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tell the tale

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NETFLIX'S STREET FOOD AND THE COLONIZATION OF NARRATIVE

The story of street food in Buenos Aires is the story of colonialism and European supremacy and Netflix's *Street Food* is the latest to fall into its trap.

Brian McGinn and David Gelb, the creator's of *Chef's Table*, have turned their gaze to *Street Food* and are back with a second season that explores Latin America with their signature formula: stories of perseverance over adversity and finding strength through familial love, community, and of course, food. The reaction in Buenos Aires was perfectly captured by Max Carnigore, a cook and staunch defender of dives and street stalls, who asked his Instagram followers if they felt represented: 382 of 400 people responded with a hard "hell no".

"This was another missed opportunity. I have never seen a foreign show or documentary that comes close to reflecting the way I feel as a Bonaerense [someone from Buenos Aires province] or Argentine." Carnigore explains, "It is always this made up version of reality that falls into the most heinous of stereotypes told over and over by the same gatekeepers."

To start, the story is littered with factual errors. From the inane, like a title frame that calls the colloquially named 'choripan' a 'sandwich de chorizo', to the head scratchers, like that empanadas are made from maize—unlike other parts of Latin America, the Buenos Aires empanada has always been made with wheat flour. Clichés felt planted, like two tango dancers filmed in a fair with a historic allegiance to folklore, or fatally miscontextualized by sloppily splicing platitudes like "in Argentina it doesn't matter what exactly you believe in" over video of protests from the largest grassroots pro-choice and anti-femicide movement on the continent, a group that most definitely cares about "what exactly you believe in". The most egregious came from narrator Silvina Reusmann, who begins by glossing over the expulsion and massacre of indigenous peoples and continues with false claims like "all porteños [Buenos Aires residents] have Italian blood" and "we are much closer to Europe than to the rest of Latin America."

Buenos Aires is always framed as a city of immigrants but we rarely hear about more than half of them. Old stock footage shows Europeans unloading off the boats but never the Brown Latinos crossing the border. The vestiges of a myopic colonialist mentality that has been around for five hundred years and that researchers have long disproven. Italian ancestry huddles somewhere around 50% nationally, and in the 1990s, eight decades worth of LATAM immigration caught up with the Europeans. Today, neighboring countries make up 80% of foreign residents. Additionally, an exhaustive 2005 study by geneticist Dr. Daniel Corach found that 46% of the Buenos Aires province also has Amerindian 'blood'. Add to that assimilated second and third generation Ashkenazi Jews from across Eastern Europe, Armenians and Lebanese, bi-cultural first and second-generation Japanese and Koreans, and recent waves of Chinese, Ukrainians, Syrians and Senegalese. Exclusively promoting the story of a city founded by immigrants implies a finality to a process that not only was never stagnant but continues to nourish.

As Carnigore pointed out, we've seen a version of the same story told a million times over. Anytime the media comes to Buenos Aires, it is to tell a narrow tale of Europeans lost in South America with a predictable checklist of places that usually fall into three or four neighborhoods in a city with nearly fifty. Rou-

tinely ignored is what the city actually is: immense, idiosyncratic, frenetic and plagued with historic inequality along often racialized class lines. In Netflix's *Someone Feed Phil*, host Phil Rosenthal readily admits that he has never been to South America and "knows nothing about" Argentina. A glaring reinforcement of hierarchy, Rosenthal visited eleven different restaurants, seven of which are in the same upper class neighborhood and four that appear in South America's 50 Best, whilst a voice-over talks about a city of Italians and Spaniards. The glaring imbalance was that a parade of celebrity chefs were allowed to tell their own stories, while the nameless chefs and owners of the two working class restaurants that were visited remained voiceless servers hovering in the background.

The obsession of the media to break everything down into the 'ten best' or speed through an entire city in 36 hours fuels this ecosystem in which all coverage of foreign spaces routinely falls into the trap of telling the story that's always been told rather than letting the real story fully emerge. As Rosenthal himself points out, this is ultimately contingent on a loop of faulty chains of information—producers, directors, interviewers, hosts, writers, editors—who have little or nil expertise in the area they are capturing, and thus, little vested interest in capturing it accurately. Every time they repeat the same simple narrative, the real one is further stripped of the privilege of human nuance and complexity.

The role of media and journalism in society is to inform collective consciousness. Media in all of its forms doesn't tell us how to think but it tells us what to constantly think about. What we are told is just as important as what we are not. Food and culture media, in particular, often absolves itself from that responsibility, negating an important role in humanizing entire cultures and communities and reinforcing the social pyramid, as if food and culture are simply recreational activities and not reflections of the socio-economics or politics of a specific place. Storytelling can never be decontextualized. No story exists in isolation. Telling the same simple story is like stacking cards into a deck, and the thicker it becomes, the harder it is to tear in half. The only way to shave down the deck is to repeatedly challenge the simple narrative with fuller stories. Repeating the hegemonic story and invisibilizing the stories that don't fit into it are ultimately mechanisms that aid social constructions which, in Argentina, further the goals of colonization. Just because the armed forces have retreated doesn't mean that the conquest has ended—it continues in the form of ideology that plagues the land they came to conquer half a millenia ago. To assert that there was never much native society to begin with is to empower police in Chaco to douse a Qom family in lighter fluid and threaten to set them on fire just two months ago. To negate the existence of Black and Brown bodies in the city's cultural framework is to empower historic state violence against young men of color in the city's villas. It is impossible to separate the societal construct from society's retelling of it.



armenian immigrants

When artist Marcel Duchamp arrived in the city in 1918 to escape the encroachment of WWI he found himself in a “Buenos Aires [that] doesn’t exist... a big provincial town full of rich people with absolutely no taste, and everything bought in Europe.” Duchamp encountered a city that was headed towards the final act of its Golden Age, a long period of unprecedented advancement on the global stage and a capital grabbing free for all by the ruling oligarchy who built themselves a cosmopolitan playground. For the reigning elite, food was always a tool for manifesting hierarchy and street food, which was never considered ‘European’ enough, was amongst the biggest losers.

“A lot of the elite referred to themselves as Spanish-Americans. They didn’t consider themselves Latinos. If you look at food consumption in the city of Buenos Aires from the times it was a Viceroyalty, there was always an aversion to the exchange of food culture between the Europeans and Indigenous peoples,” explains food anthropologist Carina Perticone. With respect to street food, “up until the 1860s, the sale of food in the street was permitted and taxed. There was food like grilled chorizo, mazorra, grilled sabalo [river fish] and empanadas. Around the 1880s, politicians began heavily regulating the sale of street food and until the 1930s there was still what was called “stadium food” [sic] pizza, faina and fugazza. Over time, they pushed street food into designated areas until it mostly disappeared.”

The city’s final push against street vending began underneath eventual President Mauricio Macri, who in 2007 was elected mayor in a conservative power shift. Modeling himself as a Giuliani of the southern hemisphere, he tasked himself with cleaning up a gritty city and endorsed policy drenched in the same xenophobia and white supremacy of a hundred years’ past. His political team, which continues to hold power over the capital, waged a successful assault that still targets disenfranchised street vendors that sell everything from pens to salami sandwiches. They started with food carts anchored outside train stations and other important transport arteries and then went after the city’s coastal borders, where a kilometer’s long promenade of barbecue stands were forced to switch from coal to gas and abide by a strict list of permitted foods. Arbitrary city ordinances, written with the exhausting bureaucratic eye for vaguely specific language, have had less of an impact on strengthening food safety and more on discouraging street food vendors altogether. The government continued their crusade neighborhood by neighborhood where mostly Brown Latin American women selling everything from pork tamales and fried chicken to t-shirts and tennis shoes to customers who usually belonged to their immediate communities.

The justifications from the city government’s team of public prosecutors was veiled underneath a collection of anti-corruption soundbites that often painted vendors as both villains and victims in the same breath. Amongst the discourse was failure to pay taxes on profits whilst stealing business from legitimate shop owners, threats to public health from unsanitary cooking conditions and stories of street vendors being tied to mafia groups and black market money laundering schemes. In a 2016 article published in one of Argentina’s largest newspapers, La Nación, public prosecutor Martín Lapadú warned about the prolificness of black market mafias and the need to “save street vendors from exploitation.” In the same article, a street vendor named Ramón Ramirez complained that his merchandise had been confiscated even though he was “up to date” on police bribes to hold his spot on the street.

The media war consistently worked to build an us vs. them campaign pitting street vendors of all sorts against brick-and-mortar businesses. In some cases, this resentment was legitimately felt, like in the once decadent Microcentro where storefronts found themselves competing for scraps with street vendors over ever-dwindling foot traffic. In immigrant rich neighborhoods, the story was much different. In the Bolivian neighborhood of Liniers, a flourishing commercial district sells products from the Altiplano. Along a three block stretch, colorful produce stands and cavernous wholesale spice and flour shops shared the sidewalk with competing vegetable and food vendors. Sidewalks that were once filled with bakers, juice makers and food that ranged from sweet Bolivian empanadas to fried

chicharrón are now a ghost of its old self. The only vendors that are left are the ones who moved to the other side of the same sidewalk to sell out of their own front doors. The rest vanished from sight.

In encountering a visible absence of street food, the show failed to ask the most important question: why?



Japanese immigrants in villa ballester

Leading Buenos Aires’ episode are Pato Rodriguez and Romi Moore, two cooks working out of Buenos Aires’ Central Market. Their value, we are constantly reminded, is built on the shoulders of acceptance of famous chefs and journalists. The market receives 10,000 truck drivers, produce vendors, cooks, wholesale purchasers and individual shoppers everyday from 2am to 12am, but, true to the city’s historic rejection of street food, *Las Chicas* is still amongst the only food stalls there. The side stories are rounded out by choripan vendor Rubén Batalla, empanada maker Fábian Peralta and septuagenarian master pizzero Francisco Ibáñez.

The stories serve the function of telling dramatic stories that ultimately uplift but the invisible story, when everything is wrapped up into one shiny package, is one of tragic assimilation. Whether telling these stories within the show’s context is good or bad is debatable considering that neither *Las Chicas* or *La Mezzetta* are street food stands nor do they sell food that are locally considered street foods. What is reprehensible is that their collective Eurocentrism only functions with the chronic exclusion of everyone else. This is storytelling as singular and exclusive rather than plural and inclusive, character building as false cannon and narrative treated as inconsequential. It’s lethargic investigation that absolves itself of responsibility of disseminating information that impacts real lives, and in folding itself into institutionalized structures of oppression, runs counter to the show’s own mission statement.

And it doesn’t feel entirely casual. The history of street food in Buenos Aires is drenched in tales of racial discrimination, classism and opportunity imbalances from the moment the Spanish settlers

landed. The show isn't unfamiliar with such themes. Political oppression against street vendors was the central story in the Bangkok episode. Venturing into marginalized neighborhoods wasn't a problem in Brazil either. What is the distinction in Buenos Aires and Argentina if not the people that are most often on the receiving ends of oppression and the bodies that occupy those stigmatized spaces?



Mauro Albarracin, known as Lesa to his 272 thousand followers, is a full-time youtuber who explores the dense conurbano. Buenos Aires' massive urban spread is home to 11 million people—3 times the size of the capital and a quarter of the nation's population. His fittingly named *Les Amateurs* employs a DIY documentary style to let locals, immigrants and economic refugees from around the country tell the stories of their neighborhoods and markets. While the media opts to demonize or invisibilize these spaces, Lesa humanizes and redefines their construction within the popular narrative, "I usually go out with a script, some prior research, but I give myself a lot of space to discover. I could spend the next ten years filming this. There is so much to tell. I want to tell the opposite of what's told and naturalize these spaces."

In nearly 100 videos, street food is alive and thriving. It begins in the morning with coal grilled flatbread and finishes with cold beer and steak sandwiches. It's also in the immense marketplaces where foods from around Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay and Peru all rub shoulders. The culture exists and there are people on the ground capturing it, they just don't get the call from mainstream editors and producers. Lesa also points out that you can see the mixture of cultures in real time, "At Starbucks, you can buy chipa which is Paraguayan. Go to the neighborhood of Laferrere and you'll find people eating hamburgers with Bolivian salchipapas. These are things that are happening naturally."

Perticone concluded that the foods of recent immigrants shouldn't be considered 'Argentine'—that would be an ingenuine appropriation. "Food that is representative of a specific place is that which is consumed widely and within a symbolic context that exists separately from its place of origin," she explains.

This may be true. Newer communities aren't the protagonists but can any single community tell the story of 15 million people? They are, however, major supporting players in the continuity of an already complex story. In the show's closing lines, we are told that "this is the new Argentine street food." The latter cannot be true without the former, and until we acknowledge and empower the stories and storytellers that exist in the real world, we will continue to fall into the trappings of an infinite loop of narrative colonization.

When that happens, I'll be waiting for Buenos Aires' due justice.

JORGELINA MANDARINA

Cook of “grandma food” and cuisine of the Argentine Mesopotamia.

We met one another in Buenos Aires and spent a lot of time cooking together in your restaurant and three years after its closure I’m still not over it. I remember when Matambre closed, you were feeling pulled back to Santa Fe and Entre Rios. Tell me what your childhood was like there?

I was born in a small town in Santa Fe. My mother is Paraguayan. I would say that she was transferred to Santa Fe. When my grandfather died, my grandmother became a widow at a very young age in a machista society that wouldn’t let her work so she had to divide up her children. My mom was sent to a convent, one of her brother’s was sent to live with an aunt in the jungle, and so the family started breaking apart. My grandmother fell in love with a truck driver with Italian roots, got married and brought my mother from the convent to San Carlos in Santa Fe. My mom had some children with a Polish man, and when he passed away met my dad and had me. My grandma took care of us. That is sort of the role of Paraguayan grandmothers. The majority of women in Paraguay are housewives and today only about 25% of Paraguayan women work outside of the house which is a lot considering what it was before. I was raised in the garden and chicken shed. I spent most of my childhood in my grandfather’s ice cream shop and the garden. I taught the chickens how to read, played games with them, they followed me everywhere like a mother hen. During the school year, we lived with my parents in the city, and when we had vacation my mother would pack my bag and put me on a bus by myself, like from the time I was four years old, and I’d go to the country to stay with my grandmother. And I have a lot of memories of like, weeds would grow on the walls and my grandma would grab them and be like, this is arugula and I was fascinated. You mean, we can pull that weed off the wall and eat it? There were a lot of moments like that. My grandmother was the only one that had preserved the Paraguayan accent. It fascinated me because it was kind of forbidden, here at home I couldn’t talk like a country girl because it was looked down on. I had friends that would tell me about their vacations on the beach and here I am teaching chickens to read. Cooking was really natural to me. My grandmother would kill the chickens and we would pluck them, the feathers would be used to stuff a jacket or mattresses. We’d cut them open and clean the guts. I never developed that aseptic relationship. It didn’t gross me out. I had to do everything. I think that is where my love for gastronomy came from.

What did you eat at home and what did you eat at your grandmother’s house?

At my grandmother’s house we ate whatever I wanted. She would wake me up in the morning with herb tea or with whatever weeds she found in the garden. Then the real breakfast would start. Milk with coffee and bread with homemade butter and she’d start asking me what I wanted to eat. My grandmother made a lot of soups, very nutritional food. She didn’t eat regional Paraguayan food even though that was who she was. A lot of stews. Very little meat. She cooked very vegetarian without really being aware of it, without putting a name on it, it was just what she had. I remember a lot of croquettes and buñuelos made with beet or sweet potato leaves or whatever leaves were in the garden. And at my parents house, my parents always worked since they were really young. So it was all the siblings that cooked. We ate experiments that got better over time, like, I remember my sister really liked Cuban rice and so we ate Cuban rice three nights in a row while she figured out how to make it. When my mother cooked, she cooked food with names. Now that I eat seasonally I realized that when I have a craving, it’s food with a name. Pastel de papa. Milanesa a la napolitana. When you eat seasonally, you eat what’s there, you eat food. At home when it was my turn to start cooking, I tried to imitate my mom’s cooking, food with names. I would draw menus and make people order food from me.



How did you end up in Buenos Aires?

As I got older I realized that Paraná was too small for me. Limited opportunities. I was always the weird girl in Paraná. I studied theater and was interested in other stuff. When I got to Capital, I stopped being weird. I found myself amongst people that [sic] we felt very at home with one another. It was in the city that I started getting to know different food communities. I lived really close to Once and started trying food from different street stands without understanding anything I was eating. And when I would tell that to my family they wouldn't get it. What? But you could be eating Italian food! But I was always really fascinated by food from different cultures. I started working in a cultural center and they put me in the kitchen and gave me the freedom to try things. That is when I started really opening myself up to a lot of questions I had about what we eat. I stayed in the kitchen because people kept telling me that was where I needed to be. I always felt kind of unsure, like I didn't know enough because I hadn't studied at the culinary institute, like what do I know? I knew a lot about soups and stews and understood how to build flavors that were influenced by my childhood. We opened Matambre and I turned myself into a cook by force and with a desire to bring joy and share, and that was the experience that really cemented this path. You have to dedicate yourself to something, you know? I have spent the last 10 years cooking and experimenting. I have always felt a little like I don't belong to this world and that I needed a title to do it but opportunities kept presenting themselves and with the freedom to be creative and over time I have felt more like a cook.

I really miss that kitchen. Obviously, it's the name of this fanzine. It was a political space with a concrete belief system but there was a lot of space for all of us to ask questions of ourselves and freely exchange our ideas and knowledge. I remember around that time you were starting a culinary journey that had a lot to do with your identity and recognizing the complexity of being from the border of Santa Fe and Entre Rios, Argentine, Mesopotamian and Paraguayan. I think the Mesopotamian side was what was resonating with you most. What does that mean for you? What is a part of that Mesopotamian identity?

[Editor's note: the Mesopotamia is Argentina's most biodiverse region, which covers three provinces across Northeast Argentina and thousands of native flora, fauna, birds, mammals and insects]

That changed over the years. I started to understand what it meant to be Paraguayan when I arrived in Buenos Aires. It really hit me because people don't see me as someone with Guaraní blood because I am so white. And I remember thinking to myself, I couldn't be more Argentine. I come from so many different places. I always saw myself that way. That Paraguay was just this part of me and I could be everything at once. But I slowly started to feel like I was being pulled in a specific direction. I think that more than a country, we are from a region. I think a lot about the river. The river passes through so much. The Río de la Plata comes from Brazil. It touches the Amazons, it never returns to the same place, it gets stuck, it brings life. I feel like the river is a part of my body. Part of that transcendence is in me. Mesopotamia is humidity and heat. It's nature and this sensation of growth. I feel like the river is a part of my body. In Buenos Aires I really understood my connection to nature. We don't see the river. We forget that it is there. We have this beautiful river and the city turns its back to it. That peace, that sense of pause, that is a part of me. Here we sleep the siesta. Here through the North [sic] Corrientes, Chaco, Formosa, Misiones, Santa Fe. You sleep the siesta. There aren't businesses that are open all day long. There is a respect for the sensation of time. I'm going to stop what I'm doing, eat, let my food digest and rest. It's not the best habit for capitalism but it gives life this space to be more present. That really started to speak to me.

You say that you didn't connect with your Paraguayan heritage until you were older, what connection did you have with that part of yourself as a child?

I kind of imitated my grandmother. She was the only one that held on to her accent and I felt like a kid that speaks two different languages. When I was with her, it was just us and I latched onto that accent. I think as a little girl there was some jealousy or resentment towards me. I am very white so I was treated like I wasn't really Paraguayan. I was raised without that part of myself. I always wanted to learn Guaraní and begged my grandmother to teach me but she refused. They distanced me from all of that culture that was inside us. Yesterday I spoke with my mother and she told me that it is hard for her to hear me mimic a Paraguayan accent which just comes out of me sometimes. When she arrived here people made fun of her. They asked her to speak so they could laugh at her. And so when she would stand in front of the mirror and practice her Argentine accent. She lost a part of her essence. As a little girl I didn't really understand that. I would get frustrated. I felt like I was being left out. As I got older, I started learning more about my food on the internet. Now I eat mbeju. But I tried it as an adult. I found a recipe online, I tried it, it was good and so I practiced and perfected my technique. One day I took some to my parents' house and they were like, how do you know how to make this? Now when I have to bring something over to eat, I make sopa paraguaya, which we never ate. It was a necessity to connect with something that was always inside me. I understand why it was rejected but that doesn't make it any less a part of me.

There is a parallel in my own family. My dad's mother is the daughter of Armenians that escaped the genocide and built their life in a small community of Armenians in Central California. It was a very poor community, farmers, workers, and they had to deal with a lot of discrimination. My grandmother slowly threw away pieces of her Armenian-ness. It's her first language and I have never heard her speak a single word. So my father didn't inherit any of that knowledge and I have nothing either. And I have the same sensation of that being a part of me that exists and doesn't at the same time. Both that specific culture but also the stain of feeling like you have to hide pieces of yourself in order to fit in [sic] I really think that pain or sense of otherness is passed down from one generation to the next. I remember at my grandmother's 80th birthday, my aunt threw a party and all of my grandmother's work friends, these women that she had known for forty or fifty years in some cases came. My aunt made a video about my grandmother's life with a title card with my grandmother's maiden name and her friends couldn't believe she was the daughter of Armenian immigrants. They had no idea. That was really shocking for me. And a part of me feels really sad that as a young woman she felt such a need to cover up that part of herself and all the reasons that someone decides to shed their identity. And how sad is that, that loss of culture and knowledge? So your mom felt the same way and it's that irony of coming to a 'country of immigrants' but one where there are preferred immigrants and unwanted immigrants that here are mostly immigrants from the rest of Latin America. The latino has to assimilate or be left out, and the European or North American can feel free to bring all their culture with them, right?

The immigration that happened over the last 100 years isn't the same as what happened 200 years ago, which were a bunch of Europeans that came to colonize and occupy space to better their lives. As far as I understand, this nation was built by taking away the rights of the people who were here. This nation was created by erasing the native communities. In the last 50 or 100 years, the Paraguayans came to work, now they work a lot in construction. And so to put yourself in that role as a worker and the place they have on the social hierarchy [sic] it's really capitalist to think of people as if we are part of a pyramid. There are people above and people below and the ones that are on the bottom need to stay there because that's the hand they were dealt. I know this has happened to you, we've talked about this, you are a white male journalist from the United States, no one asks you about your ethnicity or where your family came from. And to a certain degree, being white, the same thing happened to me. A lot of doors were opened that maybe if my complexion was different, I wouldn't have ever been invited to occupy those spaces, like what happened to my grandparents.

We see this a lot in the food. Even though different Latin communities are very present in the city,

they are either rejected and segregated or really exoticized. And within the narrative of Argentina, it is always talked about as a 'country of immigrants' but with this really extreme binary [sic] a simplified story that only talks about the immigration that happened up to the 1940s and everything that came afterward stays out of the narrative.

Yes and it's not just a matter of negating immigration. It's also a negation of what was already here inside Argentine territory. Before the War of the Triple Alliance, Paraguay reached Florianopolis and Corrientes. There is an entire section of Argentina that speaks Guaraní and not as a second language. There are other parts where Quechua is spoken too.

Where do you think that negation or editing of history comes from?

I think that it has to do with wanting what we don't have, what we can never be, rather than wanting what is right here. In Paraná, it's wild because there is native river fish, citrics, olives, regional cheese makers. Right now it's pumpkin season and they are practically given away. There are artisans of all kinds. And the people don't give a shit. People want, I don't know, french fries with fake cheddar [sic] instagram food. So instead of stopping on the side of the highway to buy danbo from a local cheese maker, they buy brie. That has a lot to do with there not existing a sense of nation. We watched Street Food the other day. Why did they go to Buenos Aires? Why do they always go to Buenos Aires? We are forgetting about all of the regions that have their idiosyncrasies and products that can only be consumed in that place.

In order for Paraná to start respecting or supporting a regional cuisine that is consumed by the masses, what are the challenges to get there?

There are thousands of challenges. Much of this has to do with access. The other day my mom said to me, how do you think about all these things? And I said to her, even if you don't think about this stuff doesn't mean that they aren't issues that affect you or that they are not a part of you. I think that is an injustice, not having access to information. I have access to an enormous amount of information that allows me to think and seek out alternatives. Maybe, for example, I'm reading about meat consumption and that opens the door to thinking about something else and something else. That ability to access or not, you see it in everything. Here there is a small movement of chefs making regional cuisine and they are all cooking with ingredients from Entre Ríos with French technique. What does one have to do with the other? Where is the regional knowledge? The closest that I have seen to eating from this earth is a place called Puerto Sanchez, which is a neighborhood of fishermen. They fish in the morning, set up tables at their front doors and sell whatever they caught that day. And more recently, they started setting up tables with pallets and selling food, maybe before the quarantine there were like 10 of them, and you could start to see that each one had some little detail that made their food unique. It's really beautiful. But accessing that, that is partly a choice too. I know that's there because I am hungry for that information. My sister, I think last year we went to this really shitty snobby bar and ate a bunch of crap. This year we went to eat fish at the port. And I was so happy. It is those tiny decisions, we need more hunger for knowledge, curiosity, that everyone take responsibility for that. I rented a house that has three patios. I've returned to the garden, which my mother always associated with poverty, it's a moment of vindication.





WHO CAN RESCUE FOOD?

In the summer of 2017, I decided to take a two week research trip to Misiones in the northeast corner of Argentina. It was a moment in the local and international food scene where discussions of embracing biodiversity, regional cuisines, ancestral recipes and native ingredients felt hot on everyone's tongue. Argentina was no exception. What began in Buenos Aires in the form of high-end tasting menus seeking out the construction of a new national cuisine was finally exiting the confines of the 50 Best Restaurants and filtering down into more casual establishments.

This had started to happen across the upper class neighborhood of Palermo, where restaurants like *Gran Dabbang* and *Las Pizarras* played around with national ingredients with great success. But more noticeable was a second wave in the working class neighborhood of San Telmo with cooks that began heavily exploring native ingredients and supporting independent producers, seeking out their space in a changing culinary scene. *Matambre Comida Salvaje* was a restaurant dedicated to food eaten with your hands that embraced seasonal produce, made everything in-house and built a menu that was adaptable to all diets. Chefs Jorgelina Mandarinina, Clara Inés and Guadalupe Alpuin opted for a heavily vegan menu served in glutinous, messy foods normally associated with meat. Meat that was used was carefully chosen: no chicken and an emphasis on often discarded cuts of beef, like a hand-rolled hot dog made with liver and other entrails or the occasional anticucho. At *Los Infernales*, the quest for autochthonous meats continued in the form of empanadas stuffed with Andean llama and river fish surubí, duck burgers and chorizo made from ñandú, a native ostrich. At *El Zanjón del Gato*, chef Andrés Plotno's cooking sensibilities floated between French, North American and Ashkenazi, and sought out local organic produce and sustainable meat, like deep fried quail and a beet salad that used the root and vegetable of golden and red varieties, both pickled and roasted—it was absolutely lucid.

I had heard that this was beginning to happen in other parts of the country, and imagined that Argentina's most biodiverse region, which cradles the borders of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay, was the perfect place to start. Early on I met with one the region's largest voices in the local culinary scene. I hopped in his car and we headed towards a nursery that was rescuing natives plants before visiting a honey farm which had been rehabilitated after years of yerba mate production had left it largely infertile. On our way out of the city, we were met with a block in the road. Families that worked in the fields of the yerba mate plantations were protesting sub-living wages and other abuses that are widespread across the industry. "Piece of shit Indians," he yelled as we were rerouted to another highway. I was so startled that I hardly digested anything he told me about needing to rescue autochthonous ingredients during the hour long drive. We would later eat grilled rabbit that was dry, overcooked, and completely insipid if it weren't for the squirts of lima-mandarina, a lemon-mandarin hybrid that I squirted furiously on top of it.

When I returned to Buenos Aires, I met a guy at a party who was from a small town in the center of the Misiones province. I excitedly told him about my trip, the mix of biodiversity and industrial agriculture and a growing desire amongst many cooks to respect native culture and ingredients put at risk by monoculture farming. I began talking about chipa, chewy globes made of cassava starch and cheese eaten morning, noon and night. He quickly interrupted me, "Chipa isn't indigenous, it is Misionero." Not really, I insisted, it's eaten across the Argentine northeast all the way up to Paraguay and into parts of

Bolivia. "It's Misionero," he repeated, insisting that without the Spanish introduction of eggs and cheese, the current recipe would never be possible. But, it came from a Guaraní preparation, it's in the name, I said. "It's Misionero", he repeated over and over again, never quite explaining to me what it meant to be Misionero nor who was allowed to be considered one.

That trip changed the way that I began interpreting this new process towards rescuing food heritage. Who is allowed to be the hero? Who are the ones that can lay claim over a local or regional or national cuisine? Can anyone? What spaces are allowed and legitimized to rescue national cuisine? And more importantly, how is that information and knowledge production passed on and recreated?

After speaking with Jorgelina Mandarinina about the ways trauma and pain are passed from one generation to the next and inscribed into our identities, I began to wonder how physical that interaction is. How much of that is connected through the blood that pulses through our bodies? If I inherited my mother's sense of humor, could I also have inherited the trauma of the great-grandparents I never knew who escaped genocide? I like to think that our ancestors live through us, no matter how distant they fall back on the family tree, and that that communication is true of everything, good and bad. They communicate connection and pride and intuitive knowledge but also disconnect and indifference and emptiness.

Maybe this is why, in thinking about the resurgence of rescuing food and patrimony, I was never convinced by the New Argentine Cuisine that erupted across the country in the early 2000s and continues today with the mission to create national and regional cuisines. There was always an obvious reason for my disapproval, like the linguistically-challenged use of the word 'Argentine' for a food that most of the population can't afford, or that it was often wrapped into so much technique and aesthetic, like 'monochromatic' or two-toned preparations, that I often wondered if the chef has ever stood on a farm before. I'm reminded of a meals at two Latin America 50 Best restaurants: at one, where I was served a cracker laminated with a leaf that was so aseptic it took three courses to wipe the flavor off my palate, or more recently at another, where food preparation was so despotic in its search for texture and color that its connection to the land was completely wiped away.

I think of the Centro Cultural Kirchner's top-floor restaurant, *Piso 9*. The restaurant was inaugurated during the presidential reign of neo-liberalist empresario Mauricio Macri, who at the time was the leader of a party that also held power in the capital and Buenos Aires province. The CCK had been built by the previous administration underneath a single, simple idea: access to culture is a human right. The multistory cultural space hosts concerts, art exhibits, theater, dance, yoga and tango—year around and often free. On the ninth floor, they erected a restaurant with a call to arms to rescue regional cuisines and bring it to the people by inviting chefs from around the country to design three course menus. The opening was highly publicized in a series of videos where celebrity chefs interviewed one another about the importance of empowering local ingredients for the people. Unlike the rest of the activities in the publicly owned institution, patrons had to purchase tickets that cost more than what many Argentines were capable of spending on a meal out. It was the 'democratization' of food knowledge for those who could afford it and the usurping of ideology as branding strategy. The meal I tried came from the region of central Córdoba, where we were served the saddest loco of my life. Loco is an important national dish, a corn stew that is a symbol of autonomy and freedom, and one that is wrapped in both the pain of the native whose land was stolen and the celebration of the immigrant that found a better life. This retold none of that. It lacked all sense of connection and body and transcendence. Very fittingly, in a building with unparalleled views of the city, the dining room looked towards the port and the artificial modernist neighborhood of Puerto Madero rather than inward towards the land and the rest of Buenos Aires.

Food is language. We use food to communicate everything about ourselves. The food we feed others tells everything about us: our mood, our economy, our politics, our social stratosphere. It also communicates the intangible. The food I feed others tells my history and the story of my ancestors and their pain or joy. It pulses inside of me—both the unconscious and the completely self-aware. And this is where these top down attempts and their search for higher meaning and revindicating what has been lost is set up to fail. Historically, the dominant class in Argentina have been the landowners. They made fortunes and consolidated power by limiting access to the land and the food that grew from it. A movement to rescue culinary patrimony can not function if it only serves the ones who stole that patrimony in the first place and continue to benefit from its hoarding and pillage. It's like stealing from a bank and redistributing the money to its board of trustees. If the people being fed connect to that land via uprooting and abusing, it seems inevitable that the one cooking it will intrinsically adopt that same relationship.

This is why it's important to shift the paradigm and change the spaces and language that this exploration typically plays out within. Because if the ruling class had developed the sale of their crops to distribute around the country rather than build an economy dependent on the export of industrial agriculture, a need to rescue ingredients and strengthen regional and national cuisine would likely have never existed. It makes little sense that they become its saviors. That responsibility needs to be divided evenly in the hands of regular people—access to food is an inalienable right and thus so should be the right to participate in its cultural construction. The narrative is always that Argentines don't know how to eat, that we don't know how to appreciate what we have, when the reality is that the bounty was stolen and the land's history was erased before it had the chance to turn into anything.

Matambre, El Zanjón and *Los Infernales* didn't survive very long, but maybe now, in a world that is more cut off and ready to reflect, this dynamic is more likely to change. When I spoke with Peter Drinan of *Americano* for one of this magazine's first interviews, he told me he was being contacted by farmers, who previously exported everything, and that his menu was being filled with ingredients he didn't previously have access to. Jorgelina Mandarina rented a house that would allow her to garden her own vegetables like her grandmother once did. I've spoken with countless cooks that have taken the pandemic as an opportunity to abandon abusive work spaces and start their own projects, seeking out connections with local producers and other independent cooks. There are more organic and agroecological vegetable bags than ever. And certainly, once restaurants open without the influence of tourists, high end restaurants are going to have to figure out how to cater to a wider audience.

I spoke with a baker and pastry chef Nicolás Claverie recently. He was struggling to find affordable pistachios. The only ones on the market were imported from Iran and cost roughly 4000 pesos a kilo or about \$50 depending on the exchange rate. It's amongst the most grown crops in the Andean region of San Juan. He contacted countless producers to find a direct source—the ones that responded told him that they exported but would sell domestically by the ton. I told this story to a friend in the food industry who retorted, pistachios aren't a part of our food culture, of course it's exported. Claverie was finally able to find a small producer that would sell at a quarter of the price. He wouldn't be able to use it otherwise. Stories like this are innumerable and until we begin to examine them and give the countless cooks and diners better access, [insert local ingredient here] will never be 'a part of our food culture'.

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