

MEAT ARGENTINA

“Food, Glorious Food”: Lionel Bart – Oliver

The swatch of red caught my eye before I realized that it was a painting of Michelin star restaurant Don Julio Parrilla.

Outside the walls of La Recoleta Cemetery - Buenos Aires’ top tourist attraction, there’s a famous weekend tent city of local arts and crafts.

Fate must have put this image in our path because the next stop on our Argentine itinerary was dinner at Don Julio. Three months earlier I’d made a reservation online after watching the Buenos Aires’ episode of *Somebody Feed Phil*. We were going - indeed I’d decided on visiting Argentina to ski in August - after watching this Netflix show.

Phil ate sweetbread at Don Julio.



My mother once took me to a tiny French restaurant on Berkeley Street in Boston. Sixty years later, I recall it being dark even at lunchtime. I believe there was a split-level entrance with a walk down from the ground floor. White cloth covered tables for two. I have no idea how my mother knew it existed or why she chose it that day. (The restaurant and perhaps even the building have long since disappeared.)

Of what else I ordered, I have no memory. A child orders sweetbreads because of the name, and a stubborn child won’t change his mind even challenged by the waiter’s explanation. French sweetbread – ris de veau – is a calf’s thymus, a so-called variety meat or offal.

Thus began a lifelong quest to enjoy again the delicate, white pillows served to me that noon.

My hunt for sweetbreads goes on. Offal are awful hard to find in the United States today. Even in New York City a few years back our search for them turned fruitless. They were the leftover parts that our poor immigrant ancestors ate in the “old country” before coming to this land of steak and roast for all. Multi-generations later, disdain has replaced desire in our dining subconscious.



I'd last found sweetbreads on the menu of Woody Allen's favorite restaurant in Barcelona – Ca L'isidre. Bites of heaven served by formally attired waiters. "Our guests come from Madrid just for our sweetbreads" – but not from the U.S.



Like a dog on the trail, my ears perked when I heard Phil mention an Argentinian favorite: sweetbreads – *mollejas*.



You can't talk about Argentina without talking about its meat. A national obsession, national pride – pampas grass fed – "incomparably tender and richly flavored". Leaner and healthier to eat than grain fed American beef. Slow grilled off-center (indirect high heat) over wood or charcoal briquettes.

Phil politely turns down more sweetbread – *before even taking a bite* - saying: "I gotta pace myself." That was a first for his show. "Not sweet and not bread, but very delicious!" Yet his face says this wasn't the "meat" he'd come to Argentina for.

Sweetbreads are as mild flavored and delicate as tofu – and calf's brain. What's not to like? Admittedly, however, mollejas were not the ris de veau of my memory; larger and firmer, perhaps from mature cows, a distinction I hadn't considered before visiting Argentina. Yet still good on the palate of one that enjoys all types of offal.



And what do you know, I've just seen a Beacon Hill restaurant included on Boston Magazine's annual Best list that serves veal sweetbreads – reservation please!

Phill went on to eat a skirt steak that he adored. And out of the seven nights on our ski tour to the Bariloche region of Argentina, our group went to four grill restaurants where we sampled many cuts of beef and lamb.



For sweetbreads are not the only entrée to haunt my culinary memory. Newly hired after law school, I had the rare treat of being taken for lunch to the executive dining room of the Detroit Bank and Trust Company.

My boss recommended the filet mignon. I'd never had one before. While a modest sized portion, it was the most tender and flavorful steak I'd ever eaten, creating another lifelong yearning.

On the last night in Bariloche, our guides reserved a table at a hilltop restaurant - Alto El Fuego – Centro. I ordered the fillet. Tender, yes. Flavorful, yes. And for my order I was served two huge fillets. Portions of meat in Argentina are uniformly enormous, at a price well below any restaurant's typical, single serving charge in the U.S. Our lucky guides went home with a generous doggy bag.



Then there was that *just oily enough* perfect slice of cheese pizza from a place off I-93 in New Hampshire that I could never find again. Or the *just crunchy enough* perfect onion ring I had one night in a Boston pub after work. And that *just gooey enough* perfect walnut tart I got served as a sample in some shopping mall. Tastes that I long to repeat. Still out there to find again, along with hopefully many new - *must have agains*.

So, what's the most memorable thing that you ate on your last vacation?

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