





Secret Eating in Buenos Aires

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SECRET EATING IN BUENOS AIRES

Some of the best dining in Argentina happens behind closed doors. Take a peek into the lively puertas cerradas of Buenos Aires.



Secret Eating and Animated Discussion



Christine Gilbert in Buenos Aires

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I'm in a restaurant that's not a restaurant on the border of the Chacarita and Palermo neighborhoods in Buenos Aires. Here at Casa Moema, I sit at a communal table with 21 strangers eating *picanha* (a tender and buttery Brazilian cut of beef). Prepared in the Peruvian *seco* style, it comes atop a bed of polenta, the cornmeal porridge that is a staple of Argentine cuisine. We listen to a geopolitical strategist use soccer analogies to describe the current legal problems of Argentine Vice President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Anyone can jump in with a comment or question — this isn't a lecture. It's all part of the experience of a *puerta cerrada*, a closed-door restaurant where the sharing of ideas is just as important as the sharing of food.

A week later, I ring a doorbell at a nondescript building in the Montserrat neighborhood and get buzzed into Glou Glou, another *puerta cerrada*. After walking up a marble staircase to a wooden-floored loft, I join more strangers at a communal table to eat gazpacho with goat cheese, fish tacos, sweetbreads with parsley sauce, and fresh peaches. We sip wines with each course in a blind tasting and discuss blockchain, the World Cup and international travel.

These were two similar yet different *puerta cerrada* experiences: a private dining experience that is operated out of a chef's home, in a location that's only disclosed after an advanced reservation is confirmed. Most open only a few days a week and serve a rotating set menu, usually of fusion food. Many have communal tables and allow 10-30 diners per night. And, the most successful establishments boast a charismatic host.

The Evolution of Closed-Door Dining



Puertas cerradas became popular during Argentina's 2001 economic crisis, when people opened them in their homes to make money. "A bunch of them popped up, but most of those didn't last long," says Dan Perlman, an American transplant who worked in gastronomy in New York before moving to Buenos Aires. Here, he opened his *puerta cerrada*, Casa Saltshaker, in 2005 with partner Henry Tapia.

However, nobody had any money, so nobody came, Perlman explains of many *puertas cerradas* that opened around the same time his did. "There was this sort of peak for a little while, and then most disappeared," he says while sitting at the large table in his Recoleta apartment, where he has now hosted 2,700 Casa Saltshaker dinners. Perlman, in contrast to other *puerta cerrada* owners of the same era, had early success due to the Buenos Aires expat community. Many expats made money in currencies more stable than the Argentine peso, thus allowing them to eat out regularly.

The concept is not unique to Buenos Aires, Perlman points out. "*Casas de comida* (eating houses) go back to practically the founding of Argentina," he says. The country's early restaurants were rooms in peoples' homes, where home cooks served what they were cooking for their own families to travelers, Perlman explains.

Despite the small boom in the early 2000s, the real heyday of *puertas cerradas* was right before the pandemic. According to Perlman, at least 68 operated in the city. “Almost all of those are gone,” he says. However, some were transformed into full-scale restaurants in Buenos Aires (like Nola, which serves New Orleans-style chicken), and some proprietors opted to open their spaces in international locations.

The owners of new *puerta cerrada*, Casa Moema, have a different take on the evolution of closed-door dining. Murilo Tartaglia, a Brazilian political analyst and chef, and his co-host Valentina Caputo, an Argentine poet and writer, see their Brazilian fusion *puerta cerrada* as a modern-day *tertulia*.

Tertulias are informal gatherings where people meet to discuss the arts and politics. Sometimes, dancing is involved. They were especially popular in Buenos Aires in the early 1800s, leading up to Argentina’s independence from Spain, and served as a space to discuss activism and the changing political landscape.

“It’s about gathering together in a group with people,” Caputo explains. “They don’t have to know each other necessarily, but somehow the environment helps.” When people start talking to each other, friendships form, she says. Both Caputo and Tartaglia wanted Casa Moema to act as a space for deep connections after the isolation of the pandemic.

Unlike other *puerta cerradas*, where conversations at the communal table happen organically, Casa Moema invites featured guests: politicians, bitcoin experts, sexologists and philosophers have all been on the roster. The speaker gives a talk at the table and the patrons are welcome to interject to ask questions, challenge and provide their own insights on the topic.

It’s a more democratic approach than in the past, Caputo says. “Everyone is the same.” It doesn’t matter who people are, she adds. “We have all the same value to speak.”

Despite differing origin stories, there’s a common philosophy behind these hidden eateries: celebrating individuality and fulfilling a desire for connection. Each *puerta cerrada* is an extension of its owners’ personality and interests — whether that’s finding rare wines, cooking spicy vegetarian food or offering political discourse.

“For me the most memorable things are the connections people make. Whether it’s us with them or them with each other,” Perlman says.

Tartaglia agrees. They’ve had everyone from new couples to new best friends meet in their space. “It could be like political Tinder.”

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Find a Puerta Cerrada in Buenos Aires



To book a dinner at the puertas cerradas listed below, send a message either via email, Instagram or Whatsapp, according to what's listed on the respective website or social media channel linked. Some require a deposit, while others might ask follow-up questions. Be sure to share any dietary restrictions in advance, as once you arrive on the day of your meal, it will be too late to make menu adjustments.

Casa Saltshaker

Tucked into a duplex in Recoleta, Casa Saltshaker serves a five-course tasting menu with paired wines. Plates favor Mediterranean and Andean ingredients and tend to be spicy. Chef Dan Perlman cooks, and the meal is hosted by his husband, Henry Tapia, a Peruvian anthropologist. Cost is US\$80 per person.

Glou Glou

Glou Glou's menu is as much about the wine as the food. The focus here is on seasonal ingredients and wines predominately from Argentina (and occasionally Uruguay and Chile). Sommelier Gaby Moreno and chef Luis Pabon, both Venezuelan transplants, host an eight-course tasting menu for 14,500 pesos (US\$82 per person) out of their home above the streets of Montserrat. There are both communal and private tables.

Toro 777

Toro 777 mixes Asian and South American flavors, like bamboo and mung bean sprouts with peanut dressing, eggplant-topped arepas and *asado* ribs. The four-course dinner, served on a candlelit rooftop in Chacarita, can also be prepared vegetarian or gluten-free. For a set price of 6,000 pesos (US\$34), diners can enjoy cocktails, coffee and (if you're lucky) hilarious stories from hosts Christian and Guillermo. Dinners are for up to 12 patrons, held Thursday through Saturday.

Treinta Sillas

Chef Eze Gallardo opened his 30-seat *puerta cerrada* Treinta Sillas in 2007, after having already cooked for U2 and Shakira in Buenos Aires' high-end restaurants. His menu of Mediterranean-inspired dishes and drinks from around the world changes weekly. The four-course meal utilizes global flavors and creations from his own kitchen experiments — like blue cheese ice cream. Located at his house in Colegiales, the space features a full-sized bar and garden of creeping vines. Dinners cost 5,500 pesos (US\$31).

Casa Moema

Casa Moema fuses the flavors of Brazil with those of Peru, Argentina and Europe in a spacious house. Featured guests facilitate conversations that range from geopolitics to astrology. Discussions last late into the night, and meals have three courses, with plates of meats, pastas and polenta. The suggested price is 5,000 pesos (US\$28), however diners tend to pay more.

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