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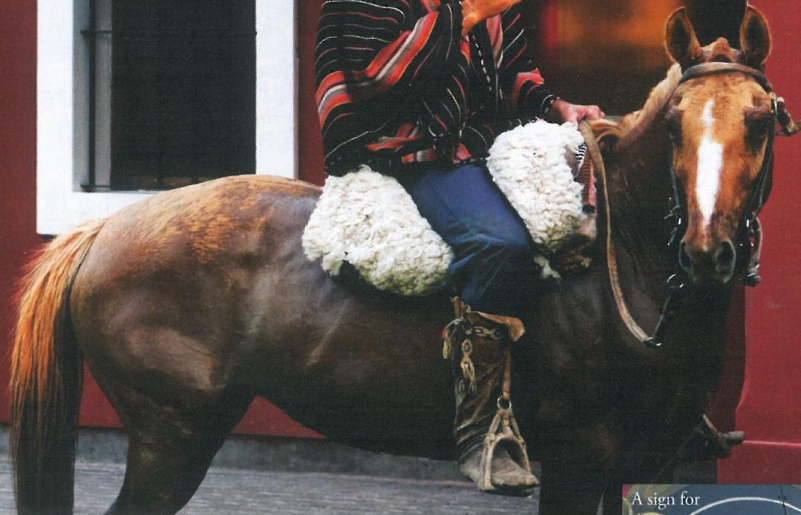
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*Emma McQuiston will be Longleat's next chatelaine –
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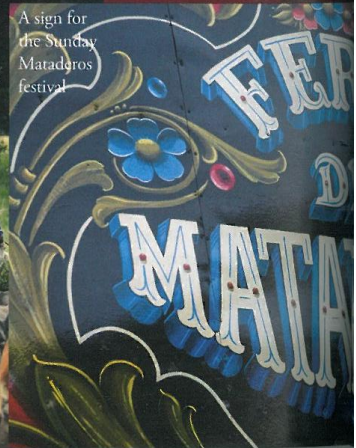
HOLY COW!

*Meat 'n' machismo:
gaucho wannabe
Chris Moss criss-crosses
the pampas in search
of the beef that puts the
boing into red-blooded
Buenos Aires*

This picture, a gaucho on his criollo horse outside La Bamba de Areco estancia. Below, gauchos at La Bamba moving cattle. Opposite page, a gaucho driving Hereford cattle at San Isidro del Llano estancia



A sign for the Sunday Mataderos festival





Meat – let's get this straight – is not just a foodstuff in Argentina. It's a myth, a national passion, a way of life. It defines gender and family values. There are no carnal sins here, only veggie ones. The Spanish word for tenderloin, *lomo*, is also the word for a woman's thigh and, by extension, for feminine desirability, and the country's most famous kitsch classic film is called *Carne* (meat), in which a pneumatic Isabel Sarli spends most of her time breathing heavily and squeezing her breasts together so they look like two uncooked fillets. The government has reportedly made her a cultural ambassador.

Meat, family, sex, politics – all intertwined. I know this, but I don't understand why.

One of my favourite alfresco steakhouses, just outside Buenos Aires, is called *Siga la Vaca* (follow the cow). It's what gauchos shout as they round up a herd. And it suits my mission: to trace the revered Argentine barbecue to its source and back and find out how it is that a whole nation can be defined by its dinner.

ROUND 'EM UP

My journey begins on a road I know well – Ruta 2. I spent the Nineties in Buenos Aires and would escape south at weekends to a small farm near Dolores, 150 miles away. There I'd go riding, ranching and rolling in the hay.

Now I take the same highway but make a left to Las Viboras estancia, which dates from 1820 – ancient by Argentine standards. I set out for a dawn ride with Giga and Sandy Dodero, daughters of Elsa Faúndez – one of Yves Saint Laurent's favourite models in the Seventies and owner of this meat-supplying ranch. She rarely visits. 'Our mother is only at home in the city,' says Giga. Their late father, Jimmy Dodero, was a famous polo player. The girls take after him. 'We're either playing polo or working,' says Sandy. 'We can't get boyfriends. Most Argentine men want to stay in the city, not spend their lives riding horses.' Even if those horses belong to two single, polo-playing heiresses whose grandparents were best pals with Aristotle Onassis? The girls gallop off. 'People think we're Indians –

savages!' shouts Sandy. I think they just prefer the criollo horses to the men.

We cross some of the most fertile land on the planet. This is the pampas: vast, flat, treeless, sun-blasted, with a sense that the earth is curving away on all sides. Many estancias have been divided up but Las Viboras stretches for 22,000 acres, right along the Atlantic coast. Eventually, after two hours of cantering, we reach a herd of 300 Angus cattle and join forces with some gauchos who are driving them from one corner of the estate to the other, many miles away.

Gaucha culture is under threat. 'Lots of landowners prefer the big, short-term gains from soya,' explains Sandy. Here, these cowboys are the real thing. They wear the classic beret, the tailored pantaloons known as *bombachas*, a shirt and sash. They carry a knife at all times – sheathed at an angle in the belt just above the buttocks – and have a dignified bearing that I have seen nowhere else. They are wiry, rugged, the ultimate picture of machismo. 'We hope we're big enough to carry on experimenting with cattle and the soil and keep these traditions alive,' says Sandy. I hope so too.

NEVER MIND THE BOLLOCKS

From Las Viboras, I travel north. Driving down the backroads of Buenos Aires province, I take in the pampas rhythms: tractors working the fields, gauchos driving their pick-ups into small towns to get a beer, thousands of Angus and Hereford cattle, like black and brown smudges in the heat haze.

That evening, at the Parrilla 1880 restaurant in Buenos Aires – not trendy or famous, but a sublime local gem – I'm not sure if I'm eating cow or turning into one. We start with a plate of *chinchulines*, curls of small intestine that are a classic entrée in Argentine grill restaurants. They are tasty when properly charred, but have a tendency to explode and deliver a mouthful of half-digested grassy mush. I prefer the other entrées – spicy sausage, black pudding and kidneys in garlic –▷

GREAT BUENOS AIRES STEAKHOUSES

LA BRIGADA

One of San Telmo's smarter institutions, with good-sized, high-grade steaks, empanadas and offal.
parrillalabrigada.com.ar

PARRILLA 1880

Friendly neighbourhood steakhouse, with mid-range prices and excellent bife de chorizo (sirloin steak) – right opposite the city's main history museum.
parrilla1880.com.ar

SIGA LA VACA

Tuck in to rump, flank and sirloin or try the Patagonian lamb at this lively all-you-can-eat restaurant. Branches in Pilar, San Isidro and Puerto Madero.
sigalavaca.com



◁ but, as an aspiring macho man, I must try everything.

Then it's on to steak (what else?) and chimichurri, the herb, oil and vinegar condiment that's never absent from the Argentine dinner table. The name is thought to have been coined when a gaucho, trying to use English at the table of his *patrón*, said, 'Give me chutney', and it came out as 'chimichurri'.

But the beef needs no garnish. It is grassy, earthy, sweet, tinged with blood, pungent with quebracho wood and exuding the faintest aroma of manure. I feel a rush of what I can only describe as the *parrilla* pleasure principle (Freudian terms come naturally in Buenos Aires, a town full of shrinks) – a warm feeling of universal bonhomie, a lovely languor born of eating the world's oldest hot meal.

Next day, I drive out to the town of Pilar, the hub of Argentina's polo set, surrounded by stables, studs and playing fields. But I'm here for the cattle. Over a maté tea at a rustic little bar, I quiz Javier Montes Baliero, a meat merchant who manages some of Argentina's finest stock. Why is the meat so mindblowingly good?

'We don't age beef like in Europe, so what you eat in Argentina is fresh meat,' he explains. 'It's tasty because of the careful breeding, mild winters, the level plains. Pampas cattle are not stressed and their food is rich in clovers, alfalfa and ryegrass – all this adds flavour.'

Javier's estancias supply an elite group of restaurants, including the Gaucho group in the UK and smart Buenos Aires establishments like Sucre, Tarquino and La Bourgogne at the Alvear Palace Hotel. Steak is not as tender in the UK because 'you are probably eating meat from bullocks that have their balls,' Baliero

GREAT BUENOS AIRES RESTAURANTS

EL BAQUEANO

An imaginative 'indigenous' venture in historic Buenos Aires barrio San Telmo that goes far beyond the cow, serving caiman, hare, vizcacha (related to the chinchilla) and rhea birds.
restoelbaqueano.com

SUCRE

Fernando Trocca's creative cuisine is worth the trip to Belgrano, in the north of Buenos Aires – try the ceviche and smoked rabbit.
sucrerestaurant.com.ar

TARQUINO

The acclaimed in-house restaurant at Hub Porteño hotel, serving exquisite Argentine cuisine with touches of El Bulli-style innovation.
tarquinorestaurant.com.ar



says. 'They grow faster and make farmers more money. But the muscle is tough and not so tasty. Argentine bullocks are castrated, which makes them calmer.'

Intriguing. In sexist Argentina, the barbecue is the only meal men ever cook. A man's performance – how good he is at making a fire, how well he salts the steaks, his knife skills – are all considered proof of machismo and prowess. It is customary to applaud the *asador*, or griller, when he serves the first cuts. And the whole affair relies on mellow, ball-less bulls.

'It's an art form. Like seduction,' grows Federico Compte, the chef at my next stop, La Bamba de Areco, a gorgeous oxblood, colonial-style estancia owned by Jean-François Decaux (the polo-playing billionaire who owns pretty much every roadside ad you've ever seen). Federico shows me how to gently massage salt into the meat, heat up the wood to white-hot and grill the huge cuts until blood bubbles on top. Later, as I feast on the vast slabs of meat, a semi-naked gaucho does stunts on a bare-backed criollo horse. It's a show of how Argentina's native pampas Indians would have

dominated their steeds – a combination of muscles, meat and quite a lot of camp. Two refined French guests look as bemused by the show as they are by their enormous steaks.

OOH! YOU ARE OFFAL

Back in Buenos Aires, my best Argentine friend Mariano, an exporter of beef and offal, takes me to visit the Mataderos ('slaughterhouse') neighbourhood. These days, the auctions and killing go on elsewhere,

but the area – now lower-middle-class residential – is still a frontier between countryside and city.

We walk along the dusty, cobbled streets, where a few ramshackle wooden pens still hold cattle brought to be sold. There's a market selling leather tack, tango vinyls and delicious meat empanadas. On the Avenida de los Corrales, a group of gauchos hurtle down the main street trying to hook a tiny ring with what looks like a twig – it's an old country sport, known as the *corrida de sortija*, a weird slice of pampas life in the city. A century ago, Buenos Aires – now a massive concrete sprawl – would have been all smallholdings and ranches. This Sunday spectacle is a vestige of its pastoral past and I am delighted when, on exiting the market, I see a packed city bus stop at the lights so that a motley gang of gauchos can cross, leading a big brown Hereford.

Before leaving Buenos Aires, I want to get a few old friends together, so I book a table at Tarquino, the city's hottest restaurant, where chef Dante Liporace has agreed to cook *La Secuencia de la Vaca*. It's a concept he learned while working at El Bulli in Catalonia, where chef Ferran Adrià invented the Sequence of the Hare. For our special reunion meal, Dante will create seven dishes using only the cow.

For two hours we work our way through brain schnitzels, sous-vide tongue, intestines and sweetbreads, beef cheek, skirt steak, oxtail sandwich and – finally – ice cream and crème-caramel foam. Dante insists the pudding is legitimate, as milk is part of the 'sequence', and I'm grateful he's not treated us to udder. Yes, these are on sale in Argentine supermarkets and, yes, they look foul. Dante joins us for a digestif. 'Ferran created his sequence in 2006 and this is my homage to him. And to the cow,' he says. 'The cow deserves artistic treatment.'

Dante's groundbreaking cooking points to new horizons for the steak dinner. 'If it can happen with ceviche in Peru, why not with beef in Argentina?' he says. 'It's just a question of changing the national attitude and then getting the message abroad.' I tell him I know a new ambassador who might just be able to help. □

PHOTOGRAPHS: LABRIGADA RESTAURANT; ISTOCK



EVERYTHING BUT THE UDDER

BIFE DE CHORIZO

The sirloins that define gaucho gastronomy – sometimes so vast you have to eat the outer edge and send the rest back for a re-grilling.



TIRA DE ASADO

Often translated as Jacob's ladder – sweet, salty, short beef ribs – the meat closest to the bones is richest in flavour.



VACIO

Flank steak, which comes in a natural wrapping of flavoursome fat and is popular for alfresco asados (barbecues).



CHINCHULINES

Little curls of cow intestine. Grassy, chewy: an acquired taste. Ask the waiter to make sure they're bien cocidos (well done).

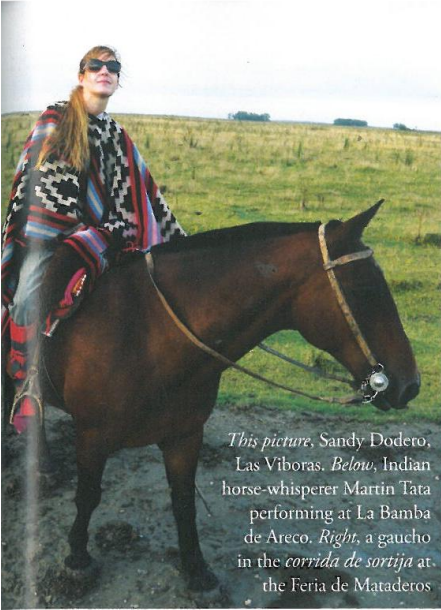


PROVOLETA

A veggie option (sort of). A provolone cheese disc grilled with the steaks and covered in grease and blood. But cor, it's delicious.



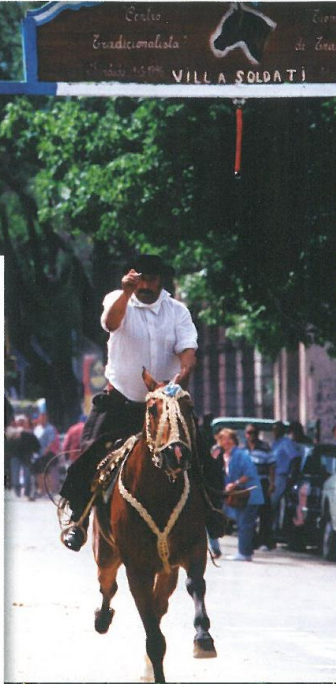
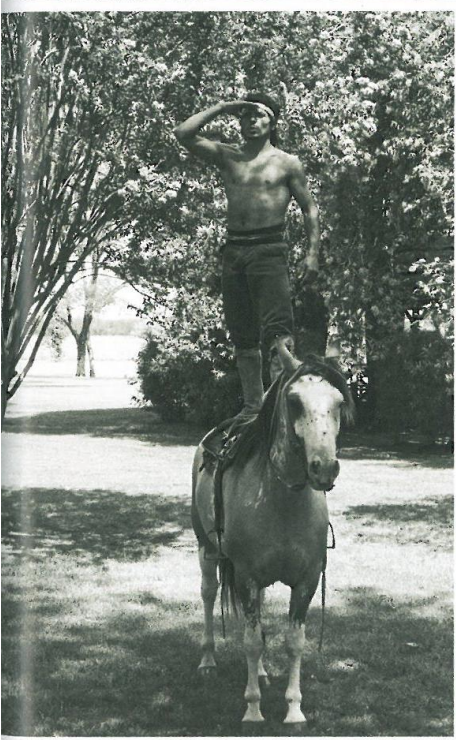
TRAVEL



This picture, Sandy Dodero, Las Viboras. Below, Indian horse-whisperer Martin Tata performing at La Bamba de Areco. Right, a gaucho in the corrida de sortija at the Feria de Mataderos



Clockwise from left, a street-side asado, Dolores; guests enjoy an alfresco lunch, Las Viboras; gauchos at La Bamba de Areco



BOOK IT
Wexas Travel (wexas.com or 020 7590 0610) offers nine nights in Argentina, including three nights B&B at the Hub Porteño in Buenos Aires, three nights full board at Candelaria del Monte in San Miguel del Monte and three nights full board at Las Viboras, from £2,489 a person, including flights, car hire and excursions.

