

Secret supper club society

'Puertas cerradas' are opening their doors to increasing numbers of foodie fans

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Health staff

The *puertas cerradas* concept has an element of exclusivity about it, even if that isn't the intention. Going to a "closed door" restaurant is a little like participating in a treasure hunt: word of mouth has probably led you to a website, you disclose some personal details, await a phone call and then you are directed to a large yet inconspicuous stone on a certain street corner under which you'll find your final destination on a scrap of paper. Okay, that's over the top. But once the hunt is over, you should hopefully find a pot of gold containing a gourmet dinner comprising several courses in a private house.

What gives it this exclusive air is that these owner-run restaurants cater for a handful of people, just 12 for example, who need to reserve in advance, but there also is an element of the personal about the evening as you are welcomed into the chef's own home, and it's quite likely that their partner will be serving up dinner and drinks.

The idea originates in Cuba, says Ezequiel Gallardo, owner of *Treinta Sillas*, which has been open in Colegiales for just over a year. "It's very common for people to go round to a family's house but pay for the dinner, and this concept is known as 'paladares'."

The idea of going out to eat in someone's home in Buenos Aires and are constantly on the lookout for something new in cuisine, will always demand more than the bog-standard fare of pizza, pasta and *empanadas* that rule the culinary roost in this city. And it's fair to say that the *puertas cerradas* chefs target this particular market, which includes foreigners and Argentines.

The other element to enhance this whole supper club phenomenon is that you probably won't know what you are eating until it's placed in front of you: surprise plus secrecy plus selectivity is what is making this culinary scene explode with a whole new wave of popularity.

"Although it is called 30 Chairs, I actually provide a four- or five-course dinner for around 18 to 20 people in my house. In the summer I make two starters, and once the weather gets colder I will make two main courses. Customers always leave satisfied and full! My food has a Mediterranean base, and my aim is to create a simple menu with the best products available," says Gallardo, who at 29, has had an impressive career at Museo Renault and *Katrine*. He was sent to the US for a year to open another *Katrine*, was recently the consultant for brand-spanking new Peruvian restaurant *Pozo Santo* in Palermo Viejo, and a new dimension to his success includes writing a food blog for a national newspaper's website, which begins next week.



Pull up a pew at Casa Félix.

repeated a single dish. I have a lot of fun in my kitchen and at the end of the day, I like to eat."

By contrast, Diego Félix and his North American girlfriend *Sara Ritzen* put their hearts, souls and natural instinct into the Chacarita-based *Casa Félix*. His idea, when he set up his *puerta cerrada* almost two years ago to the day on February 23, 2007, was to "have an original Argentine kitchen which uses original from a trip to Córdoba where we found some unusual berries, small and red like juniper, called *molle*. In Córdoba they are known and eaten all the time for medicinal purposes, but they never get here to Buenos Aires — there's no education about our native plants, so there isn't any demand for them. I'm not sure what

providers — and this really helped me with the setting-up of my own place. And these are the advantages: I design the menus, I go to Chinatown to buy the fresh herbs I want, and I open when I like. Until now it has appealed mainly to Argentines, although about 30 percent of my clients are foreigners."

ther 20 heads. "I cook but I also wait the tables — often in Bermuda shorts," says Gallardo, emphasizing the informal nature of his establishment. "What I want to do is deliver a first-class restaurant experience, from the quality of the cutlery and plates down to the food. In 60 weeks of being open I have never



Treinta Sillas' interior has a sophisticated air about it.

to do with them — perhaps I'll make an ice-cream from them or put them in an oil."

Although his *puerta cerrada* concept is the same — book in advance, eat at a chef's home, a surprise menu — *Casa Félix* has an emphasis, albeit subtle, on educating the client. The owner wants "to show tastes of the continent. I try to make healthy, tasty food with a vegetarian slant. But this is just the beginning of the journey and we are starting to learn. This isn't about being a private restaurant but showing what there is out there."

The couple live in a rustic yet chic condo, with a patio space in the middle of the house which they open three times a week to between 12 and 15 guests a night. Here, they are seated at individual tables on the patio and Félix begins the evening with a tour of his herb garden which is filled with aniseed, *basilito*, which is a local kind of lemony mint, peppers and peppermint. Félix designed his kitchen which has tens of culinary gadgets squeezed into the metal shelving and he is always happy to give a tour of his spice cabinet.

One issue that may perturb potential guests is with regards to the menu. "What if I don't like a certain ingredient or have an allergy to something?" you may be asking yourself. Gallardo puts that week's menu up on his website while Félix says: "I never know what I'm going to cook until the last minute. There are always some small adjustments. dinians worry about whether they will like my dishes. But I've spent two years making, learning, combining, playing and inventing. Clients return, and that makes me happy."

And Gallardo adds: "Most people like everything that's placed in front of them because *puertas cerradas* attract foodies."

And that sums up the concept. Foodies have opened up their home to fellow foodies, keen to share their knowledge and expertise, so the least clients can do is eat up every last scrap, leaving their plate licked clean.

OTHER PUERTAS CERRADAS

Kensho: <http://kensho-restaurant.blogspot.com/>
Casa SaltShaker: www.casa-saltshaker.com
Casa Coupage: www.casa-coupage.com.ar

WHERE & WHEN

30 Sillas, Thur to Sat, tel: 15-4492-7046, www.treintasillas.com
Casa Félix, Thur to Sat, tel: 4555-1882, www.diegofelix.com

COURTESY OF EZEQUEL GALLARDO