



Back In Time

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

The Fledgling

It's called the British Community because the British started it. They were among the first to found expat clubs and associations in Montevideo, formed by those who came out from the UK to work in the cattle business and to build and administer the railways, gas works, and water works in the latter half of the nineteenth century. But by the end of the Second World War the Community—now more tightly knit under the umbrella of the British Society—had absorbed many people of other nationalities and had become increasingly cosmopolitan. English, of course, was always the lingua franca for the group as a whole.

Many families in this international set sent their children to the British Schools, my alma mater, so I was exposed to a multicultural milieu from a very young age. My parents thought this a good thing, saying it would broaden my horizons to be invited into the homes of people whose lifestyle might differ from ours. My mother was, naturally, concerned that my manners would send the right signals in these circles, especially if I was asked to stay for dinner. She therefore schooled me in dining etiquette, and reminded me time and again that, when in doubt about anything, I should look at what my hostess was doing and follow her lead.

When I was ten years old one of my good friends was the son of the Canadian ambassador. He invited me to his house after school one afternoon, and I was subsequently asked to stay for dinner. I was delighted. Things were rather grander at the ambassador's residence than at my house. We sat down at a long, highly polished table that could not have been squeezed into our dining room at home, covered with fine china and sparkling silver cutlery. Conversation was bright and entertaining and I was having a marvellous time. I thought of myself as a worldly fellow at that stage of my life. I had, after all, lived in two countries and was fluent in a couple of languages, more or less. I felt at ease among grownups, and had overheard adults lauding my social skills. I was as sophisticated as anyone at the dinner table that night. Or so I thought.

Then came the main course—a delicious-looking filet of grilled *merluza* with some steamed potatoes sprinkled with parsley, some long green things I had never seen before, and a dollop of sauce that looked like pale pink mayonnaise. I recognized the knife and

fork I was to use for the fish, but had no idea what to do with the long green things. They were a little thicker than a pencil and about as long, piled up on my plate beside the potatoes. I assumed they were a kind of vegetable, since they vaguely reminded me of celery stalks, but that was as far as I could go. Remembering my mother's advice, I peered at my hostess and saw that she dipped hers in the sauce and bit off the end, then left the rest on the side of her plate. So that's what I proceeded to do, one stalk at a time. I wasn't particularly impressed with them. They had a rather rural flavour, which the sauce did a lot to smother, and were a bit stringy and hard to chew. But I wasn't there as a food critic so I soldiered on, chomping on the sauce-lathered tips between bites of fish, gradually building up a little pile of leftovers on the side of my plate.

At one point I happened to glance at my neighbour's plate and noticed that he was eating the opposite end of the stalks to the one I'd been eating. I quickly peered at my hostess again and saw that she was too. Horrified, I realized that I'd been biting off the wrong ends. I felt my ears burning, which meant that I was blushing furiously, and suddenly felt crass and stupid, not sophisticated at all. It was of some consolation that neither my friend, nor his lovely sister, nor any of the other dinner guests appeared to have noticed my appalling social gaffe. But, I told myself mercilessly, they were probably just being polite, and would no doubt burst into laughter as soon as I left the room. As swiftly and surreptitiously as I could, I gobbled up the stalks piled on my plate, then ate the remaining tips in the appropriate manner, finding them to be far superior to the wrong ends I had mistakenly consumed. When the butler removed my plate there was a very small stack of leftovers on it, far fewer than anyone else had on theirs, and he gave me a kindly look as if to say, "Don't worry, sonny, there's tons more food in the kitchen."

Needless to say, my mother was mortified to learn that she had prepared me inadequately for this particular social challenge, and reproached herself bitterly for what she called "false frugality that did nobody any good." The upshot was that, to my father's great delight, asparagus and salsa golf immediately became a staple at our house.