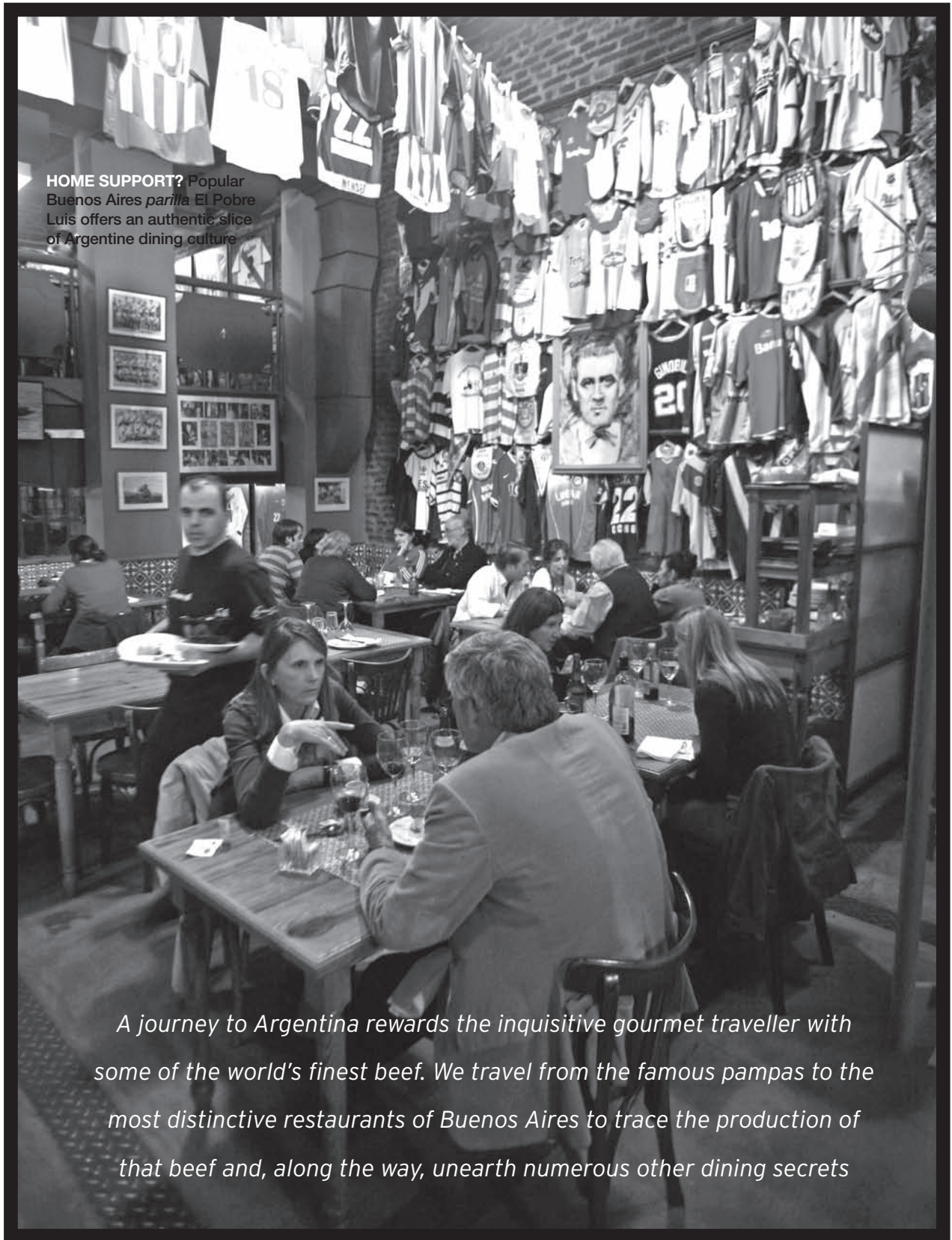


WHERE'S THE BEEF? As chef at Oviedo, one of Buenos Aires' most renowned seafood restaurants, Martín Rebaudino is aware that there is more to Argentine cuisine than some of the world's best beef



From the
PAMPAS TO

HOME SUPPORT? Popular Buenos Aires *parilla* El Pobre Luis offers an authentic slice of Argentine dining culture



A journey to Argentina rewards the inquisitive gourmet traveller with some of the world's finest beef. We travel from the famous pampas to the most distinctive restaurants of Buenos Aires to trace the production of that beef and, along the way, unearth numerous other dining secrets

THE PLATE



MARTÍN REBAUDINO at home in the kitchen (top), the orders stack up at El Pobre Luis (above left and right), while waiter Walter Osuna serves the guests at Oviedo (left)

B**BUENOS AIRES:** On a ranch in the Argentine version of the middle of nowhere, I ask the gaucho in charge what a cow's life is like. His eyebrows draw slightly closer as he takes a contemplative sip of *mate* (a stimulating infusion of yerba mate leaves) drunk through a silver *bombilla* (straw) and, without a word, gestures out the window at the 10,000ha of farmland that surround his modest cabin.

If I were a cow, I'd be pretty happy here... The sea of green surrounding Buenos Aires for hundreds of kilometres is the grazing ground for the grass-fed beef that forms the cornerstone of Argentina's gastronomic reputation. Driving toward to the city hungry and curious to know more, a guided food tour of the city with one of its finest chefs is a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

Chef Martín Rebaudino of Oviedo restaurant adopts me for this gastronomic initiation. He tells stories of the famous beef, places curious emphasis on Italian food (including divine *gelato*), and enthuses about fantastic wines. Needless to say, I am ready to eat.

For an immediate sense of place, I go to the grill. *Parrillas* are far and away Argentina's most popular restaurants, centred on grilling meat in all its forms. I push through the horde of local *Porteños* [the Spanish demonym for the inhabitants of Buenos Aires – literally 'people of the port'], spilling out of the door of the El Pobre Luis parrilla and meet owner Luis Acuña. "People who know how to eat come here," he says, matter-of-factly, as he presides over a pair of grills the size of Cadillac trunks and puffs absently on a cigarillo. Why this parrilla, though, among the thousands in the country where grass-fed beef is king and the right to grill and eat it several times a week might as well be written into the constitution? "I drive 200km to choose each side of beef," explains Acuña.

He also dry ages his beef for 20 days at three degrees Celsius – no small feat considering the time, technique, space and equipment necessary to produce this nuttier flavour and better texture that Acuña wants. Beneath it all, there's good wood, in this case Argentina's dense and hot-burning *quebracho*, which is reputedly one of the hardest of woods and imbued with powerful spirits according to native wisdom. The name alone is rich in meaning, stemming from the Spanish *queiebra hacha*, roughly translating as 'axe breaker'. Before grilling, he also brings his cut-to-order steaks to room temperature, which gives rare steaks a crisp sear and keeps well-done cuts from becoming briquettes. "Nothing," he says, underlining the word in the air with a set of tongs, "goes from the fridge to the grill."

Using his utensils like they're an extension of his arms and giving everything a liberal shake of salt, Acuña gives me tastes of slow-grilled menu items as he works: *higado a la tela* – a sausage made with liver, along with earthy and primal tasting bites of kidneys, tripe and sweetbreads. If you're wary about eating variety meat, this is the kind of place to give it a go. ➤



ARGENTINE WINES should not be underestimated, argues Alejandro Audisio, owner of Terroir Casa de Vinos and a passionate advocate of local vintages



HE MAY BE TEMPTED to serve a few inevitable steaks, but chef Martín Rebaudino (above) is happiest producing more adventurous offerings such as the one below



First timers to Argentine beef, however, have no choice but to get a steak. Try Acuña's *ojo de bife* (a rib-eye style cut) or a *lomo con hueso*, a bone-on tenderloin, which he describes as "like a T-bone cut in half." This is the good half.

The nearby Oviedo is an entirely different experience. Waiters walk discreetly among a mix of regulars that includes businesspeople and gastronomes, along with those eager diners who have heard it's the best place in town for fish. Chef Rebaudino and owner Emilio Garip are a pair of rare birds, specialising in seafood with Spanish flair in a country where meat is king.

"When my wife's parents came to the restaurant for the first time, I sent out a pan of mussels," says Rebaudino. "Years later, they told me that it was the first time they had tried them." The soft-spoken Rebaudino shows me around his kitchen until orders start piling up then dives into the lunch rush. Working several plates at once, he begins prepping a codfish brandade for dinner. He violently shakes a pot the size of a table for two over the stove, occasionally switching back to the line to plate delicate dishes like fresh fish loin with crisp cured ham and parsley oil.

Though he offers a few top-level steaks to hedge his bets, Rebaudino shines most with his more adventurous offerings like baby squid cooked two ways with a squid ink and caper sauce or a salad of alternating layers of toasted eggplant 'chips' and eggplant caviar.

"We have to work hard to convince customers. You can make extraordinary dishes and the Argentine people will say, 'No, no, no,'" he says, miming a kid pushing away a plate of asparagus, "but then they taste and understand."

No self-respecting Argentine would push away a glass of wine, however, and Alejandro Audisio is convinced Argentine wines rank among the world's best. At Terroir Casa de Vinos, the high-end wine shop he co-owns, he begins by stressing what a bargain Argentina's offerings are. "The bang for the buck ratio compared to US wines, for example, goes from three to one on the low end to six to one in the cult wines," he says, pouring a 2003 Azul Reserva from Bodega La Azul. "The best of the current vintage release in Argentina is about 120 to 130 US dollars," he adds, hammering his point home and exhibiting the mix of the businessman he used to be and the wine enthusiast he's always been. "Stuff like this in the US can be 800 bucks!"

As he talks, he offers me an impromptu version of the wine tastings that are the brunt of his business. Typically, customers call Audisio to set up a paid, private tasting based around their wine knowledge and tastes. For these, he'll decant bottles hours ahead or the night before to highlight a wine at its peak.

Audisio is quick to acknowledge Argentine wine's shortcomings. "It's easy to have a hit with one vintage and

have a dud on the following one," he says. This is where he steps into the picture; he'll buy entire productions of limited-run wines – ones he knows are good – and sell them exclusively.

A few days later, I meet Rebaudino for lunch. Darting nimbly through nerve-wracking traffic and avoiding drivers who could challenge Sicilian road warriors, we cross town for lunch in the appropriately-named La Boca district. The birthplace of tango, La Boca is known for its brightly-coloured façades and dodgy backstreets. "Drive or take a taxi," advises Rebaudino, pulling into a garage around the corner from the family-run Il Matterello restaurant.

Going Italian on a quest for typical Argentine food is curious without a bit of background, but Liliana (Lili) Stagnaro with her vibrant personality, corresponding shock of bleach-blonde hair and steely blue eyes, sets me straight.

"Nothing in this restaurant is typically Argentine, but there are lots of people from Italy," she says, referencing the huge numbers of Argentines with Italian roots. Her mother was born in Modena and her father was born in Argentina to Italian parents. "We learned all of this at home," she says, gesturing at Il Matterello's kitchen. "We transmit what we know." And working with her family doesn't drive her crazy? "Unless we're fighting, everybody shows up every day," she says, cleverly straddling the line between truth and humour.

Rebaudino and Stagnaro explain why eating Italian in Buenos Aires is nothing to scoff at by debating the merits of their favourite Italian haunts – Pizzeria Pirillo for standing-room-only *fugaza* (a *focaccia* descendant) and El Cuartito for the town's best slice. For gelato that would make even Italian mouths water, they suggest three city staples; Un'Altra Volta, Freddo and Persicco. I'd later conclude that Freddo has the market cornered on *dulce de leche* flavours, Persicco has a stunning bitter orange and mango flavour while Un'Altra Volta's bitter chocolate may be my overall favourite.

As the plates come out at Il Matterello, we tuck in and eating Italian in Argentina suddenly makes total sense. Il Matterello highlights include fantastically deep-flavoured stuffed olives, spinach croquettes (a favourite of Rebaudino's daughter), stuffed *tortelli*, known as nuns' hats, served with a brown butter sauce and green lasagna made with *arugula* (rocket), capped off with a homemade *limoncello* (lemon liqueur).

The olives are so good that I stop Lily from running around on the floor to ask just what is inside. "Ham, chicken, eggs, mortadella and *onda*."

"Onda?" I ask, flipping through the food dictionary in my head and coming up blank. "Feeling!" she says, flashing a big smile and dashing back to the kitchen. Joe Ray

PHOTOS JOE RAY



LOCAL ARGENTINE COLOUR and authenticity is always at the forefront, whether with the low-tech, but high-charm cash register at El Pobre Luis (above), or the same *parilla*'s idiosyncratic, but appealing wall display (below). A living, breathing example of local colour is Lili Stagnaro of Il Matterello, who cites 'feeling' as a key ingredient

