

## **BROWARD ARGENTINES LEAVE THEIR HOMELAND, BUT NOT ITS DELICACIES, BEHIND**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Dulce de Leche!

Just hearing the name of this Argentinean specialty can cause the salivary glands of anyone who has ever eaten it to start working overtime.

Known as Ariquepe in Peru, Cajeta in Mexico and Manjar de Leche (milk delicacy) in Ecuador, Dulce de Leche is an extra sweet concoction of milk and sugar that in the words of Parkland resident Javier Romeu is “boiled forever.” The end result is a creamy caramel spread that is eaten on bread or facturas (a type of croissant roll), over ice cream, or as a common stuffing in cake, cookies, donuts, crepes or pie.

South Florida Argentineans are stocking up on containers of the sweet stuff along with other cultural favorites such as steak as they prepare for the upcoming Liberation Day holiday on May 25.

“Dulce de Leche from Argentina tastes different than the same thing from other countries,” claimed Romeu who came here from Buenos Aires. “I think it’s because we add honey to it.”

While several brands of the sweet treat can be bought in many area supermarkets as well as specialty Latin American groceries, Argentinean brands have appeared in many places such as Costco according to Fabiana Lacerca of Weston.

Like many Argentineans who have migrated to south Florida in recent years, Lacerca feels at home here among her fellow citizens. “When I moved here, I discovered four friends who had been in the same country club with me in Buenos Aires,” she said. “We get together every weekend and have asado (grilled meat), Dulce de Leche and facturas.”

Grilled steaks are a hallmark of almost any Argentinean gathering, and all Argentineans claim that their meat is better than any other.

“We barbecue it differently,” explained Alicia Diaz-Hoysgaard of Fort Lauderdale. “We don’t use gasoline to start our fire and we use wood instead of charcoal. We also cook it slower. Too many Americans put the meat on the fire when it isn’t ready yet.”

Diaz-Hoysgaard, who was originally from Rio Cuarto, says that she doesn’t use any sauce on her meat, but serves it with a bit of Chimichurri Sauce, an Argentinean mix of parsley, olive oil, wine vinegar, basil and red and hot peppers. “Chimichurri is served with everything from empanadas to steak,” she said.

Many Argentines are horrified by the thought of adding any spices to a good cut of steak. “We just add mostly salt,” said Romeu. “A good Argentinean thinks that spices hide the taste of the meat. You should taste the meat by itself.”

Romeu said that the secret to a good steak is how it is cut. “Here in the United States you cut it into prime ribs and sirloin,” he explained. “We include the prime loin, what we call the lomo, and cut it separately. We also cut our short ribs differently.”

Another hallmark of Argentines is what they drink. “On the weekends, we sit around drinking mate (a very popular type of tea that has its origins in the southern cone countries of Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay),” Lacerca explained. “Many times, we don’t remember that we are in the United States. While we are so far from home, in some ways we are closer to Argentina here.”

That comfort has been helped by an influx of Argentines in the past few years as people escape the country’s worst economic depression in history and political instability that saw four presidents in a two week period in 2001.

“There are more coming here than you can imagine,” Lacerca said. “Some are from the middle class that has disappeared in Argentina and the others are from those of a lower income level who have had nothing to lose by relocating.”

The current immigrants follow several waves of Argentines who have come to seek a new life in south Florida according to Grace Micheli who, along with her husband Alberto, publishes the *El Argentino Mercosur* newspaper. The 30,000 circulation monthly publication was originally aimed at Argentines but now focuses on émigrés from other southern cone countries.

“The first wave came in 1981,” said Micheli, who came here from Buenos Aires and now lives in Hallandale Beach. “They were mostly professionals who came here for political reasons during the dictatorship and dirty war.”

“There was a big wave of Argentines who came here in 1982 during the Malvinas war,” she explained. “Then, in 1987 to 1989 more and more came as we had bad inflation in the country.”

Micheli said that another large group came in the mid 1990s when Carlos Menem was president. She said that many of those did not have visas and came illegally.

More recently, as the country has gone through economic and political turmoil, still more have come, including professionals and young people looking for new experiences and opportunities.

“Argentines generally fare a little better at getting visas and getting settled here,” said immigration attorney Samuel Blanco of Miami, a Cuban who helps immigrants from

many countries obtain legal papers here. “They usually have a higher level of education and social development and were better off in Argentina,” he said.

But some Argentinean immigrants still face struggles. “There is a different way of life here,” Lacerca explained. “Drivers, maids and gardeners do not exist here.”

However, many immigrants do carry cultural and value patterns with them. “We value our family and friends very highly,” explained Graciela Helguero of Boca Raton who is chairman of the Spanish department at Lynn University there. “Family is number one for us.”

“I always tell my students to hold on their value systems no matter where they live,” she said.

Some Argentinean immigrants pay close attention to those values as well as events and politics back home while others seem to have immersed themselves in American culture.

“Each person is different,” explained Alfredo Boniforti of Lake Worth who also works at the Lynn University campus in Boca Raton as Director of Purchasing, Telecommunications and Inventory Control.

“They keep what’s good from there and they add what’s good from here,” he said, adding that “Argentineans are a mix of European and Spanish with Italian, French, English and German influence.”

“We have a tendency to forget what was bad and only remember what was good there,” Romeu said. However, he added that Argentineans need to stay in touch because voting is mandatory and those outside of the country are also required to vote in each election.

“I’m disappointed in Argentinean politics,” he said, referring to today’s runoff election that pits former president Carlos Menem against provincial governor Nestor Kirchner.

“The politicians are all out for themselves rather than the country,” Romeu charged.

That type of disillusionment may account for a poor turnout during the first-round election on April 27 among south Florida’s estimated 100,000-300,000 Argentine residents. “Two thousand registered at the consulate (in Miami), but only 200 turned out to vote in the first runoff,” Micheli reported.

“I’m not very connected to politics in Argentina,” Boniforti, who is from Buenos Aires, admitted. That attitude is reflected by Juan Carlos Urra who is the co-owner of Che Pibe, an Argentinean steak house restaurant in Hollywood. “I don’t talk much about politics there,” he said. “My focus is here and this is where I live. I don’t know too much about the next president.”

Most local Argentineans do care about the situation in their country and are reaching out to help during a these difficult times. “We are trying to help in every possible way,” said Cris Bohler, country chairman of the Fort Lauderdale-Mar Del Plata Sister Cities relationship.

“We are gathering clothing, blankets, sheets, towels, diapers, shoes, anything that we can to send to Santa Fe,” she said, referring to the city north of Buenos Aires that has been hit by devastating floods in recent weeks. Twenty-three were reported dead and more than 70,000 homeless in waters that inundated the area.

“Forty percent of the population was evacuated,” she said. “The hospital and the schools are under water.”

Bohler, who came from Buenos Aires and lives in Fort Lauderdale, said that those willing to help should call her at 954-456-7077.

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