

MEAT ME IN ARGENTINA

Feed your beast with trip to S. America's wine country

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TRAVEL
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I've never eaten so much meat in my life.

Think beautiful blood sausage, succulent sweetbread, crisp chorizo and rib roast tender enough to make your taste buds tango.

I was in Argentina, where the average person consumes at least a pound of meat per day. My appetite was ready to assimilate to the gaucho grilling lifestyle. So for 10 days straight, I devoured red meat and guzzled red wine — Malbec, of course — during my grape escape through Mendoza, Buenos Aires and Patagonia.

I started out in Mendoza, located in the western central part of Argentina in the Cuyo region. And I celebrated my first night with a sunset asado at my hotel, Entre Cielos, a luxury boutique hotel in the Mendoza countryside overlooking Malbec vines and the Andes mountains.

An asado (which can be booked for \$85 at the hotel on Wednesdays and Sundays at entrecielos.com) is an Argentine tradition where families and friends gather outside to barbecue. Also known as a parrillada (mixed grill), almost every part of the animal is cooked. Our chef flung spicy pork and beef sausages, chinchulines (small intestines), tripa gorda (large intestines), rinones (kidneys) and mollejas (sweetbread, the thymus gland and the pancreas) onto the grill. If intestines aren't your thing, there's also plenty of chicken, ribs and baked potatoes to go around.

The meat is cooked slowly to retain all of its natural juices. There's so much natural flavor in the beef that you won't want to use any steak sauce. That's because cows in Argentina are raised in the Pampas, the flat, fertile lowlands in the heart of Argentina, where the grass is so rich that cows don't need to be corn fed. You may find your meat accompanied by spicy green chimichurri sauce to add a little kick.



The outdoor asado at Entre Cielos is a lush expanse of flavor, where they grill meat (lots of meat) and have a loft overlooking the vineyard of Malbec vines.



Writer Jeanette Settembre found that tasty empanadas (l.) are a staple anytime friends gather for a meal.

Food is the main attraction at any asado, but the communal camaraderie mixed with cooking is what really ignites this lively affair. We started by making empanadas for appetizers – a half-moon shaped piping hot pocket of beef, onion and sometimes eggs. We stuffed and folded the dough pinching the edges to seal them shut before our chef grilled them to perfection. Some varieties are fried and contain ham, cheese, fish, chicken or spinach. You can tell what filling is inside your empanada by the pattern added to the pastry fold.

Nothing goes better with red meat than Malbec, the grape variety that's prominent in Mendoza. The wine region sprawls more than 356,000 acres with more than 1,500 wineries that

produce nearly two-thirds of the country's wine. So naturally, I stayed at a boutique wine hotel.

Entre Cielos – which means “between the skies” – is a 20-acre property with an elevated loft in the middle of the vineyard ideal for stargazing. In addition to Malbec, the property produces two other wines under its brand Marantal, including a sauvignon blanc and chardonnay.

And at this hotel, you can have your wine, and bathe in it, too. The main attraction at Entre Cielos is its relaxing spa and hamam; a Turkish bath that features steam, sauna and water treatments. Enjoy the Beneath the Grapes treatment (\$80); a combination of a steam bath, grape seed exfoliation, a wine bath from grape extracts and a

relaxation hot stone massage – all with wine in hand, if you choose.

After a little rest and relaxation, my journey continued 600 miles east to Buenos Aires, Argentina's bustling capital.

There, I ate at the 12-seat restaurant, Patagonia Sur, in the home of gaucho grill master Francis Mallmann in the neighborhood of La Boca. The renowned Argentine chef is known for cooking outside over roaring fires in adventurous places like the remote woods of Uruguay, beneath the Andes, below the Eiffel Tower and under the Brooklyn Bridge.

At Patagonia Sur (for reservations, visit restaurantepatagoniasur.com), meat is overdone to the point of being practically

burnt; vegetables have the perfect char and there are always crispy baked potatoes. We sipped Campari cocktails in Mallmann's red-painted living room that was filled with poetry books. Mallmann – who happened to cook for Katy Perry two nights before I ate at his restaurant – is known to recite a few lines at dinner if he's around. The menu changes seasonally and features six courses for around \$190 per person, not including alcohol. During a spring visit (fall in New York) to the spot, we enjoyed beet soup, crab humita, sole and rib eye steak.

Continued on next page



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Buenos Aires is a modern mecca for dancing and dining. At right, Cafe Tortoni, which has been selling coffee and pastries since the 1800s. Below, some of the spectacular scenery in Patagonia.

If you go...

GETTING THERE: Non-stop flights from New York to Buenos Aires are around \$1,100 round-trip. You must fly into Buenos Aires first and take a connecting flight to Mendoza (\$95). From Buenos Aires to Villa La Angostura, flights are \$130. Visit aerolineas.com.ar.

STAY:

In Mendoza: Entre Cielos Luxury Wine Hotel & Spa. Rooms start at \$280; entrecielos.com.

In Buenos Aires: CasaSur Art Hotel. Rooms start at \$197; casasurhotel.com/arhotel/eng.

In Villa La Angostura: Correntoso Lake & River Hotel. Rooms start at \$252; correntoso.com.

Continued from previous page

Don't be afraid to let loose in this magical city. It's almost impossible not to since La Boca is the birthplace of the tango. Often referred to as a musical ode to working class immigrants in Argentina expressing feelings of loneliness and love, this beautiful dance was developed in the mid-19th century. The "Rojo Tango" show at the Faena Hotel is the best in the city. The intimate and lively performance features a five-piece orchestra, two singers and four sensual dance partners telling their stunning stories through movement.

The songs are in Spanish, but you don't need to understand the lyrics to feel the meaning. Enjoy dinner and the show, or just come for drinks like champagne and Malbec. (Tickets start at \$290 per person at rojo.tango.com).

If you really want to get a first person experience of the dance, take a private tango lesson (lavirutatango.com) like I did – in Nike sneakers, not heels. It's a lot harder than it looks, but once you stop staring at your feet and move to the rhythm of the music, you'll glide like a pro.

All that dancing calls for some re-fueling. In Argentina, just about every sweet treat is served with dulce de leche, a milky, caramel-like spread that's excellent for dipping churros in and commonly served in a crepe-like pancake.

You'll find the best ones at the popular tourist attraction Cafe Tortoni, a 158-year-old coffee shop, bar and pastry shop on Avenida de Mayo. Opened by a French immigrant, it's one of the oldest cafes in Argentina and once frequented by artistic types like painters, writers and musicians. Be prepared to stand on a wrap-around line, but it's well worth the wait.

I continued south-west to Villa La Angostura, Spanish for narrowness, a tiny village south of the Argentine province of Neuquen, on the northwest shore of the Nahuel Huapi Lake. This quaint area in the mountainous area of Patagonia is located halfway between the cities of San Martin de los Andes and Bariloche.

The town is pretty desolate, but people come for the mountains and peace of mind. Conquer these views on horseback. The air is so fresh and crisp that you can't help but savor deep breaths. Riders can embark on a 3 1/2 hour tour for panoramic views of the Andes mountains and lakes Nahuel Huapi and Correntoso (Prices vary at laangostura.com).



I had never ridden a horse without a helmet before and there was no guardrail separating us from the Correntoso Lake below us. It was exciting and unsettling to ascend higher and higher up the Andes mountains.

Breezing past towering emerald-colored trees, the rocky path narrowed as I climbed off my horse and hiked the rest of the way to the summit. Greeted with a waterfall amid indigo and violet mountain tops, I paused to take in the serenity of springtime in Patagonia.

"Listen and enjoy the sound of nature," our gaucho advised, amid birds chirping, waves whipping and wind shaking tree branches and leaves. When we got to the top of the waterfall, our gaucho shared a sip of yerba mate, an herbal tea made from caffeinated leaves dried over a fire.

The beverage is more of a social custom in which drinkers pass around the mug and savor it from a communal straw. I was so in awe of the breathtaking scenery, I didn't care about germs.

When I returned to hectic and hyper-connected New York City, and combed through souvenirs from my trip, I appreciated the simplicity of the gaucho lifestyle in Argentina even more.