



Fray Bentos

Fray Bentos became a household name during the twentieth century, widely known as the most famous brand of corned beef in the world. But what do those words mean? To tell that story, we must first look back to the early days of the Spanish conquest of the Americas, some five centuries ago, when cattle from Andalucía were first brought to the New World. Many years later, in the early 1600s, a large herd was released on a swathe of rolling grasslands east of the Río Uruguay that, in those days, was known as the Banda Oriental. Those cows and bulls multiplied and, in the course of time, laid the groundwork for Uruguay's signature cattle economy.

At about the same time, Jesuit missionaries began to arrive in the area, bringing their religion and establishing missions among the native peoples. One of those priests founded a settlement along the eastern banks of the Río Uruguay in what is now called Rincón de Haedo. He was a man of faith and boundless determination, but Indian raids and advancing age took their toll and one day he retreated from human society and spent his later years living in a cave. His name was Fray Bentos, or Friar Bentos in English, and the settlement and a nearby stream were eventually named after him.

As time passed and shipping traffic on the river increased, local landowners realized that the place named for the reclusive friar overlooked an excellent natural deep-water harbour. Export opportunities of various kinds attracted immigrants and the population steadily grew. The town of Villa Independencia was founded in 1859. In 1900 the name of the town, which by then was a city, was officially changed to Fray Bentos, the name it still bears to this day.

The town's fortunes were vastly improved in the early 1860s, when the Liebig's Extract of Meat Company built a factory there to manufacture their meat extract. With a ready supply of the best beef in the world and an easy export route down the Río Uruguay to the Atlantic Ocean, conditions were perfectly aligned with the company's goals, which were nudging Uruguay towards an industrialized future. Rapid technical advances ensued, bringing electricity to the factory in 1883, a full three years before it arrived in Montevideo, the capital city. In 1873 the factory started



producing tinned corned beef, which was exported to Britain under the name *Fray Bentos*, and a legend was born. Corned beef is made from inexpensive cuts that are cured in a process involving large grains of rock salt ("corns") and brine. The cuts are then cooked slowly to produce a tender, tasty product.

The Boer War (1899-1902) boosted sales of corned beef to the British Army in South Africa and provided a hint of things to come. The iconic tins were a staple for U.K. troops during the First World War, and *Fray Bentos* became synonymous with quality. The British Vestey Group bought Liebig's and the brand name in 1924, whereupon the factory became the Anglo Meatpacking Company, commonly known as the Anglo.

World War II drove production of *Fray Bentos* corned beef into overdrive. At its peak, the factory employed over five thousand workers. For a brief, heady time, sales of corned beef made the Uruguayan peso more valuable than the American dollar. But after the war the famous brand was no longer in such high demand; sales dwindled, and the factory closed in 1979. It became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2015 and is now a popular tourist destination.

Many of us still have fond memories of the product and the brand. At Boy Scout camps in the wilds of Uruguay in the 1950s, there was nothing I enjoyed more than a large helping of corned beef hash. H.R.H. Prince Charles, on a visit in 1999, told reporters, "I remember eating corned beef until it came out of my ears." Who would have thought that the name of an obscure missionary who lived so far away and long ago would become so deeply embedded in British culture?