

in Argentina would be something he'd take lightly. If anything, I expected him to question my ability to adequately cover the culinary turf of a nation measuring more than a million square miles in nine days. Instead, he questioned my ability to cover the animal.

"Steak . . . ?" he asked. "In Argentina, we eat every part of the cow."

"I can handle it," I said. "Just take me where I need to go."

Diego tipped his head and looked at me in the same way I'd look at my six-year-old neighbor if she threatened to drink me under the table. I hadn't paid much attention to the gesture at first, but then Rafael gave me the exact same look upon hearing my purposes for coming to his restaurant. I could almost hear him thinking, "OK, little American, let's see what you're made of." He began placing each forkload of beef on the grill with a slapping movement that seemed to say, "Take that! . . . and that! . . . and that!"

Such aggression caught me off-guard. After all, I'd come to Argentina with the reverence of a Buddhist going to Tibet. If you were to add up my thoughts throughout the course of any given day, you'd see that I think about eating and cooking meat over other things by about three to one. I've tried everything from dog paws in Vietnam to antelope bladders in Montana, and I consider those line-drawn butcher's charts to be like fine art. I always figured I was an honorary Argentinean at heart. Residents of the country pack away 143 pounds of beef annually, much of it grilled on the *parrilla* (a word that can also refer to the restaurant or the grilled meat itself) and served with little more than a sprinkling of salt. That's almost fifty pounds more than burger-fanatic Americans drown in ketchup and mustard in the same period of time. No wonder former Argentinean president Carlos Menem offered this recommendation to the U.S. trade publication *Western Beef Producer*: "Tell your readers, 'Don't come to my country if they're vegetarian.'"

I'd been obsessed with Argentinean beef since my first visit to the country, eight years ago, when I spent a few days fly-fishing for trout in the arid and rocky foothills of the Patagonian Andes. At the end of my stay, something magical happened on a twelve-hour bus ride. I'd been sleeping for hours when I awoke to see that we'd stopped in a small town somewhere between Bariloche and Bue-

STEVEN RINELLA

Me, Myself, and Ribeye

FROM *Outside*

THE GRILL AT El Boliche Viejo steak house, in the foothills along northern Patagonia's Limay River, near Bariloche, looks like something made from the recycled parts of a medieval torture chamber. It's built of firebrick and heat-blackened iron, and the grate is adjusted by a hand-powered system of chains and sprockets that move with a fine-tuned clink. For the past seven years, this grill, or *parrilla*, has been under the jurisdiction of Rafael Huemchal. He's about forty years old, with a pudgy face and black hair that he keeps tucked beneath a cheap short-order cook's hat. He served a full ten years in the restaurant's back kitchen before ascending to his current position. The length of his apprenticeship suggests the national importance of his job, which bears the cool-sounding Argentinean name *asador*: That translates roughly as "grill man," though as I watched Rafael I thought of Dr. Frankenstein, who, if he'd wanted to assemble a cow instead of a human from miscellaneous body parts, could have come here and saved himself the hassle of digging around in old graveyards. Rafael regularly handles beef cuts from front legs, back legs, ribs, heads, necks, hearts, stomachs, intestines, kidneys, tongues, brisquets, and diaphragms, and many of those were sizzling in front of us.

I'd been warned about this by my friend Diego Allolio. Born in Concordia, near Argentina's border with Uruguay, Diego, forty, owns Meridies, a Bariloche-based adventure travel company. The former rugby player often leads expeditions to such inhospitable places as 22,834-foot Aconcagua, the highest point in the Western Hemisphere. I had figured my humble quest to find the best steak

people who didn't really know what they were talking about, because sometimes you can turn up surprising pieces of information like that.

What I learned is that locating the best steak in Argentina is like trying to pinpoint the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden. A cab driver in Los Angeles told a colleague of my wife's that the best steaks come from the area around Bariloche. His opinion was in stark contrast with that of a friend of a colleague of mine, who suggested that the best steaks are more than a thousand miles north of there, near Iguazú Falls. He couldn't think of the name of the place, but he assured me that it was "on a main road near a bus station." Alberto Gonzalez, an Argentinean expat who owns one of my favorite restaurants in New York City, GustOrganics, explained that he couldn't in good conscience tell me about the best steak place. "Why not?" I asked.

"You would think I'm biased."

"Are you?"

"No, it truly is great. But it's owned by a friend."

"If you could tell me, what would you say?"

"I'd say, 'Happening. In Buenos Aires.'"

The testimonials suggested that I had to go just about everywhere. This was impossible, of course, so I settled on a plan to divide the country into three districts—central, south, and north, or Argentinean Beef Zones I, II, and III—and to conduct a whirlwind examination in each zone.

We started in Buenos Aires for the simple reason that that was where we landed, but, considering the history of Argentina, it was the perfect place to begin. Cattle were first introduced to Argentina in the northeast provinces by gold-and-silver-crazed Spaniards in the early 1500s. These early colonists didn't stay long, as they were harassed by natives and ran out of supplies. They abandoned many cattle when they retreated to Paraguay, and the animals turned feral and thrived on the verdant grasslands. When the Spanish finally returned, in 1580, to establish a permanent settlement in present-day Buenos Aires, they discovered a vastly multiplied and renewable export commodity that would enrich the city and provide the centerpiece of Buenos Aires cuisine for hundreds of years.

Katie and I planned to spend the next forty-eight hours eating

nos Aires. I was drawn to a small curbside restaurant stand with smoke coming from a crude chimney. At the counter, I was served an unusual cut of meat that would forever alter my impressions of beef. It was long and narrow, almost like a wooden ruler, though it was well over an inch thick. It was obviously a strip of ribs, like what you'd get if you spaced two saws an inch apart and ran them down your side from armpit to hip. They weren't stewed and saucy and greasy like American-style ribs. Instead, they were steaky—there was lean meat and fat meat, charred meat and tender meat, and the saltiness seemed to come from inside the meat itself. I ate four strips, then savored the small hunks of bone as if they were meat-flavored Life Savers.

The experience left me banging my fist in frustration that I'd gone my whole life without tasting something so wonderful. For years I tried to replicate that meal, both at home and in Argentinean steak houses in the United States. I never came close. It was like a gastronomical version of an itch in the center of your back, right where it's impossible to reach.

But Rafael was probing the borders of my tolerance with the half cow he'd thrown on the grill. When the waiter poured me another glass of wine, I became emboldened and looked at Rafael.

"Bring it on," I said.

Luckily, I'd brought along my wife, Katie. She mistakenly assumed that this was some sort of fun couple's trip, but I was actually using her for her belly. My midwestern upbringing forbids me from leaving an unclean plate, and I figured that I might need backup to handle stray scraps.

If Katie and I ever seek marriage counseling, it will be over issues of foreign travel. Our styles are polar opposites. I like to keep things free and easy; Katie likes to plan. She thinks my method is lazy and leads to a lot of missed opportunities; I think of her method as a pair of strong, warty hands wrapped around the neck of spontaneity.

Because I was dragging her along on an adventure of my own devising, I agreed to bow to her desires. My efforts toward organization would have made a Secret Service man jealous. I read restaurant reviews going back twenty years. I talked to dozens of American and Argentinean beef connoisseurs. I even talked to

steak for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Our first stop was a hard-earned recommendation I'd pried out of Clint Peck, the director of the Beef Quality Assurance program at Montana State University, in Bozeman, which pursues a "commitment to quality within every segment of the beef industry." Peck frequently acts as a beef liaison between the U.S. and Argentina. When I brought up the subject of Argentinean steak, he offered some potent opinions.

"I've got a well-trained palate for beef," he said, "and some of the best steaks I've had have come out of Argentina. I'm not shy to say that."

"Anyplace in particular?" I asked.

"Estilo Campo," he said. "If your hotel concierge in Buenos Aires tells you differently, he's likely taking kickbacks."

"How do you cook the cow eyeballs?" I asked.

We'd just been seated at Estilo Campo, in Puerto Madero, a bustling neighborhood of shops and restaurants bordering a system of shipping canals. When we walked inside, the restaurant's overblown beef theme reminded me of a Chuck E. Cheese's for steak fanatics. There was cattle-related art and spits of roasted meat displayed behind glass windows that looked into the kitchens. The steak knives were essentially serrated machetes. Our waiter was dressed in baggy pants and a pressed shirt, which made him look like a cross between a traveling salesman and a gaucho.

He was confused by my question. "I don't understand," he said. Nothing irritates me more than a waiter who doesn't know his own menu. I pointed to my copy and tapped the words OJO DE BIFE. "Right there, 'eye of cow!'"

His eyes lit up. "Beef ribeye. Sir?"

I played it cool by acting like I'd wanted that all along.

"Rare," I said. "Please."

Our attention turned to Katie. She's usually a very adventurous eater, but she was perusing the salads. I shot her the same glance I'll use if she ever admits marital infidelity and politely flipped her back to the meat listings.

She asked the waiter about the *bife de chorizo*. I recognized that from my beef studies. Unlike the Mexican or Spanish sausages that Americans are familiar with, it's actually a cut of beef similar to our sirloin strip.

He nodded, said, "*Excelente*," and tucked his pad into his belt and disappeared. When he swooped back with our dishes, he placed on the table two slabs of beef that were big enough to pull up their own chairs and have a seat. The closest thing we had to a side dish was a shaker of salt. I thought about asking for a hunk of lettuce or a grilled zucchini, but international travel brings out a passivity in me that Katie finds infuriating. Instead, I did what any man would do: I dug in.

Right off, I recognized the mild saltiness that seemed to come from inside the meat. The fat was sweeter and more palatable than most American beef. The cut had a certain resistance to being chewed—not toughness, but a substance to it that was very pleasant. It tasted real, almost wild. I knew right off that this was the steak I'd been looking for all those years, but instead of feeling sated, I felt egged on. It was like finding a few quarters in the crack at the back of a couch. Rather than thanking good luck, you're compelled to dig deeper and deeper.

When you factor in a glass of wine, three glasses of water, and close to two whole steaks (to say I had to finish Katie's steak would overstate her role), you'll see that I left Estilo Campo weighing about three pounds more than when I went in. We waddled over to the famous Plaza de Mayo, where adoring thousands gathered in the 1950s to hear Eva Perón speak from the balconies overlooking a giant monument of national hero General Belgrano. I fantasized about how much steak I could eat if I were the size of that statue, then dozed off beneath a palm tree.

I awoke an hour later in a panic about missing our dinner reservation at Cabaña Las Lilas, a waterfront steak house recommended by *New York Times* food critic R. W. Apple Jr. as a restaurant worth the cost of a plane ticket. It's fair to say that his assessment is still drawing clients. The restaurant was sophisticated and packed with well-dressed international tourists. As best I could tell, we had seven people attending to our table, and the prim staff served our steaks with a level of care you'd expect at a Sotheby's antiques auction. Of course the meat was perfect, but the hefty bill almost mandated that it had to be.

The steaks I had for brunch the next morning were just as good, though they came without the high prices. A well-connected friend had recommended La Dorita de Enfrente, in the trendy Palermo

district. After we ate, our wanderings were guided by our need to arrive for an early dinner with the second-generation co-owner of Happening, the place Alberto had recommended. The restaurant is located in the Costanera district, along the Río de la Plata. Katie and I waited at the bar for Fernando Brucco, forty, who met us wearing Italian sneakers and a wrinkled beige linen suit. I explained that I couldn't eat that much because we'd just tackled a couple of sumo-size steaks for brunch and another strange piece of meat for lunch. He advised me to drink more red wine, a commonly accepted Argentinean remedy for fullness.

As we ate a procession of amazing steaks, again and again I pressed Fernando about what makes the beef in Argentina so good. Finally he nodded at my half-finished ribs and said, "In Buenos Aires, about steak we do not talk so much. Not when we could be eating it."

I was reminded of his observation the next morning before we flew from Buenos Aires to Bariloche. There was a steak vendor across the street from the airport, working off a trailer-mounted grill. I ordered a steak from him, and he pulled the thin and strange-looking meat from a plastic shopping bag that was lying near the wheel well.

"Please tell me you're not going to eat that," said Katie.

I try not to talk with my mouth full, so I was unable to reply.

Diego Allolio, my friend and Bariloche-based mountain guide, had none of Fernando Brucco's reservations about discussing meat. He was driving Katie and me eastward out of Bariloche in his pickup. Lake Nahuel Huapi, the centerpiece and namesake of a vast national park, stretched away from us in three directions. Surrounded by snowcapped peaks, it was so absurdly beautiful you'd think it was sponsored by a postcard company. During our 830-mile flight from Buenos Aires that morning, I'd watched as the lush grasslands turned to arid desert and then began to rise toward these glacial valleys. As our plane dropped, we passed over the heads of hundreds of sheep and cattle and then landed in a small town dominated by Bavarian architecture dating back a hundred years. Now Diego was taking me to his favorite place to eat steak.

"No *parrilla* should be formal," he said. "Great meat is simple. It should be cheap." While Diego expressed some uneasiness about

his government's often heavy-handed involvement in economic matters, his opinions on affordable meat have some political backbone. In 2005, a surge in beef exports led to a sharp increase in domestic prices. The price increase led to international attention and widespread inflation, the way increased oil prices can single-handedly drive inflation in the U.S. As a remedy, the federal government stepped in to stabilize beef prices in early 2006, which put the finest cuts at about one-half of U.S. prices.

I'd been eating steaks several times a day, and the weight of it had settled in my gut like a wad of lead the size of a racquet ball. But as soon as we walked into El Boliche Viejo, I knew that tonight was not conducive to moderation. The medieval-looking grill was positioned in the room like the cross in a church, and Rafael Huemchal was piling on enough meat for a small banquet.

My sense of gastrointestinal dread was alleviated by the excitement of seeing a master at work. Rafael had next to him only a bowl of salt and a carbon carving knife. He didn't trim the meat of its connective tissues and silver skin. These, he explained, help retain the moisture of the cut and enhance flavor. Before cooking, he sprinkled the surfaces of the meat with a generous application of salt and let that soak in. The bars of the grill were made of quarter-inch angle iron with the troughs facing up and pitched at an angle in order to channel the fat and cooking juices away from the coals. This was imperative, Rafael explained, because one of the cardinal sins of *parrilla* cooking is to taint the charcoal flavor with the taste or smell of burned grease.

Another cardinal sin is to let the flame make contact with the meat. Alberto had explained to me that his countrymen can't help but laugh at American steak house commercials that feature flame-licked slabs of beef. Rafael kept the meat about ten inches above the heat source at all times. "This is not about speed," he said. He let the meat cook for an hour. Then, just before serving, he lowered the chains and dropped the grill to a position just above the charcoal. This was the moment when he put the signature Argentinean char on the steaks. The move represents one of the primary differences between Argentinean *parrilla* and your typical American barbecue, where meat is quickly "seared" the moment it's placed on the grill.

Thankfully, Katie was more interested in a local bottle of Malbec,

so her palate had been lubricated for a starter of grilled thymus glands, kidneys, and stuffed sausages. The glands were succulent and rich, but I could hardly bring myself to try the kidneys, with their urine-like aftertaste. Katie dug right in. "Don't be a baby," she said.

I spent the next hour in a beef-induced trance. I'm a little hazy about what exactly happened, but I know that I consumed at least a few bites of every cut of beef on a cow. At some point Diego drove us back to our hotel; and then it was suddenly morning again and he was waiting outside our hotel in a pair of shorts. This time we headed down the Limay River into a narrow valley of grasslands and bizarre rock formations. We pulled off the road onto a narrow trail along the river; on the other side, a man climbed into a small skiff and motored over to pick us up. We weren't halfway across when I detected the now unmistakable odor of a fully loaded grill.

Diego's friend Jorge Pinto met us on the opposite bank. A lanky and eager guy with a bush hat held around his neck by a cord, Jorge runs the secluded and rustic fishing-and-rock-climbing lodge Valle Cantado, with his wife. One of their specialties is home-cooked *parrilla* served to small groups traveling downriver by boat. Jorge took us to look at the *quincho*, which is like a walk-in dome-shaped oven with a diameter of about fifty feet and a ventilation hole in the peak of the roof. It was well over one hundred degrees inside.

Within moments of arriving, I was cradling a glass of Malbec and looking down on several platters of perfectly prepared meat. As I ate, I swore I could taste the rivers, the hardwoods, and the mountains. Just when I wondered if it was possible to become paralyzed from overeating, Jorge suggested we climb into the hills behind his property to investigate a number of ancient cave dwellings. I commented to Katie that we should have waited to eat until after we'd climbed. Jorge overheard this and assured me that I could have more meat once we climbed down.

I figured I'd eaten about twenty pounds of beef in seven days, and for the first time in my life I was considering going on a vegan cleanse. I was hurting as we flew twelve hundred miles north of Bariloche to Salta, smack in the heart of Beef Zone III. Salta, a historic Spanish colonial city, lies near the northeast border with Bo-

livia; it's a rugged and hot place dominated by big ranches, dusty farmland, fast-moving flatbed trucks, and lanky dogs. I was traveling north of the city in the early-morning darkness with Agustín Arias, whose home, Estancia el Bordo de las Lanzas, produces beef, polo horses, tobacco, and a wide variety of organic crops.

We'd gotten up at 3 A.M. because Agustín had promised to show me a slaughterhouse, which was a couple of hours away. (Katie had bowed out and found herself a swimming pool and a bowl of fresh fruit.)

I was dozing against the window when Agustín awoke me with a proclamation: "There are two things that are important in Argentina," he said. "Soccer and beef."

"I think I heard that line from someone already," I said, "except the person said—"

Agustín interrupted. "Politics, labor strikes, polo . . . The first word doesn't matter. The second word—*beef*—that's what matters."

As the truck took a series of rolling bumps, I began to question the integrity of the steak I'd eaten from the plastic grocery sack near the airport. My stomach was making peculiar sounds. When I explained my concerns to Agustín, he suggested a remedy of red wine.

I expected the slaughterhouse to be somehow less advanced than the ones I've visited in the States, but in fact it was as modern and brisk and sanitized as anything I've ever seen. I followed one animal through the processing line. Its journey began with a blow to the head and ended as twenty knife-wielding workers took the steer apart as easily as someone undressing for bed. I looked at Agustín and made a joke about the unappetizing nature of the spectacle by patting my stomach.

"Yes," he said. "It makes me ready for dinner, too."

I made an embarrassing performance during a lunch of beef ribs, and then Agustín took me to visit a good buddy of his. We drove back south toward Salta, then followed a byzantine maze of double tracks and trails that wound their way higher and higher into the dry, brown hills. Just when I figured there couldn't possibly be anything back there, we rounded a corner and came across four gauchos separating a group of cows and calves in a cloud of dust. As we watched, the owner of the estancia, Francisco, pulled

good grass, good estancias, and a good tradition. That's why Argentinean beef is the best."

That night, back at Agustín's, I thought of Francisco's statement as I poured Katie and myself yet another glass of red wine and watched one of Agustín's hired men prepare our meal on an outdoor *parrilla*. It was a process I'd seen half a dozen times or so by now, but still I reveled in the precision and uniformity of the task. There was the lighting of locally collected hardwood; the thoughtful adjustment of the grill; the sprinkling of salt, as careful as a beautician applying makeup; the long spell of patient waiting.

In America, we pretend that innovation and change are the hallmarks of great cuisine. We've even made game shows out of our desire to rethink every aspect of what goes into our mouths. There's always a new way to do this, a better way to do that. Hanging around in Argentina, though, I fell in love with the way people strive for a known and traditional goal. Not only do they know how to cook *parrilla*; they know that they know how. There's no apology, no second-guessing, and no need to mess with a winning system.

Forty-five minutes passed, and then an hour. The rib bones slowly turned the color of coffee with milk. The sausages lost their swollen, slightly medical look. The flank went from looking rubbery and impenetrable to something you could cut with a fork. It was slowly surrendering to the powers of heat and time, and once again my stomach was surrendering to the power of the *parrilla*. I'd waited eight years to eat this steak, and I took comfort that in eight more years I could come back and find it exactly the same.

STEVEN RINELLA

280

up alongside us. The first thing Francisco said to me was "Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, we eat meat. And we eat meat the day after those days, too."

In most respects, Francisco looks like your typical Wyoming rancher: four-door Ford diesel pickup, cowboy boots, a big gut that prevents his shirt from being fully tucked in. What set him apart was his red beret, which he wore with a haphazard fold above his ear. He has a 74,000-acre estancia and runs 4,000 head of cattle on it. The estancia has been in Francisco's family since the 1700s. Back then, they were raising the animals mostly for leather. Beef production didn't become the primary aim of the estancia until the advent of refrigeration, which allowed for the storage and distribution of fresh beef.

Francisco has not taken to trends in organic ranching. Rather, he's a follower of old traditions in organic ranching. When I asked if he uses antibiotics and hormones to facilitate faster growth, he responded as though I had asked him if it's socially acceptable to pinch your grandmother on the fanny. To do so would be a violation of cultural mores, he answered.

I found that Francisco doesn't employ the more egregious practices used by American ranchers. Many of Francisco's strategies are mandated by the economic realities of Argentina, where beef must be produced inexpensively. Instead of producing cattle with an eye toward high fat content, large body size, and quick growth, his aim is to raise healthy animals that can take care of themselves and live comfortably on the habitat without requiring constant attention from vets and gauchos. The calves must be small enough to pass through their mother's birth canal without human assistance. Rather than fattening cattle on grain for four months, which is typical in the United States, he puts his animals on grain for only five or six weeks before sending them to slaughter. It's just enough to add eighty pounds to the carcass, rather than the four hundred pounds common in the U.S. For the rest of their lives, Francisco's cattle run free-range in the meadows of his estancia.

Driving around with Francisco, I sometimes got the sense that we were watching a form of wildlife rather than livestock. His eyes brightened when he saw some animals through a distant gap in the trees. As we pulled up to Agustín's truck, Francisco seemed contemplative. "Everyone can produce beef. But in Argentina we have