

## Nicholas Lander on the pleasures of eating well and inexpensively in Argentina

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I fell in love with Argentinian food 25 years before visiting this fascinating country.

This Damascene conversion took place early one evening in a friend's flat when his Argentinian wife was spoonfeeding their young baby, *dulce de leche* or caramelized milk, the unctuously sweet compote that I now realise features on top of virtually every single Argentinian dessert.

Whilst over 120,000 tons of *dulce de leche* are now produced commercially each year to satisfy the country's sweet teeth, making your own is according to Gustavo Peyna, the talented Argentinian pastry chef at the Four Seasons resort in Carmelo, Uruguay, not that difficult, only slightly time-consuming. 'Take one kilo of the freshest, fattest milk, half a kilo of sugar and cook gently over a low heat in ideally a wide copper pan. And,' he added with a smile, 'stir continuously with a wooden spoon for about three hours.'

My first visit to Buenos Aires during the current economic unrest gave me the opportunity to try various commercial brands including the ever-so-rich, super *dulce de leche* icecream studded with chocolate at the Munchi's ice cream parlours and revealed other distinctive restaurant facts of Argentinian life. Most conspicuously that portions are huge and prices low by European standards but such is Argentinian society's emphasis on good looks that eating disorders are sadly widespread and rising. And that because of the peso's fluctuations quoted menu prices are not quite what they seem.

The going rate is now two pesos to the dollar but most restaurants will convert the bill at 1.8 if you show them dollars, making a tidy, if necessary turn on the side. In the café at the not-to-be-missed Malba gallery, which specialises in 20th century South American art, the policy is not to offer any discount for dollars at all and we only got the right change after our waitress decided to become a foreign exchange dealer herself and make the transaction at close to the going rate.

Between our first and second visits to the Hereford restaurant in the Recoleta district, where the beef really is fantastic, a note had appeared on the tables advising of a 10 per cent premium for all bills paid by credit card rather than cash as a way of passing on the 25 per cent increase in the cost of meat and other ingredients. But even including this, its prices seemed as ridiculously low as its portions were huge.

19 pesos, US \$10 or £6 bought a three-course menu with at least half-a-dozen substantial meaty choices at each of the first two courses and included half a bottle of wine and coffee. And with the meal came two gastronomic firsts. The first was the sight of a 1.1 kilo Hereford steak which each of the two diners at the next table was slicing into for the princely sum of 27 pesos, US \$13 or £7 and the other was a novel way of cooking sweetbreads. First grill the sweetbread whole for five minutes on either side and then slice it thinly and grill them again on both sides until crisp. Serve with fresh lemon juice.

But despite, or because of, the ubiquity of such good beef, I lost my professional heart to two Buenos Aires restaurants where I ate excellent fish. Both are in the business district down by the port, close to the Sheraton and Four Seasons hotels, and are separated physically by no more than 100 yards but in time by 55 years and in spirit by even longer.

The Visa sign and the arrows pointing smokers to the left and non-smokers to the right are probably the only visible symbols of physical change to the fabric of **Dora** restaurant since the 87-year-old Senor Jose Fraguas opened the restaurant in 1955. And he, seemingly hale and hearty thanks to an obviously good diet, continues to occupy the dining table closest to the open kitchen.

Dora's varnished wooden interior is cool and uncluttered with small wooden racks along the walls for coats, hats and briefcases as in that other restaurant institution, L'Ami Louis in Paris. And its menu is still unfashionably biblical in length, at least 10 pages, full of exciting fish dishes and the odd idiosyncrasy such as Iranian and Russian caviar priced less expensively than that other sadly disappearing delicacy, *anguillas*, baby eels with garlic.

As big a shock was our waiter's determination that we enjoy our meal to the full although his way of showing this, by warning us off our first two choices, was initially disconcerting. It was only when he explained that the servings of what we had in mind were just too big that we appreciated his altruism. But what we did order was vastly generous. First courses included a huge plate of crispy squid and a whole tortilla, still just runny in the centre, stuffed with prawns. Then, from the whole page devoted to fish that can be ordered simply grilled, came cod with a watercress sauce and hake with a thick almond sauce, both so vast that they covered the entire plates which, I could not help but notice, were made in England many years ago. Dora's wine list is novel, too. Each different page is submitted by a different Argentinian winery and the restaurant merely writes in the price.

With a bottle of Sant'Anita Semillon 1997, our meal for four was 148 pesos, US \$82, £58.

Whilst Dora, whose two-storey building nestles amongst a sea of skyscrapers, represents the old, unchanging face of Buenos Aires, the **Winery** nearby is its brash, confident alter ego.

Opened a year ago, the Winery's ground floor is devoted to wine and cigar retail with the basement housing one of the classiest wine bars I have ever visited. But the real shock comes via a blackboard which offers five generous tasting samples of your choice from the 20 available by the glass for the staggering sum of 15 pesos, US \$7.50 or £5.50.

A flip through the full wine list reveals that thanks to a combination of canny buying and charitable mark-ups, accentuated by the weak peso, the Winery must be the least expensive and most comfortable place to drink fine wine in the world. Certainly I have never seen lower prices for Krug, Dom Perignon 1992 or Cristal 1993; for Italy's remarkable Tignanello 1997 (75 pesos, US \$38, £27), Spain's Pesquera Reserve 1996 (82 pesos) or France's Pavillon Rouge 1996 (131 pesos). With the chef's modern interpretation of Argentinian seafood evident in sesame-encrusted, crispy langoustines and a fillet of salmon in a warm gazpacho together with a bottle of the first vintage of Obra Prima Malbec, dinner was shockingly inexpensive.