

A homey meal steeped in culture at The Argentine Experience

By **DONNA BRYSON**
Associated Press

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina — Let's start at the end, with dessert at The Argentine Experience.

The Buenos Aires restaurant that immerses diners in culture offers an abundance of tastes and the stories behind them. On the night my family shared a communal table with another group of U.S. visitors, dessert included a delicacy prepared with sponge-like yacarata wood.

Alex Pels, one of the founding co-owners of The Argentine Experience, said in an interview that the earliest inhabitants of what is now northern Argentina chewed yacarata wood because it stored water. Pels' pastry chef sweetens the wood and serves it atop local cheese in precise cubes that wouldn't look out of place in a three-star restaurant anywhere in the world. The architectural treats seemed particularly modernist alongside another dessert we sampled, alfajores cookies, accompanied by the national drink of warm mate (pronounced mah TAY). The herbal infusion is a perfect, bitter complement to the rich pastries.

We also learned a decadent technique for enjoying the alfajores: Slather one buttery cookie with dulce de leche, a caramelized milk concoction popular across Latin America. Layer on another cookie. Roll the cookie sandwich in shredded coconut. Dip in melted chocolate for decadent good measure.

The main course was, of course, tender Argentine beef served with grilled vegetables and several versions of the traditional chimichurri sauce of oil, vinegar and herbs. But we also ate slivers of flavorful pork in a land famed for its beef. Pels told me that his partner Leon Lightman, who is from England, had been in Argentina several years before he encountered the pork cut Argentines call matambre.

"It's definitely something that Argentines would order and something that foreigners don't," Pels said.

In creating The Argentin



In this March 20 photo a tourist serves himself chorizo, the local sausage, at a dinner during an activity called The Argentine Experience in Buenos Aires, Argentina.



In this March 20 photo a tourist eats meat during an activity called The Argentine Experience in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Experience, Pels and Lightman wanted to showcase food visitors might be missing. One inspiration was chef, restaurateur and author Francis Mallmann. Mallmann was trained in France but gained fame with grilling and other cooking techniques of his native Argentina.

Pels and Lightman started out in 2011 serving dinners in an apartment in Recoleta, a neighborhood known for its historic cemetery. The next year they moved to airy, two-story quarters in the trendy Palermo Hollywood neighborhood.

Early on, customers said they were getting too much information from staff who guide diners through prix fixe meals. That's been relaxed, "so that people don't think it's

a class," Pels said.

Facts about the food shared in English were leavened by family stories and jokes during our visit. We also learned a few Spanish terms, such as how to order a medium rare steak (jugoso, or juicy).

The light tone didn't mask a deep understanding and appreciation of the food and its role in the broader culture. The relaxed approach and free-flowing local wine, though, did make it easy for guests to get to know one another, also a goal of The Argentine Experience.

Upon arrival, we donned aprons and chef hats. We assembled the cookie sandwiches as well as empanadas, folding mixtures of meat or cheese into pastry circles.



In this March 20 photo Jane Andrews, from U.S., second left, smiles during an activity called The Argentine Experience in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Tourists participating in The Argentine Experience have the chance to learn about the local cuisine, wine and traditions during a dinner in Buenos Aires.



In this March 20 photo people have dinner at a restaurant during an activity called The Argentine Experience.



In this March 20 photo a tourist makes his own empanada during an activity called The Argentine Experience.

The activities and uniforms created camaraderie among my family, the Israeli-Americans at our table and the Germans and South Africans at the next.

"People don't know how to meet other people when they travel. But that's how stories are created: You meet other people," said Pels, who has managed hotels and hostels and travels frequently himself.

Evenings at The Argentine Experience are conducted in English or Portuguese, but not Spanish. The program doesn't cater to locals because Pels fears they'd be unimpressed by the homestyle cooking. That left me wondering just how authentic my evening was. So I asked around, turning among others to

Mariano Bruno, a friend of a friend who is a political scientist and self-described "foodie" and wine enthusiast.

Bruno told me he has watched a revolution in Buenos Aires restaurants in the last decade, with many establishments sharing The Argentine Experience's awareness of the importance of ingredients. While I had enjoyed beef, pork and local vegetables at The Argentine Experience, Bruno said there was even more to explore.

"Not everything is beef," he said. "In this country we have great lamb. The best comes from Patagonia."

Argentine-American Lucila Giagrande Lucila's Homemade Alfajores supplies cookies to shops and cafes in the Chicago area. Giagrande

was surprised and pleased to hear that a fancy restaurant had served us the pastries and shared the ritual of heaping dried mate leaves into traditional clay mugs, pouring in not-too-hot water and sipping in turn from communal mugs.

"When the tourist or the traveler gets to hang out with Argentines (at their homes), one of the first things they'll do is get to share alfajores with mate," said Giagrande, who like Bruno is not associated with The Argentine Experience.

A night out that requires costumes and playing with your food could have been hokey. Instead, our Argentine experience was a friendly and relaxed way to learn about the locals and what and why they eat.

Pork medallions with grape sauce make a quick weeknight entree

By **SARA MOULTON**
Associated Press

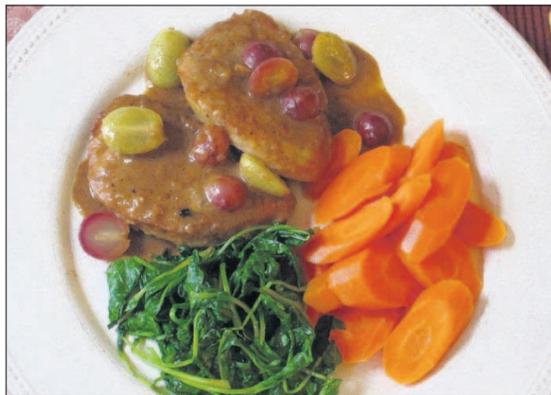
Here's a quick, easy and delicious weeknight entree that's certain to impress your family. The star of the show is pork tenderloin, the leanest and most tender part of the animal. Like beef tenderloin, pork tenderloin is a muscle cushioned by other muscles. It's tender because it's not used very much. I prefer it hands-down to pork loin, which is prone to cook up dry and tough.

Pork tenderloin is a narrow cylinder of meat, usually weighing between 1 to 1 1/4 pounds. For this recipe it's cut crosswise into rounds (or medallions). These medallions would be kind of puny if you cut the tenderloin straight down because it's only about 2 inches in diameter. Here, though, we slice it at a 45-degree angle into rounds that are around 3 inches in diameter.

Tender as it is, tenderloin will dry out if it's overcooked. This recipe arms you with two ways to guard against it. First, dip the medallions in flour before browning them. Second, brown the meat very quickly, just one minute per side. (Make sure your pan is good and hot before adding the meat.) The flour not only furnishes the meat with a protective outer coating, it also helps thicken the sauce when the meat is returned to the pan at the end of the recipe. And the quick browning leaves the pork extra-pink inside, which makes it that much harder to overcook afterward.

The grapes are the surprise ingredient here. Much as we love grapes straight off the vine, a cooked grape is one in which the flavor has been concentrated. In effect, it becomes grape-ier. Once you've tasted the cooked grapes in this recipe, you may find yourself adding them to other savory sauces. Try them with sauteed chicken and see for yourself.

Sara Moulton is host of public television's "Sara's Weeknight Meals." She was executive chef at Gourmet magazine for nearly 25 years and spent a decade hosting several Food Network shows.



Sara Moulton via AP

SAUTEED PORK MEDALLIONS WITH GRAPE SAUCE

Start to finish: 40 minutes (20 active)
Servings: 4

- 1 pork tenderloin (about 1-1 1/4 pounds)
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- Kosher salt and black pepper
- 1/2 cup Wondra or all-purpose flour
- 1/4 cup minced shallots or onion
- 1 cup red or yellow seedless grapes or a mix, halved
- 1/2 cup dry white wine
- 1 1/2 cups low sodium chicken broth
- 1 teaspoon firmly packed dark brown sugar
- 1 1/2 tablespoons Dijon mustard

Slice the pork diagonally at a 45-degree angle into 7 to 8 pieces, each about 3/4- to 1-inch thick. Don't worry if the pieces are not all the same size. Just make sure they are all the same thickness.

In a large skillet heat half the oil over medium-high heat. While the oil is heating, season half the pork medallions on both sides with salt and pepper and then dip them in the flour, shaking off the excess. Add them to the skillet and brown them quickly, about 1 minute a side, transferring them to a plate when they are done. Repeat the procedure with the remaining pork, flour and oil.

Add the shallots to the skillet, reduce the heat to medium-low and cook the shallots, stirring, for 1 minute. Add the grapes and cook, stirring occasionally, 5 minutes. Add the white wine and deglaze the pan, scraping up the brown bits and simmer the wine until it is reduced to about 1/4 cup. Add the chicken broth and sugar and simmer until reduced by half. Whisk in the mustard. Return the pork and any juice from the plate to the skillet and simmer gently, turning the medallions, several times, for 2 minutes. Divide the pork medallions among 4 plates and spoon some of the sauce over each portion.

Nutrition information per serving: 382 calories; 124 calories from fat; 14 g fat (2 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 92 mg cholesterol; 360 mg sodium; 24 g carbohydrate; 1 g fiber; 8 g sugar; 33 g protein.

Filet mignon with pistou and salad

By **KATIE WORKMAN**
Associated Press

Wow, does this dish look classy, right? But look at the ingredient list — not too long. And look at the steps — pretty darn simple.

My boys love all kinds of steaks, though a perfect, tender filet distinctively communicates "special occasion." They are no harder to cook than any other steaks; just make sure to have the temperature high enough in the pan that the outside gets nicely seared while the middle remains pink,

and be careful to not overcook it. A medium rare filet will have an internal temperature of 130 F.

Pistou is similar to pesto, though often made with a looser consistency, and sometimes the pine nuts and/or Parmesan cheese are omitted, resulting in a simpler basil, garlic and olive oil sauce. That's the drizzle you're going for here, just a pop of herb-infused green olive oil to brighten up that perfect little filet. Then all you need is a handful of lightly dressed baby greens on the side and you are in business.



Sarah E Crowder via AP

FILET MIGNON WITH PISTOU & GREEN SALAD

Serves 4
Start to finish: 25 minutes

- 2 garlic cloves
- 1/2 cup fresh basil leaves
- 1/3 cup plus 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, divided
- Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- 4 5-ounce filet mignon steaks, about 1-inch thick
- 1 tablespoon white wine vinegar
- 5 ounces mixed baby lettuces

Make the pistou: Place the garlic cloves in a small food processor and mince. Add the basil and process again to chop, then add 1/3 cup of the olive oil, some salt and pepper, and blend until it becomes a bright green sauce.

Season the steak generously with salt and pepper. Heat a large

heavy skillet, such as cast iron, over medium-high heat. Add 1 tablespoon olive oil, and when the oil is hot, sear the steak for 3 to 4 minutes on each side for medium rare. Remove the steaks to a cutting board and let them rest for 5 minutes before serving.

While the meat is resting, in a large bowl combine the remaining 2 tablespoons olive oil, the vinegar, and salt and pepper. Stir to combine, add the lettuce and toss.

Serve the filets with a drizzle of the pistou on top, and a couple of handfuls of the dressed mixed greens. Pass the rest of the pistou on the side for extra drizzling.

Nutrition information per serving: 542 calories; 356 calories from fat; 40 g fat (8 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 116 mg cholesterol; 231 mg sodium; 2 g carbohydrate; 1 g fiber; 0 g sugar; 42 g protein.