but even then, it will still be utterly swamped in squidgy melted cheese. The Argentine classic is the *fugazetta* – all of the above plus a thin layer of onions. Like the chefs kept telling me, proof that less is definitely more.

Helado

A gelato-style ice-cream, proving that the Italian influence also extends to dessert. There are ice cream shops – chains, and independents – all across Buenos Aires, my favourite of which was Nicolo Helado in Palermo.

Medialunas

Forget the cronut, this is the croissant variation you want. Smaller, stickier, sweeter... Available from *panaderías* and in cafes everywhere.



are, admittedly, also excellent), there's barely a handful of recipes you can make in a second floor flat that doesn't have a balcony. I mean I've asked the people downstairs if they'd mind a fire pit in their ceiling but they don't want to know, the inconsiderate sods...

To appreciate Mallmann's vision and dedication, you need to see it on home soil. And, while the man himself tends to focus on larger-scale events these days, he's left 1884 in the very capable hands of Dan Alterman, a hospitable man who probably soon regrets telling me I can hang out around the cooking area for as long as I want.

"It's not 'seven fires' here," explains Dan with a grin, "it's 'three. We do the 'seven fires' thing elsewhere for bigger dinner parties and celebrations but here, we're a restaurant, so we have to watch the economics."

Things may be scaled down but oh, the three they have... On the right is a hugely impressive wood-fired oven, on the left a classic parrilla (alongside a huge stack of

charcoal that is gradually called into service throughout the night) and, in front, a pit that's: a) Mallmann's own invention; and b) the single sexiest piece of cooking kit I have ever seen. There are grill sections, there are hotplates, there are logs burning in the centre and a shelf some six feet above the fire – "we butcher the evening's meat in the afternoon and rest it on that," Dan reveals, "so that the fat picks up a little smoke." Sauces bubble away, potatoes are kept warm in a thyme-heavy, wine-based sauce and, over a few burning charcoals brought over from the parrilla, there's a selection of vibrant but very charred vegetables that will shortly have me questioning much of what I thought I knew about cooking. Or, indeed, overcooking. The star, though is, of course, the beef.

"Argentine cuisine is very much influenced by immigrants," explains Dan, "especially from Spain and Italy, but for grilling we take our own influence, from the *gauchos*. It's that strong connection with fire – whenever there's a fire you stare at it, and you're drawn close to it.

Dan echoes Saul's earlier statement that simplicity is the key. "I always say the hardest part of my job is finding good ingredients" explains Dan, "because the way we grill is also influenced by the quality of the meat. We don't need to brine it for days to make it tender or tasty. It already is."

There is no great secret then to grilling the Argentinean way. You could say less is more, and you'd be right. I just prefer the way Dan puts it. "It's meat, salt, fire and time," says Dan. "You don't need anything else." 🍴

ABOVE: A recipe for success – meat, heat, and a couple of potatoes thrown in for good measure... THIS PIC: Buenos Aires tastes good, and looks good too.

