



WORDS ELISABETH KING

TUCK IN AS BUENOS AIRES SERVES UP ITS CAPITAL FARE

BUENOS Aires is, was and always will be the most exciting and sophisticated city in South America. This year is a prime time to discover the Argentinian capital as the city has been designated the 2017 Ibero-American Capital of Gastronomy. It's also a lot easier to get around these days, too, with an extended subway network, the Metrobus and 180km of cycle lanes that access key food, drink and party districts. The Centro Cultural Nestor Kirchner is a good place to start a tour of the rejuvenated city. Opened two years ago and located in a 19th century Beaux Arts post office it's the biggest cultural centre in Latin America, spanning nine floors dedicated to poetry, art, opera and tango. The Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires (MAMBA) celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2016. At last the 7000-strong collection has a permanent home - a renovated tobacco factory. Two floors of paintings showcase the work of local and international artists. Later this year a literary cafe will open to allow art lovers to linger over coffee.

Make mine a vermouth. Nearly 60 per cent of portenos, as Buenos Aires residents are known, are of Italian heritage and vermouth is central to the city's historic drinking culture. At CSJ La Vermuteria, a micro-bar in San Telmo, cool-as TV cook Lele Cristobal dishes up tapas to go with the on-tap vermouth - Cinzano Rosso, Fernet Branca and Cynar.

Meat dominates Argentine parilla (barbecue) cooking and La Cabrera is BA's most touristy and famous steakhouse. But one of the most fun ways to experience the Argentine twist on the theme is at Nerca (local slang for meat), a never-ending pop-up held at different venues across the city. Some of Buenos Aires' trendiest chefs prepare one-off, meat-heavy six to seven-course menus for only \$60 a head. Because of the wandering nature of

the pop-up, details are only available on Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest.

If wild boar is more your style, then head for Pulperia Quilapan. Housed in an 18th century casa chorizo, a skinny historic house style named after the sausage, the boar is slow-cooked for 14 hours in the city's largest clay oven. The house wine is served in a pinguino (penguin) jug that holds one litre. Inspired by pulperias - rural grocery stores - there's a heavy emphasis on organic produce and artisan cheeses,

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too. The quirky decor relies on old football memorabilia and street signs for a nostalgic effect and be sure to order a digestif in the bar at the back to be sure of a good night's sleep.

Authenticity is also the drawcard at Parilla Secretito in Las Canitas, an area known mainly for upmarket bars. Officially a bodegon (tavern), there's nothing as modern as a website. But if the highest quality beef for chump change appeals, the expertly grilled entrana (skirt) and bife de chorizo (sirloin) steaks taste even better surrounded by the knick-knacks of the Racing soccer club, one of BA's "Big Five" teams.

There's something irresistible about a hotel simply called Home. Located in Palermo Hollywood, a sub-district of the trendy area crammed with gourmet burger joints and craft breweries, this 20-room bolthole is an homage to its English-Argentinian owners from the Florence Knoll furniture to the Arts & Crafts wallpaper. An on-site spa, swimming pool and parterre garden seal the deal, and the weekend brunch is a triumph.

Palermo Hollywood also boasts the M Salumeria & Enoteca. The owner, sommelier Mariana Torta, stocks only wines with a real back story. There's new selections daily, but over 200 Argentine bottlings are in stock for on-demand tastings. The charcuterie is a perfect foil and opening hours stretch from 12.30pm to 12.30am.

A lavish breakfast is also a cash-in-hand extra at Querido, a renovated seven-room townhouse in Villa Crespo. Think state-of-the-art furnishings, restored wooden floors and individually designed rooms. Even better, the club-filled area of Palermo Soho is only a few minutes walk away.

In macho Argentina, it comes as a bit of surprise to learn that Mona Gallosi is one of the city's most renowned mixologists. La Calle, hidden behind the La Guitarrita pizzeria, is where she holds sway. The music is hip-hop and house, so regulars are young and energetic. But it's worth dropping by for the house cocktail - a potent mix of Jameson Irish whiskey, ginger syrup and fresh-squeezed lime juice.

Bread, cheese and wine - what more do you need to sustain life? Pain et Vin, owned by Israeli chef Ohad Weiner and his Argentinian wife who is also a sommelier, specialises in weekly wine tastings and is one of the best places for a quick study of local wines. The bread and cheese? Insanely good.

Fernet and Coke is the national drink of

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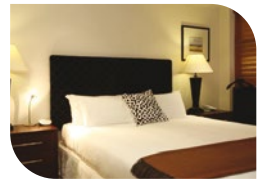
Argentina. Test the custom at El Federal, an historic example of the city's bares notables (old time cafes) founded in 1864. A Cynar and soda also goes well with the house-made charcuterie.

Restaurant theatre rules at La Brigada. A pilgrimage spot for steak lovers in San Telmo, the meat is so tender that the waiters "cut" it with a spoon. But for a culinary delight you won't find anywhere else, check out El Baqueano. Chef Fernando Rivarola uses Argentinian native ingredients and heritage cooking methods to create dishes such as llama carpaccio and alligator empanadas. Co-owner Gabriela Lafuente is a seasoned sommelier and pairs the dishes of the constantly changing menu with equally interesting local wines.

Portenos eat ice cream by the kilo. A smart strategy when the helado is world-famous. The city is full of heladerias and a standout is Helado at Rapa Nui. A family-owned business that originated in a chocolate factory in Patagonia, you haven't eaten chocolate ice cream until you've tasted one or all six of its variations on the theme.

The food-obsessed should not miss Proper, an incredible hit from day one. It's so trendy it hurts. Based in a former mechanic's workshop, Young Turk chefs Augusto Mayer and Leo Lanussol spent a big chunk of the fit-out money on a huge, custom-made wood-fired oven. Consider: pork flank with red bean ketchup, sea bass with chermoula and haloumi provoleta with date vinaigrette.

The major commercial beer brands, Quilmes and Brahma, have a stranglehold on BA's throats. On Tap now has four branches, but the Palermo outpost is the original. It's standing room only to explore 20 of Argentina's top craft beers. 



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