

ARGENTINA

THE CULINARY HIGHLIGHTS AND CULTURAL CURIOSITIES OF A VAST AND VARIED LAND

My first visit to Argentina was eight years ago – to marry the man who is now the father of our three children. I had travelled South America far and wide and thought I knew what to expect, but I soon found out that Argentina has its very own peculiarities that range far and beyond the famous tango bars of Buenos Aires. It's a bit of Europe in South America – and a bit of everything you can somehow imagine. Written by **Dini Martínez**.



Buenos Aires city

H

uge variety

The eighth largest country in the world, from north to south it stretches around 3,650 km. No one region resembles any of the others. Salta, all the way up north, has much more in common with neighbouring Bolivia and Paraguay than with any other part of its own country.

The area around Buenos Aires is all hip, busy and thriving from the former Spanish and Italian influences. Only half a century ago, this was a more prosperous place than any European

city or state at the time. Although interesting International Monetary Fund policies, peculiar local politics and other uniquely Argentinean economic phenomena have produced massive changes, reminiscences of the former glory remain.

Past the endless grazing grounds of La Pampas and the Andean rivers, lakes and mountains, heading south through Patagonia eventually takes you to the most southern stop before Antarctica: the infamously melting-away glaciers in the end-of-the-world archipelago of

Tierra del Fuego. Overall, Argentina is one of the safest places to visit in South America and, rocking inflation aside, also one of the easiest.

Culinary highlights

During my second visit to the 'Paris of South America', we had a baby in tow. Jet-lag meant 4 o'clock in the morning strolls through Buenos Aires and a few days when we were the first customers in one of the many cafés where *café con leche* is served with steaming fresh 'media-lunas'. These are the

Argentinean version of croissants, best devoured with 'dulce de leche' – a source of national pride to which the loose translation of 'caramel spread' does not do any justice.

Then, of course, you cannot miss out on Argentina's fine wines. In fact, my husband brought my first ever Malbec to our first date many, many moons ago and therewith settled the deal there and then. The region around Mendoza is particularly world-famous for its delicious grapes. The yearly wine festival takes place in the first week of

March, but several months of preparative festivities lead up to it.

It is probably superfluous to mention the meat for which Argentina is famous. Its beef comes from grass-fed cattle in the massive expanse of the Pampas and Argentineans have perfected the art of 'asado' – the traditional way of barbecuing meat almost as a whole piece. As a vegetarian, I cannot rave about this popular delicacy with any enthusiasm. Every time we visit, my mother-in-law tries unsuccessfully with 'just a bit of

chicken'. Some restaurants in Patagonia will look at you in disbelief – along the lines of: "Really, you just want to eat the bread and butter generally served as a pre-starter?" Buenos Aires is a bit more worldly. I usually get by just fine with a mix of empanadas, grilled veggies and the pizza and pasta reminiscent of Italy.

Cultural peculiarities

Another very common occurrence falls half-way between a culinary and cultural peculiarity: 'mate'. Whether

you are invited to someone's home, to catch up with old or new friends in a park or even to sit at a desk for a stint in the office – day and night you'll see peculiar, pumpkin-shaped containers with metal straws everywhere. Inside these traditional 'mate mugs' you find a strong green tea – *hierba mate* – grown in the tropical parts of Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and southern Brazil. It has diuretic, uplifting and appetite-reducing qualities which is why even in Europe it is becoming increasingly popular. »



European

With over 85 per cent of Argentines stemming from Europe, people are generally proud of their historic links. It has been said that they are a nation of Italians who speak Spanish and think they're English living in Paris. A stroll through the markets of Buenos Aires, with its café culture and restaurants, also provides a good illustration of another popular saying: 'Peruvians originate from the Incas, Mexicans from the Aztecs, Paraguayans from the Guaranies and Argentines from the boats.

Warm greetings

Argentines are warm-hearted people. They like standing close when speaking and have taken informal

greetings to the most up-close-and-personal level. A lively and loud kiss on the cheek is the common greeting amongst friends and acquaintances – even between men. This is often followed by a long hug, a few pats on the back, a short upper back rub and a quick body scan to see how you've been taking care of yourself since your friend has last you. Sometimes a comment about your physical condition follows. My husband sometimes marvels at the efficiency lost in the office just because everyone has to do the round of kisses before even firing up their computer! As a general rule, when in doubt just kiss everyone.

Strangely affectionate

Another way of showing affection amongst friends



Left: Patagonia **Below left:** Tierra del Fuego **Above:** Asado – traditional way of bbq-ing their meat **Bottom:** Media-lunas – Argentinean version of croissants; *Dulce de Leche* – Caramel spread; *Mate*, a strong green tea which is drunk from traditional mate mugs

would in most other countries be considered up-front racist. In Argentina, however, it shows much affection and affinity to call any male friend of darker skin 'negro' (black), Jewish origin 'ruso', blond or fair-haired 'gringo', Italian-named 'tano' and with Asian influence, like my half-Japanese husband, 'chino'. Moreover, men often exchange friendly greetings which can require an expletive or two. Imagine being so happy to see a close friend that you cannot help but curse and exclaim: "How the hell are you doing, you son of a bitch?"

Time-keeping

Punctuality is not paramount in Argentina. In fact, the only social events for which you should arrive on time are the theatre and soccer and polo games. For parties, not arriving 30 to 60 minutes late is considered impolite. In fact, social life tends to happen late, with dinners not uncommonly starting after 10pm and nightclubs not seeing their first guests until well past midnight.

Politics and football

The Argentines love talking about football and politics, but when it comes to the Falkland Islands, it's better to use their Argentinian name, The Malvinas, and better still to not even mention this sensitive topic. This also applies to the Peron years, about which people tend to feel quite strongly – either way. In fact, football and politics are often interwoven. One of the most famous examples of this link occurred in the early 1980s when misfortune on the pitch befell this proud nation's football team at around the same time that the nation's army waved the white flag in The Malvinas. There is, however, always a silver lining – in this case the eventual free democratic elections which followed in 1983.

Last but not least, there is a lighter aspect which will bring you back home: Argentines in general – and the Porteños (people from Buenos Aires) in particular – are tremendously fashion-conscious. Dress well if you want to make a good impression – and don't forget to kiss! 🗨

