



🍴🍷👠❤️ EAT, DANCE, LOVE





## An extended sojourn in Buenos Aires



BY CAMILLE CUSUMANO  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAVIER PIERINI

Opposite page: The bright colors of Buenos Aires' La Boca area. This page, from top: A parrilla's culinary offerings; tango footwork.

# M

Y FRIEND PATRICIA and I were singing shamelessly at the top of our lungs, waving our arms to suitably dramatize the already dramatic lyrics. We sat in the front row of the tango show at the Mansion Dandi Royal in Buenos Aires. We had behaved demurely as we made our way through the cobbled streets in a barrio steeped in the lingering touches of a long-ago bourgeoisie—courtyards and art nouveau refinements on Spanish Colonial buildings. But seated in an elegant dance salon, we morphed into schoolgirl groupies.

Onstage, the singer had just twirled his curvy slit-skirted partner in sultry tango moves that included *ganchos* (hooks), entwining the woman's fishnetted, stiletto-heeled legs with his own. In typical warm-hearted Argentine fashion, he egged us on. "*Por una cabeza de un noble potrillo!*" Patricia and I belted out with him. "Translation?" Patricia said, "Losing by the head of a noble horse." I knew the music well—it has starred in many films. It's the tune Al Pacino dances to in *Scent of a Woman*. But until that night I hadn't realized it was my life's theme song.

Now Patricia was yelling in my ear. "This guy gambles on horses and love and, well, sometimes he wins, sometimes loses, but always barely—*by a horse's head!*" I went melancholy. Was it really only just over a year ago that I found myself single again—and gambled on this move to Buenos Aires? My 15-year relationship had ended, in part due to my tango obsession. I didn't know a soul when I arrived in this Latin city to chill for two months. But a year and a half later, I had yet to move back home.

A city that sizzles and never sleeps was the perfect refuge for a broken heart. It wasn't just the tango, which I could dance from 2 p.m. to 6 a.m. By day, I wandered the leafy tree-lined streets of the "Paris of the South," endlessly captivated by its French and Italian Renaissance architecture. I crawled around the stunning Palacio de Aguas Corrientes, Palacio Barolo, and Teatro Colon. Day

or night, I could find a café or bar for an espresso jolt and a *medialuna* (croissant) or a glass of the country's dark Malbec. Strolls to parks, museums, bookstores, gelato parlors, and tango classes packed my days.

A distraction became a passion: night after night I hit the *milongas*—the dance halls. I discovered the healing power of tango endorphins. How could moving to the music of a crying violin and a moaning *bandoneons*—it's an Argentine concertina—in close embrace with a dozen or more men a night not feel wonderfully uplifting? I'd met Patricia and all my Argentine friends in the dance halls, and it was over food and its inherent rituals that we cemented our bond.

## FOOD EAT

After our "performance," Patricia and I were famished. We stepped out into the cobbled streets of San Telmo, one of the barrios, along with neighboring La Boca, where tango was born more than a hundred years ago and where it's still danced in the streets and in the plaza on weekends. We followed the tantalizing aroma of charcoal-roasting meat to a *parrilla*, one of the Argentine grills that are temples of grass-fed beef.

I was an *asado* (barbecue) virgin when I met Patricia. Formerly married to a gaucho, she had me salivating with stories of how she cooked over a wood fire, even her *dulce de leche*, that miraculous alchemy of caramelized milk and sugar that I ate every morning at breakfast. At one of her favorite *parrillas*, I had my first tastes of the earthy Argentine pampas in the various cuts of rich and tender beef she ordered. We worked our way through *morcilla* (blood sausage); *lomo* (sirloin) cooked *a punto* (medium-rare); *chorizo* (sausage); *molleja* (sweetbreads); and empanadas, plump pastry stuffed with a Mediterranean-seasoned beef mixture or an array of other fillings. "*Muy rico*" (very delicious) and "*iriquisimo!*" (most delicious!) punctuated our feasting.

There was much more to sample at other sittings, including the *bife chorizo* (T-bone equivalent); *matambre*, a chewy meat the gauchos strung to their saddles as they roamed the pampas; and—well, maybe—the entrails, called *chinchulines* (calf intestines).

On my own in Buenos Aires, I savored the briny sweetness of Spanish fish stews and saffron-tinted paella at La Gran Taberna and Oviedo or the hearty Asturian seafood at Palermo Preferido (Asturias was an ancient Spanish kingdom).





I told my friends: “*Es corta, la vida*”—Life is short.



Clockwise, from top left, opposite page: A café beckons; tango dancers; a flower sculpture; Bartolomé Mitre monument; *medialuna* for breakfast; a winding staircase; a Buenos Aires street scene; Neapolitan pizza



Couples take to a milonga's dance floor

## I rapturously danced every *tanda*.

Buenos Aires is overwhelmingly Italian, a result of the waves of immigrants who landed here in the early 1900s—and the cuisine shows it. My friend Marcela, a caterer in San Telmo, spoiled me with her *riquísimo* pasta Bolognese made with *lomo*. As we sat on the airy terrace of her home, she pushed a plate of her chocolate flan in front of me and helped make a list of the city's best Neapolitan pizzas (the mediocre ones are all too prevalent): El Cuartito, Pizza a la Parrilla, and Pizzeria Pirillo. When I stood up to leave, Marcela looked me over. “*Que flaquita sos*”—how skinny you are—she exclaimed, and, to fix that, she handed me a bag of her handcrafted *alfajores*, indescribably delicious iced cookies sandwiched with *dulce de leche*. Hey, I needed to keep up my energy. I was burning calories as fast as I consumed them.

### DANCE

I had met Marcela through our common friend, a tango instructor with the fabulously heavenly name Angel Cristaldo. At his dance studio in the upscale Recoleta barrio, he would come at me after a practice session with a fork, a piece of *morcilla* suspended from its tines. “*Tenes que comer hierro*”—you need to eat iron. Iron deficiency, he insisted, was why one of his students, a vegetarian, could *simply not dance tango*.

Thursday evenings at 11, when the *milonga* was just heating up, I found Angel at Confiteria Ideal, an atmospheric old dance hall a few blocks from the landmark Obelisco. After handing over my free pass, a flyer scribbled with Angel's initials, I climbed the marble stairs to the salon, with its dark wainscoting, beveled mirrors, and soaring columns. I found the

table marked “AMIGAS DE ANGEL.” Of all his many *alumnas* (students) from around the world, it was with Marcela that I had *buena onda* (slang for good vibes). With her black wavy hair pulled back tightly to emphasize her Nefertiti neck and luscious red lips, she taught me how to sit poker-faced as we rated the men dancers. Her highest rating: *divino*—divine. The worst: *iQue olor fatal!*—he stinks (loosely translated).

By the time we met, I had conquered my fear of *cabeceo*, the oh-so-subtle head-nod-cum-eye-lock that Argentine men dispatch to invite women from across the room to dance. In fact, I knew the time-honored art so well, I could have a man thinking he invited me when it was the other way around. “*Es corta, la vida*,” I told my friends like Marcela, who marveled that I seldom sat out a tango—life is short. I rapturously danced every *tanda* (a series of three or four like-themed tangos that you implicitly commit to with the same partner, once you accept his *cabeceo*). Each time I entered that warm, torso-to-torso embrace, and felt the music that was born of longing, I became the happiest woman on earth.

But occasionally my overly active *cabeceo* fluency failed to get my man. Such was the case, at least at the outset, with Oscar Coda, aka Oscar the Grouch.

### LOVE

I had studied Oscar at Salon Canning in the city's Palermo district. He seemed to float within his own body, his confident arms caressing his partner as if she were a bouquet of flowers. At Niño Bien, a vastly popular Saturday-afternoon *milonga*, I had swooned over his graceful lines

as he glided on the balls of his feet. But he only returned my smile with a curmudgeonly stare. (The closest word to curmudgeon in Spanish is *cascarrabias*, meaning grouch.) I nearly broke the strict *codigos* (codes) and asked *¿Señor, porque no me sacas a bailar?*—sir, why don't you invite me to dance? Instead, I gave up on Oscar.

Lo and behold, a few nights later at Maipu 444, an intimate *milonga*, he invited me to dance, four *tandas*. I was not disappointed and reported back to Marcela, “*¡Divinísimo!*”

Etiquette advises couples not to talk during the dance, but between songs you are allowed a brief *charla*, or chat. Oscar's and my first *charla* naturally went to food. His father was born in Piemonte. My four grandparents were immigrants from Sicily. It felt so natural, and had almost never happened. A different club, different night, different choice, and we'd never have met or danced. We had an animated discussion on how to make the best salsa marinara. Our hands flew and our voices rose even as the next song began. Nearly four years later now, we have not ended our debate. And we are still dancing tango together between Buenos Aires and my home in San Francisco.

Buenos Aires made me grateful for encounters that initially seem fleeting but somehow endure. To think of it, I have Oscar's love and friendship—and Patricia's, Marcela's, Angel's, and Carmen's, Anamaria's, Hector's, Marialelia's . . . and all of Buenos Aires'—*por una cabeza*. By a mere horse's head. ✨

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