

Slice of heaven

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On the basis of English writer Virginia Woolf's observation that "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well" the Argentine people are all loving, clear-thinking intellectuals who sleep like angels.

Argentina's food production is such a cornucopia of plenty that it's axiomatic eating in Argentina is to dine well.

In my case as far as loving well is concerned, I am hopelessly, head-over-heels in love with Argentina which proves the proverb that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach.

My love affair encompasses Argentina's gregarious and handsome people, its sophisticated cities and natural wonders but in this stellar array the lodestar is its sublime cuisine and my expanding waistline attests to the depth of my affection.

There's nowhere in the world outside of Italy where Argentina's culinary mainstays of cheese, pizza and pasta are so good and wolfed-down with such lip-smacking abandon as are the culinary specialities of the Indigenous peoples (locro, humita, quinoa, tamal) and of immigrants; the Spanish (omelettes, paella, jamon crudo), French (bread, pastries), Jewish (bagels, gravlax, pickles), Arab (couscous, unleavened bread, empanadas which had their roots in Moorish Spain) and the English & Welsh (scones, cakes and lamb).

My New Zealand antecedents mean I am no stranger to good food (especially lamb!) but my travels in the wider world were steeped in culinary disappointment until I came to Argentina where the food and drink is universally fresh, chemical-free and in my experience, with one exception, sublime.

My one exception is 'Yerba Mate', the ubiquitous infused drink of the indigenous Mapuche which is consumed by people of all ages in Argentina either in splendid isolation or in a shared social ritual.

I've not been able to acquire the taste for Mate despite trying valiantly to do so for years as I find it very bitter, even when it is made properly, and I attribute this failing to not having been conditioned to its taste as a child although I did like it when sugar was added but as I live a life fighting the battle of the bulge I was not prepared to start a Mate habit if it meant increasing my intake of sugar and I have stuck to black coffee with its zero calories and which thankfully is also available in delicious espresso form everywhere in Argentina.

Also available everywhere in Argentina is its superb, grass-fed beef which is rightly the most famous constituent of Argentine cuisine.

The first cattle arrived in Argentina in 1556 when two brothers named Goes brought a bull and seven cows from southern Brazil and set them free in the Pampa region ("pampa" means to roam free with no disturbance) where with ample feed and no predators (except for a few pumas I imagine) the cattle bred easily and an enormous herd quickly evolved.

As the cattle were not owned by anyone in particular citizens were allowed to take as many beasts as they wanted as long as they kept their herd under a quota of 12,000 cows per person (a mind-boggling number in today's terms).

By the 18th century there were an estimated 40 million cattle roaming the pampas and it was on their backs with the advent of refrigerated shipping that Argentina by the early 1900s was the 3rd richest country in the world.

An "Asado" is the traditional way of cooking beef in Argentina which is how the Gauchos (cowboys) did it out on the vast pampas where they cooked their meat over fires on makeshift grills.

In Argentina an asado is much more than just how meat is cooked, it is the name for the gathering of family and friends for a culinary event that is the epitome of Argentine social culture.

From what I've seen an asado is an art form, a ritual evolved during generations of family traditions where patience is paramount to ensure the fire results in perfect coals to slowly cook the meat and infuse the signature smoky flavour that typifies asado meat.

The other key ingredient is the company of your family and friends during the preparation of the coals and the slow cooking of the meat and to assist in this Argentina's complex wines, especially Malbec from Mendoza, are the ideal lubricants.

There are clouds on the asado horizon which must be acknowledged namely recent and on-going inflation which has made meat less affordable for the lower classes and the impending removal of Argentine beef import restrictions in the United States which will restrict supply in the domestic market and put upward pressure on prices in addition to inflation.

Argentina has an infinite capacity to increase beef production and as its people are adaptable and resourceful and because the asado tradition is so entrenched and so integral to Argentine culture there is no doubt in my mind that the smoky aromas and tastes of asado will endure.

Last but not least and the closest to my heart and ever-tightening trousers are the croissants, tarts, crème caramel, Dulce de Leche (a caramelised milk and sugar paste) and cakes that Argentina's pastry shops and restaurants produce in exquisite perfection.

Argentina is a culinary Paradise and if further proof is needed in addition to its succulent meats, seafood, agricultural produce and luscious wines I recommend a generous portion of Tarta de Ricotta, Argentina's version of cheesecake, a crusty short-pastry base topped with luscious, lemony ricotta dusted with icing sugar which is truly, a veritable slice of Heaven!