



Rich or Poor?

Las Piedras is a country town just north of Montevideo. Its historical claim to fame is that it was the site of the famous Battle of Las Piedras where Artigas and his patriots defeated the Spanish in 1811, a major step on the way to Uruguayan independence.

It was also, many years later, one of the towns where British railway workers and their families settled. My parents had friends in Las Piedras, an English couple who had been there for years. He lost his job when the railways were nationalized in 1949 but stayed put. He and his wife had a *chacra*, a vegetable farm, just outside town and sold their produce at local markets. When we went to visit them, which was pretty regularly, the adults gathered indoors for gin and tonics and “the boys”—my brother and I—were ushered outside. “Go help Martín, he’s planting onions today.”

Martín was a grizzled old farm hand. He had a weather-beaten face with the prominent cheekbones that were typical of Uruguay’s indigenous peoples; he may have been a Charrúa or a Chaná. It was hard to tell how old he was because he seemed so fit and vital. He looked strong, like a man who had worked outside his whole life. He flashed us his usual smile and said we were welcome and were just in time to help him plant a field of onions. Christopher and I were ready for anything.

Martín taught us how to move up and down the furrows, planting the crop one onion at a time. He did it with his feet spread apart, bending over from the waist, so we did it that way too. Once the excitement of this new adventure started wearing off, I began to notice how many furrows lay ahead. There appeared to be hundreds of them, stretching all the way to the horizon. That’s about when my back started hurting and it wasn’t long before I felt frozen into that

position, like a hairpin. I glanced over at Christopher, and he looked as miserable as I felt. Martín, of course, was rows ahead of us, moving like a well-oiled machine. I clenched my teeth and told myself I’d keep going as long as I could. I didn’t want Martín to think I was a soft little city boy who never got his hands dirty. Perhaps he sensed that his crew was wilting on the field because he abruptly called a halt for lunch.

We sat around a well-used fire pit where Martín got a fire going with some twigs and dry eucalyptus branches. When the fire had burned itself down to a bed of hot coals, he slid a home-made *parrilla* over the embers. He took a cut of meat out of its newspaper wrapping, salted it, and put it on the grill. He broke a loaf of bread into three large chunks, one each, then showed us how to tear off a piece and fold it to hold a slice of beef.

When he judged the meat to be ready, Martín held up his *facón* and asked how we would like our meat served: “*a lo rico o a lo pobre*” [rich style or poor style]. Clueless, we both said “*rico*.” He proceeded to shave off two extremely thin slices and slide them onto our bits of bread. Then he cut a piece for himself, and it was what my grandmother called a doorstep. A thick hunk of meat, far bigger than mine. He saw my disappointed expression and said: “Rich people like their meat sliced very thin. Poor people prefer a slice cut thick. You made your choice.” Then he grinned and gave us each another piece. I explained that I had interpreted the word *rico* [rich] in its other sense, meaning “tasty,” but he just shrugged. My back muscles eventually recovered from the onion ordeal, and thanks to Martín, I have always tried to make sure I fully understand all my options before I make any critical decisions.