

GAUCHO'S FEAST

From Argentina's hearty steak culture to Venezuela's exquisite chocolate production, Olivia Greenway selects some of the region's culinary highlights



From left: Chef cooking beef Argentinian style; Corks from Argentinian wines

ARGENTINA IS KNOWN for having the best beef in the world so no visit to Buenos Aires would be complete without visiting a dedicated steak restaurant. Argentinians eat late — don't expect anyone to be seen at a restaurant before 21.00 — and they still resist the fashion for fast food, meaning long, chilled out, and lively dinners.

Look for local, family-run restaurants called *parrillas*, named after the grill the meat is cooked on. Homemade pasta may feature too, signifying the strong Italian influence. Try La Cabrera in Palermo, popular with large family groups.

Hunt a little harder and you will find vegetarian or 'healthy' restaurants opening up, especially in the Palermo Hollywood area, serving fish and lighter food. Kensho serves mainly vegan food, mostly raw in a Zen-like setting. The mushroom *ceviche* (Portobello, shiitake and oyster), served with spicy *ocopa* sauce, tastes so meaty it's hard to believe it's vegetarian.

Artemisia is cosier with chunky wooden pine tables, fresh flowers and homemade bread to take away. Ditherers can choose the vegetarian plate with a selection of dishes or go for the tasty lentil burger or more unusual *quinoa* croquette served with lemon yoghurt — both with potato wedges and salad. Don't miss the ginger lemonade and fish lovers may opt for several refined salmon dishes.

Portenos (as Buenos Aires natives are known) are becoming used to the idea of a tasting menu — El Baqueano was one of the first to introduce this option. Serving all sorts of unusual meats, it's not just a passing fad: llama carpaccio and alligator skewers are recommended.

The locals are known for not liking spicy food, but Asian cuisine is finally starting to catch on. Green Bamboo serves Vietnamese food in a smart environment. Another love is Japanese sushi — there are bars all over town and you can even have it delivered. Try the Sushi Club in upmarket Puerto Madero: it's fresh, delicious and healthy — a definite trend among the young of the city.

Havanna is a coffee shop chain to look out for; try a coffee and cake combo including the ubiquitous *dulce de leche* biscuits smothered in chocolate. Delicious *gelato* (Italian ice cream) is everywhere.

WINE IN MENDOZA

Nearly 750 miles west of Buenos Aires, at the foot of the Andes, Mendoza is now the foremost wine-producing region in Latin America. A focus on quality grapes has brought it an international reputation, with its Malbec being the most famous. Wine tourism is also improving and expanding. ►

"SAMPLE"

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LATIN AMERICA

COFFEE IN COLOMBIA

The Americas began to develop a coffee habit in the 19th century and this fuelled a global demand. Colombian coffee bean plantations expanded and the country is now one of the world's largest producers of Arabica coffee beans. Colombian coffee has a distinctive, rich taste and is of high quality. It's grown in mountainous regions, although production is affected by natural occurrences such as earthquakes, hot winds (El Nino) and global warming. Be warned: Colombians drink their coffee very weak.



PERUVIAN CUISINE

Peruvian cuisine is as varied as its geography and is beginning to attract international attention. In the coastal regions, *ceviche* (fish marinated in lime juice) is served raw and spicy. Street traders hawk kebabs of *corazon* (beef hearts) and clay oven cooked *cuy al horno* (guinea pig). Peru is also home to the potato, the hot chilli pepper and maize, and all appear regularly in delicious Peruvian dishes, in recipes influenced by Chinese immigrants and the long Spanish occupation.



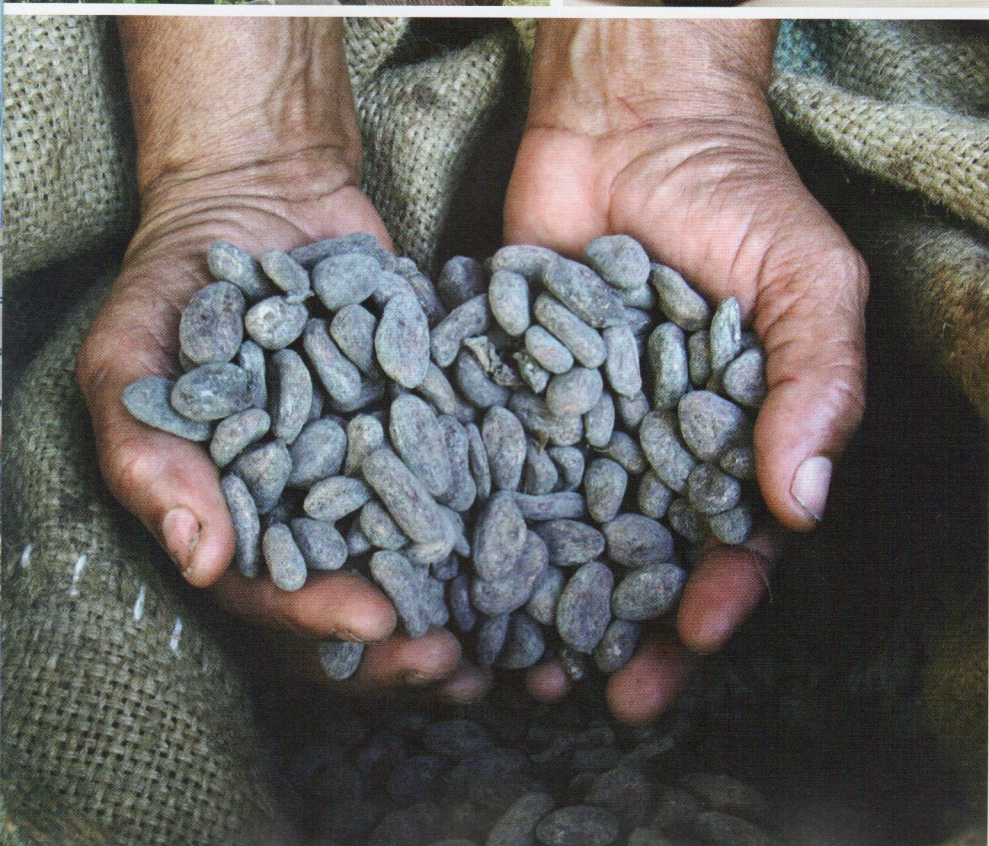
CHILEAN WINE

Viniculture started here in the 16th century but it was only in the 1980s that Chilean wine entered the world stage by switching to oak barrels for ageing and by introducing stainless steel tanks, vastly improving the flavour. Chile's relative isolation also means that insect blights have largely been kept at bay, allowing prices to remain competitive and turning the country into one of the world's largest exporters of wines. Take the chance to enjoy a bottle of Carmenere, which has become Chile's signature grape.

VENEZUELAN CHOCOLATE

Chocolate is made from cacao beans — like wine, the taste varies according to natural conditions such as soil, temperature and humidity — and some of the very best beans are found in remote Chuao in Venezuela. The criollo tree produces beans with a rich, fruity flavour but despite low productivity and susceptibility to disease, it's sought after by bespoke chocolatiers catering to the market for high quality gourmet chocolate. El Rey is a good home brand to seek out. ■

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Clockwise from top left: Coffee producer, Colombia; Raw black shellfish ceviche, Peru; Viñedos, Chile; Dry cacao seeds at La Flor de Birongo chocolate factory, Venezuela

