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GlobalGourmet / In Argentina, a country that knows how to live the good life, mealtime matters. So do it right and dine with those in the know at one of Buenos Aires' best unadvertised and exclusive restaurants.

By Paula de la Cruz / Photography by Mark Wagoner

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Buenos Aires' Secret Suppers

Buenos Aires is a city for hedonists. At first sight, it reveals itself with mammoth avenues shaded by languorous rubber trees and monumental beaux-arts mansions from the early 1900s. If you look closer, the chatty dilettantes who today populate its prodigious wood-paneled cafés will remind you that Argentina was born from cultures that don't just talk about the sweet life. They take ample time to enjoy it.

The serving of grilled meats and other mealtime traditions are highly ritualized in Argentina—and this is true both at restaurants and at home. Lunch seems like an insignificant snack unless there's pasta to start, followed by a traditional Argentinean steak or Milanese (breaded, fried meat), accompanied by an olive oil-drenched mixed salad. A coffee and smooth Spanish flan with lots of caramel and a dollop of *dulce de leche* is the only sensible finale.

In recent years, locals have been taking a cue from their Cuban peers, and closed-door restaurants have started sprouting in private homes around the city. Some, like Restaurant Mis Raíces (Arribeños 2148; Tel: 54-11-4784-5100 or restaurantmisraices.com.ar), offer dishes in portions that only nurturing mothers—in this case, a Yiddish *mamen*—can imagine. But all of them let you dip into the heart and soul of Buenos Aires' melting pot and right into its succulent homemade center.

In keeping with this homey trend, Buenos Aires foodies also have begun rediscovering their old hidden taverns as alternatives to the city's more refined or flashier restaurants. Diego Benson, the author of the blog *Bodegones, Fondas y Afines* (bodegonesyfondas.blogspot.com), has become a source for many top finds. One of these is El Hornero (José María Moreno 655), which specializes in such exotic meats as *caiman*, *capybara*, and wild boar.

The pursuit of an unforgettable intimate meal in Buenos Aires means finding a place so off the radar that it's either private or a secret. But, fortunately, keeping secrets is not the capital's forte. Here are four hush-hush restaurants that will make your next trip to Buenos Aires the ultimate insider's visit.

Almacén Secreto / A little metal door next to a tattoo parlor conceals the best northern Argentinean food in Buenos Aires. After the hostess and owner María Morales Miy welcomes her guests to her "Secret Grocery Shop" in the trendy neighborhood of Palermo, she seats them in her leafy patio, beneath a wisteria and lemon tree, or in her cozy dining room, where

A Note About Gnocchi

The 29th of each month is Gnocchi Day in Argentina, called **Ñoquis del 29**. Since this was the day before payday, it was when Argentineans were poorest. So diners would **place a peso under their dishes** to attract prosperity while they ate gnocchi, which was **both inexpensive and filling**. Today in Argentina, government officials who do little more than accept paychecks are called *ñoquis*, too. The best way to participate in the celebration is to **visit a restaurant on the 29th**, and come with coin.

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there's a wood-burning stove and a bright-red wall filled with framed family photos. Before ordering any dishes, dip into the bowls of white beans in olive oil, oregano, and spicy peppers from Salta, María's native province. Then try the *tabla grande* as your appetizer, for its selection of northern goat cheeses, smoked beef, and salami. Sautéed meats are the northern province's specialty, and for a really interesting twist María makes hers with llama. Another exceptional dish is a pork, quinoa, and mint roulade. Quinoa is a hardy Andean cereal that grows at altitudes as high as 13,000 feet. It has a nutty flavor and a crunchy texture and was once a staple of the Incas. The evening is complete when María passes around her guitar and lets guests play while enjoying their last sips of northern wine to a folkloric lullaby.

Dinner only, Thursday–Saturday. Address given only with reservation. Tel: 54-11-4775-1271

Mexico 631 / When Sergio Quentin realized his modern furniture and art collection would no longer fit in his Buenos Aires home, he looked for a place to keep it in the city's trendy San Telmo antiques district. He then partnered with Zeta Catering and turned his new two-floor loft space and professional kitchen into a private lounge able to fulfill even the most demanding epicurean requests. Named after its address, Mexico 631 opens its unmarked doors when customers call for everything from casual lunches to full-blown parties. Quentin's enormous couches and chairs invite you to relax, but eventually you'll be drawn to his tables. Zeta Catering's pan-Latin, international, Argentinean, and indigenous dishes include Basque sausage quesadillas, veal burritos with Bolivian pepper sauce, filet mignon in a Malbec-wine sauce, and sole ceviche so tangy and fresh you can still taste the ocean. For dessert, try the coconut flans, caramel crêpes, and plates of local cheese. If you come for lunch, a lazy stroll down the cobblestone streets browsing antiques is the best way to end the day—unless you also want to stay for dinner.

Although Mexico 631 recommends Zeta Catering, guests may bring or book their own chefs. By reservation only. Mexico 631; Tel: 54-11-4331-0917 or mexico631.com

Maat / This private gourmet club, named after the Egyptian goddess of truth and balance, serves some of the most sophisticated food in Buenos Aires. Housed in a French beaux-arts townhouse in the neighborhood of Belgrano, Maat welcomes diners as guests three times before requiring them to become members for a fourth visit. Chef Mariano Vivaldo notes each diner's favorite foods and then promises never to prepare them the same way twice. Members also can learn to cook their preferred dishes with private lessons. Sample such delights as Vivaldo's veal confit, lemon risotto, and cream corn with Camembert cheese and pork sausage caramel. After your meal, you can move to a small adjoining library and salon. Maat's classic wood interiors, inspired by the old rail luxury of the Orient Express, will make you want to stay on for tea, even if that's not until the next day. Cozy interiors open onto a shaded garden during the summer. Maat also organizes cultural events and wine auctions. Some members even use the club to take private language classes. All employees are multilingual.

By reservation only. Sucre 3168; Tel: 54-11-4896-1818 or maatclubprivado.com.ar

Casa SaltShaker / When Dan Perlman opens the door to his Recoleta apartment, you'll feel like you've arrived at an old friend's house for dinner. The expat New York chef constructs multicourse meals according to never-repeating themes each Friday and Saturday evening for 12 guests. For a "Techniques of Preservation: A Tribute to Dr. James Bedford" dinner (Bedford was the first person cryogenically frozen in 1967), highlights were a pickled fennel, veal, and sweetbread roulade with a peach rum sauce and a London broil served with watermelon pickles. One of the guests was an Argentinean polo player who'd just retired from playing in Brunei and was now opening her own closed-door restaurant in Buenos Aires. After your visit, you can learn the tricks of Perlman's trade by visiting his online diary, where he posts his recipes and reflections on food history.

Dinner only. Address given only with reservation. Tel: 15-6132-4146 in Buenos Aires, Tel: 646-502-8699 from the U.S., or saltshaker.net

Paula de la Cruz grew up in Argentina and is now based in New York. She travels to Argentina frequently, where she produces Malbec wine. She contributes to *Lexus Magazine* and other publications.

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