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Every nation has sentimental songs that are sung by its sons and daughters when they are far away and homesick. Argentina is no exception, and one of its most famous tangos begins with an emotional paean to “My beloved Buenos Aires.”

So, what does a native son think about as he returns after an absence of several years? That tango kept running though my mind on the overnight flight from Dallas and, as the sun rose, my thoughts drifted from Alfredo Le Pera’s lyrics and expressed my personal nostalgia in words of my own:

My beloved Buenos Aires, I am
 coming home again

I can see you in the distance from
 the window of the plane.

Your skyline is as beautiful as any,
 anywhere

and the River Plate still looks like
dulce de leche from the air.

The Río de la Plata, the vast estuary that separates Argentina from Uruguay, is almost always muddy brown, like the mighty Mississippi. And *dulce de leche* is an iconic Argentine product: a caramelized, sweet, muddy brown milk jam that is intimately linked to my memories of childhood. It was spread on bread and toast, rolled into pancakes, lathered over ice cream, and was the filling of the equally iconic *alfajores* – a traditional pastry item. But the best way to eat it was off a spoon straight out of the jar, standing in front of the open refrigerator at any hour of the day or night. I cannot think of Argentina without drifting, sooner or later, into reveries involving *dulce de leche*.

We spent the night in Buenos Aires, and the following morning were

off again, heading west to Mendoza. Our flight left from Aeroparque airport, and Lillian was enchanted to find fresh flowers in the departure lounge restroom. “What a detail,” as the Argentines would say. Another traditional food item I craved was the classic *sándwiches de miga* – ham and cheese layered between incredibly thin slices of white bread from which the crust has been guillotined. The airport cafeteria had run out (they’re still that popular), but fate (and Aerolíneas Argentinas) was on our side and they were served as the in-flight snack, together with an excellent cup of coffee.

First class buses make the thousand-kilometer trip across the flat pampas to Mendoza in twelve hours, but the flight took only two, and we preferred to spend our time at our destination rather than on the journey. We stayed with friends who grow grapes and olives on their property about half an hour from town. It was the harvest season, and ancient trucks piled high with grapes rumbled along narrow country roads on their way to local wineries. The grapes in Mendoza are grown on vines, strung out on wires in long straight lines, and this is where the Argentines produce the finest of their wines: Malbec, for example, which is the current favorite both here and abroad.

In the evening, as the sun slipped behind the Andes and the snow-capped peak of Aconcagua gleamed in the fading light, we sat on the patio behind the house, drinking *mate* and watching the blue shadows roll down from the mountains and engulf row after row of vines in darkness. This far

from the lights of a city, the night sky came alive with stars, and we gazed up at the Southern Cross and marveled at the Milky Way, shimmering like a celestial ocean and disappearing into the unimaginable distance.

“We look at the *cordillera*,” said the foreman of the vineyard, speaking softly so as not to disturb the shadowy silence, “and in our minds we fly towards it, then upwards, following the mountain slopes straight up to the sky. But up there, faced with an infinity of possibilities, we look back at Argentina and lose our sense of purpose. Then we loop backwards and fall to earth again. We Argentinos can never get beyond ourselves; that is our curse.” He passed the *mate* gourd and I sipped the strong brew through the metal tube, just as generations of Argentines have done here for centuries.

Rested and refreshed by the rural tranquility of Mendoza, we returned to the urban intensity of Buenos Aires. The traffic in the city can sometimes seem insane, since drivers see no reason to keep within their lane. We were staying with friends in the secluded suburb of Martínez, where security guards are on duty twenty-four hours a day in booths on almost every corner, a reminder that kidnapping and other forms of antisocial behavior are still part of the local reality. In the late afternoon, as we relaxed on the terrace overlooking the gardens, Lillian looked up and saw seven pink flamingos flying past in formation just above the tree line, moving ahead of a cold front that was billowing up from the south. It was a surreal, deco vision that had all the trappings of an omen

of some kind (if this were a movie, the sky would have filled with music), but it's probably a mistake to attempt to read some meaning into everything one sees in Argentina.

Our hostess, mindful of the particular nostalgia that is felt in the stomach rather than the heart, placed a platter of *empanadas* on the table, and I was as a child again in my grandmother's kitchen, trying to choose between the meat, the chicken, or the vegetable fillings. Rather than offend anyone, I had one of each. "Leave a little room for *Martín Fierro*!" said my friend, and I was overcome with memories of yet another treat from long ago. *Martín Fierro* was the quintessential Argentine gaucho who achieved immortality in the eponymous epic poem by José Hernández. It was also the name given to a humble, traditional dessert consisting of a slice of quince jelly and a slice of cheese. On special occasions it also included a slice of sweet potato jelly. This was such an occasion, and it occurred to me that I might want to start keeping track of my nostalgia in calories.

The following day we took a stroll around the neighborhood, walking off some of those calories and window shopping in the boutiques near the suburban railway line. Suddenly, on a crowded sidewalk, I heard a cello playing. A young man sat on the other side of the road, his cello between his knees, his eyes blissfully closed as his bow slid back and forth across the strings. I crossed over and stood beside him, drinking in the music. He opened his eyes and smiled at me. "Do you like Bach?"

"I do," I said. "I have this piece on a CD at home."

"Yo-Yo Ma?" he asked.

"Rostropovich."

"Ah, yes!" he nodded, and closed his eyes again. The music filled the street and I looked up, half expecting to see Lillian's flamingos flying over-

head again. Instead I saw her waving excitedly at me from the doorway of a used bookstore, with something in her hand. She had found a bilingual edition of the *Martín Fierro* poem, bound in cowhide, in perfect condition, at a very reasonable price.

Buenos Aires is a splendid metropolis with a population of some thirteen million people who call themselves *porteños*, meaning that they are residents of a port city. It was founded by Spaniards in 1536, but the indigent people of the region forced the invaders to abandon that original settlement. A few years passed, and the city was founded again, this time permanently, in 1580. In time it became the capital of the Spanish Viceroyalty of



the Río de la Plata, which encompassed an area that is now shared by five countries: Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, and part of Bolivia. Perhaps this helps to explain why Argentina has always considered itself to be high up in the pecking order among Latin American nations.

We spent the final weekend of the trip at an *estancia*, a ranch, in Entre Ríos, northeast of Buenos Aires. In Spanish, one would say that we spent the weekend in the *campo*. In Argentine English – the variety spoken by Anglo-Argentines – it is called "the camp". It gets damp in the camp in the rainy season, when mosquitoes attack you for no good reason. A major source of nostalgia for carnivorous Argentines is, of course, the beef. The camp is the

perfect place to satisfy one's hunger for a steak or a *parrillada* – a variety of cuts of beef, sausages, and other delicacies cooked over smoldering coals on grills of all shapes and sizes, from the store-bought kind made of cast iron to the makeshift ones that might be a piece of chicken wire or a king-sized bedspring. It's true that not everyone likes red meat, but since about forty percent of the Argentine population originally emigrated from Italy, the pasta is varied and delicious, and most *parrilladas* include chicken.

On our drive back to the city we were fortunate enough to encounter that fundamental icon of Argentine folklore: the gaucho. Actually, we saw seven gauchos, accompanied by five dogs, riding herd on about a hundred head of cattle. They were moving the herd from one side of the road to the other, and we and the other three or four cars in the vicinity pulled over and stopped to give them plenty of room to do so. As the cattle were crossing the road, one of the steers suddenly changed his mind. He broke away from the herd and bolted, running parallel to the road and to our left. Four of the gauchos and three of the dogs wheeled around and raced after him, galloping at full speed with the effortless skill of those who have spent a lifetime in the saddle. They surrounded the steer and turned him and then, with the enthusiastic help of the dogs, headed him back to join the herd. As they rode past the car we saw that some of the men straddled sheep skins rather than saddles, some had no stirrups, and all were as one with their horse.

Our trip was over. We returned to the 'beloved city' and were preparing to leave the country. As I packed my bag I began singing a tango lyric I remembered from long ago: "Adiós Pampa mía," the classic sentimental farewell to the pampas. In Argentina there is a tango for every occasion. ★