

Argentine Asado

By Stephanie Levin-Gervasi

American Way - Sojourns

Argentine asado is no meal for a vegetarian. Hunkering down for this South American barbecue is serious carnivorous business.

Rooted in tradition, asado shares a historical link with the Argentine gaucho, who roamed the pampas, tended livestock, and ravenously celebrated the end of the day with this dish. As word of this cowboy cuisine reached the capital, curious and genteel residents of Buenos Aires, linens and silver in tow, traveled to the countryside to participate in a Sunday afternoon asado. As the gauchos' culinary fame spread, asado restaurants began appearing in the city. Today, the Paris of South America boasts asado restaurants on every street corner. But the oldest asado restaurant in the city, La Estancia (941 Lavalle Street, 011-54-1-326- 0330), is a definite favorite.

Open daily from noon until 2 am., La Estancia's huge front window attracts first-time visitors as well as the curious. Men robed in gaucho attire stoke an open fire while roasting giant slabs of beef and chivito (goat), the house specialty. The asado criolla, made country style, involves binding a substantial portion of meat with the skin to a cross, arranging it over the fire pit, and roasting it to a savory perfection. La Estancia also prepares the traditional parrillas, or grill-style barbecue, with an array of skinless cuts that challenges the heftiest of appetites.

Don't expect ketchup or other gringo seasonings on the table; Argentines have their own indigenous condiment, chimichurri, a kind of Argentine barbecue sauce. Bring a hearty appetite and plenty of time when dining at La Estancia. Portions are macho-style, and the Argentine custom of sobremesa, dallying for hours over conversation while feasting like a king, is part of the asado experience.