

A steak, some wine, music . . . la vida dulce

► **DULCE DE LECHE**
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lowing it with a dulce de leche-laced cappuccino.

And we wouldn't have to break the bank. The dollar is still strong against the Argentine peso (breakfast was less than \$4). Moreover, Argentine sweets may well provide the world's highest calorie count per dollar.

Nursing a sugar high, we were ready to brave the flea market that sprawls from Plaza Dorrego along the neighboring streets. Musicians performed on nearly every corner, and vendors hawked purses and tooled belts, silver jewelry, more macrame than I had seen since the '60s, and silver-lipped painted gourds with silver straws for sipping herbal infusions of yerba mate. Men roasted nuts over charcoal, and women squeezed oranges for fresh juice. Alas, no one was selling dulce de leche.

But the sweet proved to be a leitmotif that cut across every district in the city. Although we were staying in the close-knit, working-class neighborhood of San Telmo, we ventured into the Palermo district of wide, leafy streets and upscale (if rather generic) shopping. We found our sweet fix at Persicco, a sophisticated ice cream shop where a fleet of motorbikes waits out front, each with an insulated box on the back to make home deliveries. (You have to love this city!) Among the several dozen flavors of ice cream are a straight dulce de leche, as well as variations with brownie pieces, chocolate chips, nuts, or — for the truly hard-core — ribbons of dulce de leche swirled in.

But sweets aren't the only gastronomic obsession of the Argentines, who without false modesty proclaim their beef the best in the world. If so, we wanted to try the best of the best. R.W. Apple's last story for The New York Times before his death in 2006 was headlined "An Epicurean Pilgrimage: Meals Worth the Price of a Plane Ticket," and among the 10 restaurants described was Cabaña Las Lilas in Buenos Aires.

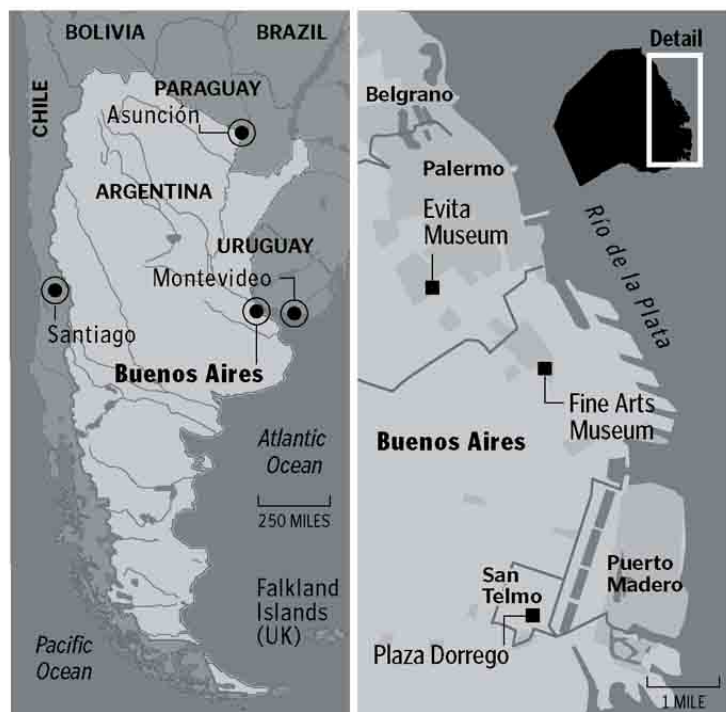
Las Lilas was a pioneer in the redeveloped dock area known as Puerto Madero, a riverfront complex of elegant shops, flashy bars, and high-end restaurants. Photos of prize Angus and Hereford bulls from the owner's ranch on the Pampas dot the walls, but most diners hardly raise their eyes from the massive portions of beef on their plates.

As we waited for our ribeye steaks to be grilled over an open wood flame, we observed the prandial rhythms of an Argentine steakhouse. Diners in animated conversation would fall quiet when their plates arrived. They raised their knives and forks in unison and pounced: cut-cut-cut, chew-chew-chew. Moan. Repeat. We joined in, savoring our beef with a Cadus Malbec, one of the great reds produced by Nieto Senetiner in the high desert vineyards of Mendoza. Perfect with the



PATRICIA HARRIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Street life in Buenos Aires includes cafes like the ubiquitous Havanna chain, which makes the famous Havannet, dulce de leche in chocolate, and tango musicians at a San Telmo flea market.



SOURCE: ESRI; www.allaboutar.com/ba_map.htm; mapserver.gis.umn.edu/gallery/mapa.buenosaires.gov.ar(en)

JOAN McLAUGHLIN/
GLOBE STAFF

rich beef, it remained superb with the classic Argentine dessert of panqueques, crepes filled with

(naturally) dulce de leche.

Between meals and snacks, we also managed to take tango les-

sons, dance in the milongas, and see the sights. At Recoleta cemetery we watched an older woman place a white flower at the tomb of María Eva Duarte de Perón, a.k.a. Evita. Intrigued, we visited the nearby Evita Museum, which chronicles the short life of Argentina's one-time first lady and almost mythical heroine to the country's poor. Later that afternoon, we paused at a cafe in the Buenos Aires Design Center to drink a toast to her memory — with dulce de leche liqueur.

I worried that my interest in dulce de leche was becoming an unhealthy obsession until a Brazilian couple at my B&B grudgingly admitted that Argentina has the best. They were under strict orders to bring home boxes of Havannets from the Havanna coffee shop chain for friends and family. I had blocked this ultimate expression of dulce de leche from my mind. "Americans find it too sweet," Edelberg had said of the pyramid of dulce de leche enrobed in chocolate. "They can usually only eat half."

If you go . . .



JOE RAY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Where to eat

Il Forno
Bolivar 933
011-54-11-4300-6897
Excellent San Telmo bakery-cafe. Sandwiches \$2.05-\$2.70, sweets \$0.50-\$2.05.

Persicco Helados
Salguero 2591
011-54-11-4808-0888
persicco.com
Ice cream \$2.10-\$3.50.

Cabaña Las Lilas
550 Alicia Moreau de Justo
011-54-11-4313-1336
laslilas.com
Legendary steak house in Puerto Madero. Entrees \$17-\$25.

Wela Pulpería
Pueyrredon 2501
Casual outdoor dining at the Buenos Aires Design Center. Empanadas \$1.60-\$2.25, dulce de leche liqueur \$1.30.

El Cuartito
Talcahuano 937
011-54-11-4811-1751
Thick-crust pizza joint has been local favorite since 1934. Pizzas under \$10.

What to do
Evita Museum
Lafinur 2988

011-54-11-4807-9433
Tuesday-Sunday 11 a.m.-7 p.m. \$3.20.

Recoleta Cemetery
Junín 1760
011-54-11-4803-1594
Daily 7-5:45. Free.

Where to stay
1890 Boutique Hotel & Art Gallery
Salta 1074
011-54-11-4304-8798
1890hotel.com.ar

New conversion of historic courtyard-style house in Montserrat at the edge of San Telmo opens this month with six rooms that share patios and gardens, \$90-\$160.

La Otra Orilla
Julián Alvarez 1779
011-54-11-4867-4070
otraorilla.com.ar
Seven attractive rooms in historic house located in Palermo Viejo, \$35-\$140.

Hotel NH Latino
Suipacha 309
011-54-11-4321-6700
nh-hotels.com
Ultramodern, 100-room business hotel sits in heart of financial district, \$160-\$225.

Havanna coffee shops in Buenos Aires are as common as Starbucks in the States. After a week of tasting I was ready for the ultimate test. I settled at a table and ordered a Havannet. It took an extra glass of water to cut the unctuous sweetness, but I proudly defended the honor of the American sweet tooth and finished every . . . last . . . bite.

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