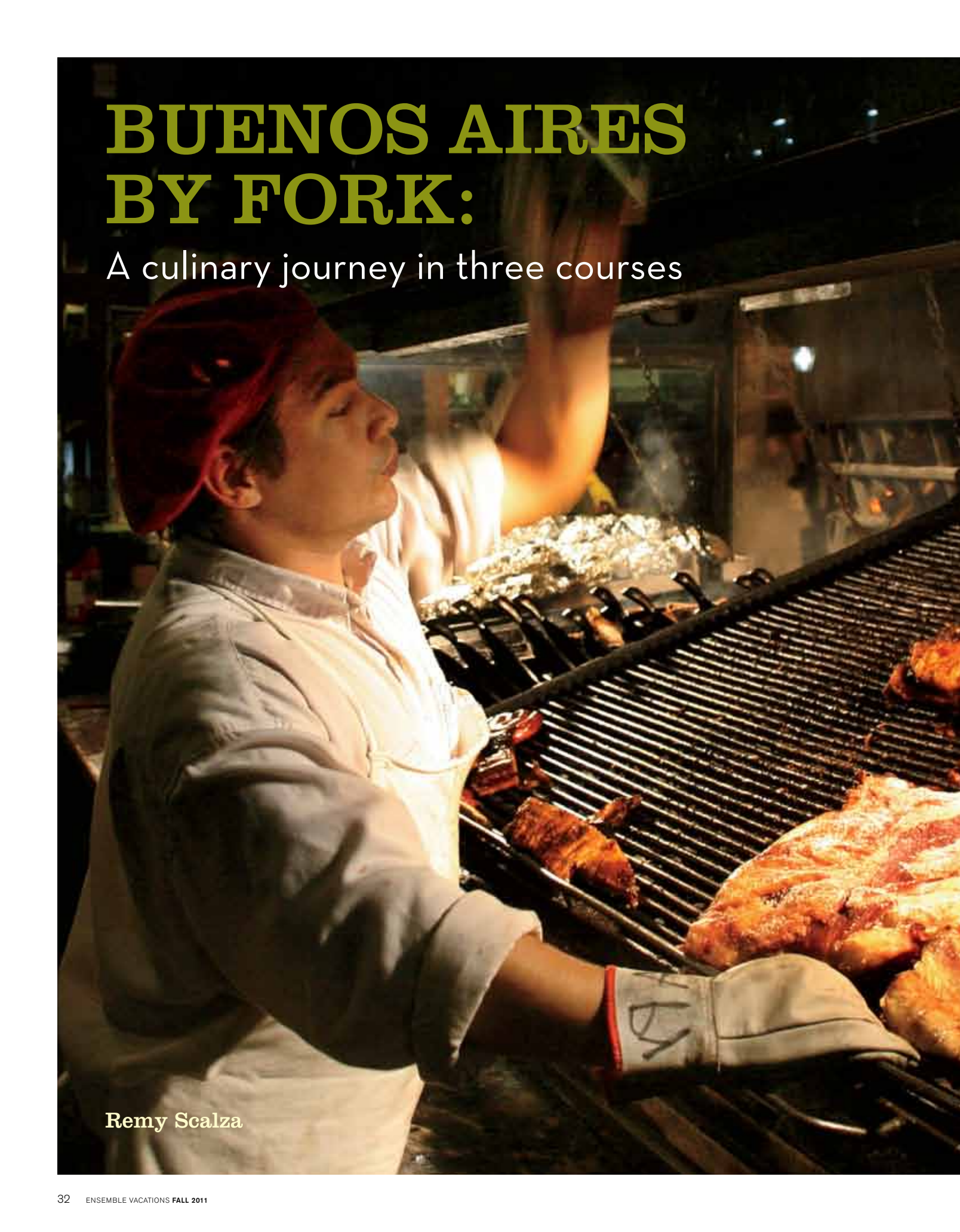


BUENOS AIRES BY FORK:

A culinary journey in three courses

A chef in a white uniform and red hat is working at a large grill. The grill is filled with various meats, including a large piece of pork belly and several smaller pieces of meat. The chef is wearing a white glove on his right hand and is looking towards the grill. The background is dark, suggesting an indoor kitchen or restaurant setting.

Remy Scalza



Ribs roast at La Caballeriza, a *parrilla* in Puerto Madero, Buenos Aires' trendiest new neighbourhood. The cook, known as a *parrillero*, is salting the meat.

IT'S NEARLY MIDNIGHT and Rodi Bar, a venerable old restaurant in Buenos Aires' Recoleta neighbourhood, is full, with a line stretching out the door and down the tree-lined street. Inside, bow-tied waiters, grey hair slicked back in fine Old World style, shuffle from table to table balancing plates piled with sizzling steaks, homemade tortellini and bottles of wine. The crowd in the room and the din – an unremitting clamour of clanging cutlery and loud conversations in *castellano*, the regional Spanish dialect – is nothing unusual. For all their tango renown, what locals here really do well, and at all hours, is eat.

The cuisine is hardly revolutionary: an abundance of beef, pizzas and pastas – brought over by Italian forbears – and little else. But it is uniformly good. Ingredients are fresh, recipes are time-proven and – failing all else – the wine is cheap and eminently drinkable. For the traveller, the city can be a veritable moveable feast, provided you know where to look.

PART I > LA CARNE

Just as high-end hotels have their signature scents – that trademark olfactory blend that suffuses the lobby – so does Buenos Aires: and it is the heavy aroma of seared beef. There are literally thousands of steakhouses, known as *parrillas*, in the capital, often packed two or three to a block. With few exceptions, they do a brisk business.

Beef in Argentina is a national passion on par with *fútbol*. Cattle are grass-fed – raised on pastures and not in feedlots – and also hormone-free. The result is a different steak altogether than the bland beef on offer in many North American supermarkets and restaurants. Little surprise that Argentinians consume more red meat per capita than anyone in the world, roughly 150 pounds every year.

Parrilla La Dorita sits on a street corner in Palermo, once a working-class neighbourhood slowly filling up with boutiques and sushi bars. Inside the crowded dining room, the clientele is split between young bohemians, all tight jeans and scraggly facial hair, and old couples who probably remember Evita – the Argentinian First Lady of the 1940s and '50s, not the Madonna musical.

At the back of the room, two cooks in red-stained aprons preside over a massive, wood-fired barbecue – the high altar of the city's carnivorous faithful. One tosses on ribs, steaks, bell peppers and potatoes. The other stirs coals glowing just beneath the grill.

La Dorita's menu lists a baffling array of cuts, from the delicate *bife de lomo*, a tenderloin filet, to the hands-down local favourite *asado*, a meaty rack of grilled short ribs. I settle on the *bife de chorizo*, a sirloin. Served humbly on a worn wooden cutting board, it's a thing of beauty – seared with dark crosses from the heat of the grill but *a punto* inside, still showing just a touch of pink. My knife slides through, and the *bife* is gone much too fast: a steak I still dream about today.

PART II > EL VINO

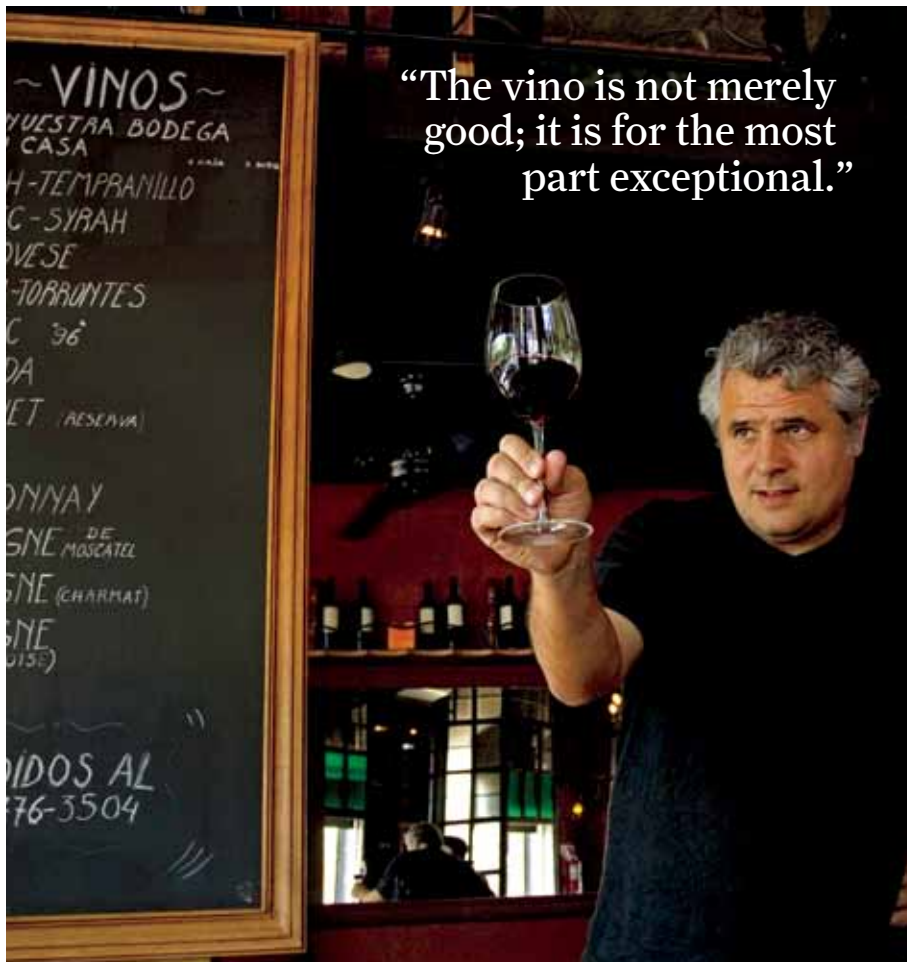
Old-timers in Buenos Aires have a habit. To every glass of red wine, they'll add a shot or two of *agua con gas*, soda water – a holdover from the bad old days when Argentinian plonk was virtually undrinkable and begged to be watered down.

This evening, inside the tiny wine bar and restaurant **Dadá** in the city's gritty commercial centre, no one is diluting anything. Groups of young Argentinians – chic, thin, with a practised, almost European *ennui* – sit gathered around bottles at tables covered with brown butcher paper. Against a soundtrack of American soul music, glasses are filled and refilled. The vino is not merely good; it is for the most part exceptional.

In the late 1980s, after centuries of making cheap jug wine, vintners here finally turned their attention to taming Argentina's signature grape, the notoriously tannic **Malbec**. The result today is a glorious catalogue of dark, complex reds. In the bars and restaurants of Buenos Aires, bottles are available in cheap, splendid profusion. In most places, \$10 buys a decent bottle; \$20 an excellent one – bright, fruit-forward and an optimum complement to the ubiquitous beef.

Back inside **Dadá**, the old zinc bar is filling up with regulars. I spend a few more pesos than usual and spring for a bottle of Malbec *reserva* – the good stuff. In the glass, it's dark, dense, conspiratorial – a Buenos Aires night bottled.

After a very good glass, and then maybe one or two more, I make my way back outside. The downtown is quiet at this hour, shop windows hidden behind steel shutters on a street of handsome old buildings with wrought-iron balconies. From the doorway, a red glow seeps out from the bar onto the dark sidewalk.



“The vino is not merely good; it is for the most part exceptional.”



Alvear Palace Hotel

PART III > EL TÉ

And for the final course, something unexpected: silver teapots and white-gloved waiters, sponge cake and butter tarts, delicate porcelain cups refreshed with practised grace. In defiance of geography and history, the British tradition of formal afternoon tea is replayed thousands of times a day in Buenos Aires, the vestige of an unusually deep Anglo fetish.

A few thousand enterprising Brits settled in Argentina in the mid-1800s, lured by dreams of striking it rich in the booming railroad industry. They introduced the continent to soccer, founded an English newspaper in Buenos Aires that still exists and even opened a Harrods in the heart of downtown.

They also drank tea, a custom locals – eager to Europify their humble backwater – embraced. Though the 1982 Falklands War with Britain put a damper on tea drinking, formal salons remain vital today. And perhaps none is more storied than the one inside the **Alvear Palace**, the 1930s *Belle Époque* mansion that houses arguably the city’s ritziest hotel.

Under crystal chandeliers, in a room decked out with Louis XV-style furniture, Buenos Aires’ elite privately indulge their inner anglophile. All the Victorian trappings, real and imagined, are here. Harpist playing softly in the corner? *Check*. Mint’s worth of silver polished to a high sheen? *Check*. Scones, jam and crustless sandwiches? *Check*.

The clientele these days is mixed: young socialites who text between sips, businessmen in expensive loafers and tourists sneaking shots with camera phones. But mainly this is the domain of the *señoras*: Buenos Aires’ glamorous silver-haired ladies of leisure. Today a large group is gathered around a table. They wear furs that would trigger protests in North America and jewels that evoke Buenos Aires’ halcyon days of yore.

I work my way through sandwiches of creamed trout, homemade crumpets, cheese puffs, mousses and tarts, sipping daintily all the while. But when the big silver trolley rolls around with its payload of pineapple sponge cakes and strawberry cheesecakes, I draw the line. *No gracias – nada más para mí*. Better to leave some room – there’s a long week of eating still ahead. ▣

