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September 26, 2010

Buenos Aires: Behind Treintasillas' Closed Doors



Above: *The dining room and bar at Treintasillas*

"Supperclubs", "underground restaurants", "closed door restaurants" and "private kitchens" have been buzzwords in major foodie cities during the entire time we were on the road. A blend between a restaurant and a dinner party, these underground eateries seek to create a more intimate and titillating dining experience by being located at the chef's home. Some provide a delicious space in which to meet other adventurous foodies, by seating the evening's motley crew at 1 large table. Many of them operate for a few evenings a week only, take in diners only by reservations, and feed these same diners according to some mix of their creative whim and the providence of that week's seasonal market bounty.

I was keen to get in on the underground dining action at least once while we were travelling. We passed through Paris, Berlin and Hong Kong unsuccessful on this front -- either because the asking price was too rich for our backpacking blood, or else because we couldn't make the dates work. But finally, good timing and reasonable pricing came together in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

After debating with Babs and South America travel companion and longtime fellow foodie Jas about whether we wanted a local chef -- who might more likely draw a Spanish-speaking only crowd -- or an expat chef that was more likely to attract fellow gringos, we decided to punt on a more "local" experience. Through a not overly scientific scan I decided to book us into **Treintasillas** (30 Chairs). The closed-door restaurant is located in the working class neighbourhood of Colegiales, and is helmed by chef Ezequiel Gallardo. At the time of dining dinner cost a fixed price of ARS 120, or ARS 170 with wine pairing -- pricey by Buenos Aires standards but still reasonable by big global city standards.

We went with the wine pairing option. I will list the wines we tried here, but need to share a quick disclaimer that I'm very much unschooled in describing wines, so won't go into credible detail on reviewing them here. All I can say is that the pairings were all pleasant enough, but none really jumped out at me in terms of obviously ~~accentuating~~ accentuating a dish.

Our group was the first to arrive that Friday evening, and we were greeted by boyish looking chef himself. Chef Gallardo ushered us into a cosy dining room (above). I was slightly disappointed upon realising that Treintasillas was not one of the more socialable 1-big-table outfits, but shrugged it off quickly. Later that evening I would poke my head into the backyard of the property, where I spied a gorgeous parrilla (grill). The dinners are held outside during Argentina's warmer months, I'm told. Very gaucho chic.

Chef Gallardo started us off with a scrumptious minced beef spring roll. The skin was light and crispy and the filling flavourful. A cute Asian twist on the carne **empanadas** we'd be sampling almost religiously everywhere else on the continent. The pairing wine was a Festivo 2009 rose from Mendoza's Uco Valley. Roses for me always signal impending fun with a touch of silliness, so we were off to a good start.

Our first proper course was beef carpaccio dressed with a thread of oil and herbs, a bangle of tiny sweet cherry tomatos, a pinch of rocket and 2 crackers of fried cheese.





Argentina is famous for its superb beef and this was a fantastic platform to showcase the stuff. The dressing gave the dish a lift but there was no threat of or need to cover up the inherent beefy taste of the carpaccio (as might sometimes be the case with steak tartare). To say that this was my favourite dish of the evening is an understatement -- I reckon there is a special place in heaven for this beef carpaccio.

Our 2nd course was a tasting-size quiche. My head is still woozy from carpaccio bliss at this point, but I remember liking the smoky quality of the quiche (from the bacon bits if I remember right) and I also enjoyed the texture and bite of the thin potato strips hiding under the velvety blanket of cheese.



Our two meaty starters were paired with a glass of D.V. Catena, a 2005 Syrah by Catena Zapata -- a lovely medium-weight red that didn't bully the lightness of the carpaccio.

Next up was the main -- a scallop and pea risotto paired with a Zuccardi 2008 Chardonnay from Mendoza. I had high hopes for this dish. Aside from trout and the occasional *surubi* (catfish), seafood was for us a rare find on an Argentinean menu.



Sadly the risotto was the disappointment of the evening. The scallops were sweet and the rice sufficiently flavoured, but ultimately too al dente for a risotto. The unanimous feedback from our table was that our batch of risotto needed 5 more minutes on the stove. It pained me to tell Chef Gallardo this -- I hope I was sufficiently gentle and constructive, because we enjoyed his evening's work otherwise.

And finally, for dessert: a masterfully made souffle with raspberry compote, arriving as hot, rich, sweet and tart as the best of any Buenos Aires estancia heiress. To bookend the evening, the final pairing wine was a *Del Fin Del Mundo* (End of the World) Extra Brut Pinot Noir + Chardonnay Rose from Patagonia.



Souffles -- as I understand it -- are a notoriously stressful dish to make, given their propensity to collapse and deflate. I do wonder if Chef Gallardo was keeping such a close eye on his souffles that he let slip on the risotto.

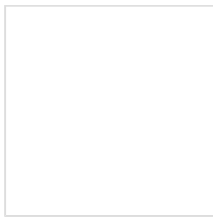
All in all it was an enjoyable multi-course meal and a delicious adventure. The taste-memory of that beautiful carpaccio still haunts -- I hope the rest of Chef Gallardo's dishes one day all reach that same sublime standard. After this experience I'd like to continue trying underground restaurants in other cities, especially those with communal tables to see what the socialising-with-strangers element brings to the meal.

In the meantime, if you are interested in trying an underground eatery in Buenos Aires, listings can be found on **[Buenos Aires Foodies](#)** (thanks for the tip [@paulscooking!](#)), **[A Gringo in Buenos Aires](#)**, **[BA Tips](#)** and **[Boston Globe](#)**.

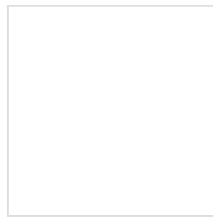
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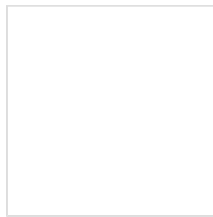
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mum said...

Have yet to try one of these restaurants. Wonder if there is any in S'pore.

[Reply September 26, 2010 at 08:17 AM](#)



Paul said...

The beef carpaccio looks amazing - looks like you are having a wonderful time in Buenos Aires!

Reply September 26, 2010 at 11:17 AM



OysterCulture said...

Sounds wonderful, I'll passed along your post to my brother-in-law who leaves next week for Argentina - I'm hoping he'll sample for me.

Reply September 27, 2010 at 04:11 PM

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