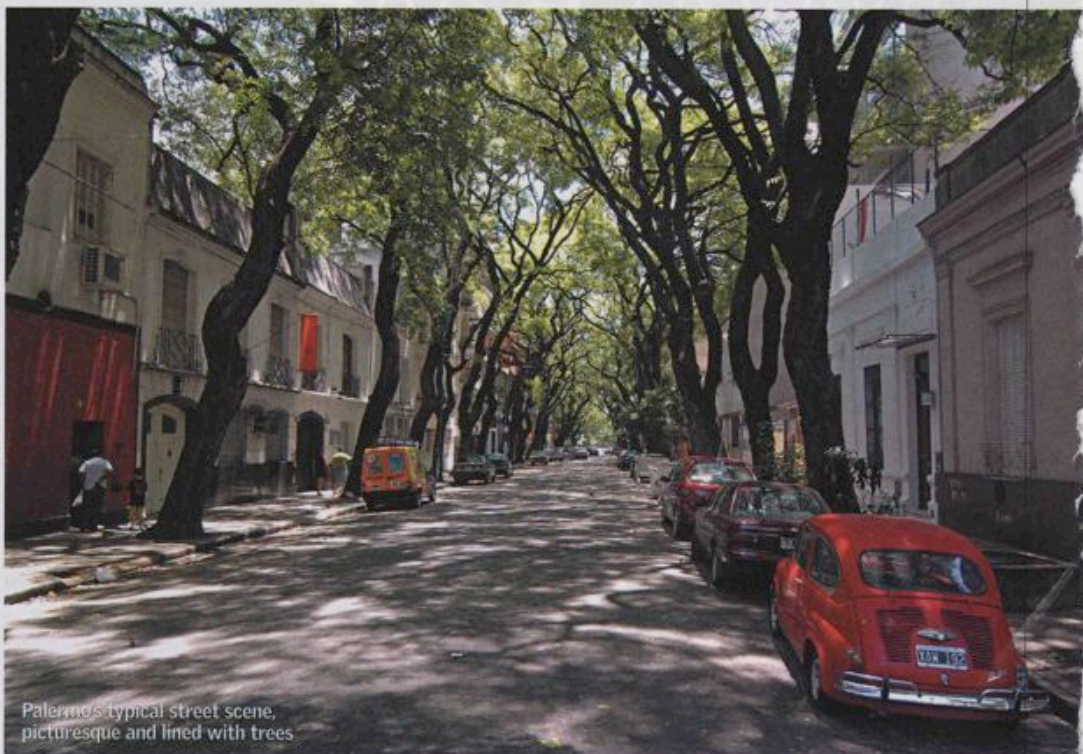


The Heart of Buenos Aires

This Argentine city's comeback is being led by Palermo, a trendy, relaxed neighborhood where you can get anything from hand-stitched leather to a drink at dawn. By Joseph Guinto

T "IF YOU TURN around, you will freak out," says my companion. I am in a swilleria-pizzeria-café-bar called Malasartes in the Palermo Viejo neighborhood of Buenos Aires. And, as those in such a place are wont to do, my imbibing partner and I are drinking a number of strong concoctions. Behind me, as I have just been warned, the sun is rising. ¶ All-nighters are supposedly



Palermo's typical street scene, picturesque and lined with trees



de rigueur among younger Buenos Aires locals, or *Porteños*, as they call themselves. But all-nighters are abnormal for me, especially when they're accompanied by cocktails. But what's even more surprising to me than my watching the sunrise from a bar is that I am watching it with plenty of company. Malasartes sits on Plazoleta Cortázar, a traffic circle that's ringed with swilleria-pizzeria-café-bars, most of which have large outdoor seating areas. It is seven a.m., yet hundreds of people are here, moistening their mouths with Quilmes, the national beer of Argentina, and other adult beverages. I can see that just across Plazoleta Cortázar, a still-packed dance club is thumpa-thumpa-thumping, even as the first light of day laps up against its tinted windows.

It would be silly to suggest that this thumpa-thumping could be the heartbeat

of all Buenos Aires. But it's also silly to be drinking whiskey at seven a.m. So let's go ahead and suggest it.

Not long ago, Palermo Viejo had flat-lined. Like the rest of Buenos Aires, this traditionally middle-class area was a victim of the spectacular 2002 economic crash that obliterated the country's wealth and destroyed its currency. Businesses were shuttered. Homes were abandoned. But today, Argentina is on the mend — the *Economist* projects that the country's economy will grow nearly three times faster than that of the United States this year. And nowhere is the comeback more palpable than in Palermo Viejo. All over this neighborhood, which is 15 minutes west of downtown, construction crews are at work. Century-old former warehouses, factories, and homes are being converted for use as boutique hotels, cafés, and shops. New residents are moving in by the dozens, and they're christening new subneighborhoods as they arrive.

Yes, that's right: subneighborhoods. See, Palermo is one of the largest neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, with some 250,000 residents. It is home to the city's botanical gardens and zoo, as well as to the new Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA), which is a museum of Latin American art dating from the early twentieth century to the present day. At its core is Palermo Viejo, the oldest section of Palermo proper. And now, there are also sub-subneighborhoods — some within Palermo Viejo, some nearby — going by the names

Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires



“Palermo Viejo has a very particular charm ... cobbled streets, two-floor houses, and a certain tranquility. There is a permanent cheerful spirit. Nobody seems to be in a hurry here. It's impossible not to enjoy it.”

Palermo SoHo, Palermo Hollywood, and even Palermo Queens.

If the names seem out of place, they should. Palermo Viejo is an anomaly in Buenos Aires. It is stuffed with boutiques but has none of the crazy bustle of the city's historic downtown shopping avenue, Calle Florida. It is home to several tango halls — known as *milongas* — but has nothing akin to the touristy tango shows in gritty San Telmo. Its streets are lined with trees, and many of its buildings are old and elegant, but Palermo Viejo is far more modest than tony Recoleta,



Tienda Tres, which features three designers, and Prototype (left), in the Fuentes de Malabia shopping center, are among the many boutiques in Palermo.



the neighborhood that earned Buenos Aires its nickname, the Paris of the Pampas.

"The neighborhood feels completely different from the rest of the city," Nancy Kulfas tells me. She's a Buenos Aires native who runs Atípica, a Palermo Viejo shop that specializes in local arts and crafts, everything from paperweights to paintings. Kulfas also writes a trilingual blog, Trendy Palermo Viejo (trendypalermoviejo.blogspot.com), with entries about the neighborhood in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. "Palermo Viejo has a very particular charm ... cobble streets, two-floor houses, and a certain tranquility," she says. "There is a permanent cheerful spirit. Nobody seems to be in a hurry here. It's impossible not to enjoy it."

AT THE RISK of squaring the double negative: I'm not sure that it's impossible not to enjoy Palermo Viejo. But it's certainly not easy to dislike if you enjoy good food and drink and unique shopping — and especially if you have U.S. dollars or euros to exchange.

None of those were things that drew the first of the area's settlers. People have lived in Palermo since the 1600s — long before the neighborhood had a name, much less all those subnames. The population surged in the 1800s as Spanish and Italian immigrants were joined by thousands from Eastern Europe and the Middle East who came either to work in the neighborhood's emerging businesses or to start their own.

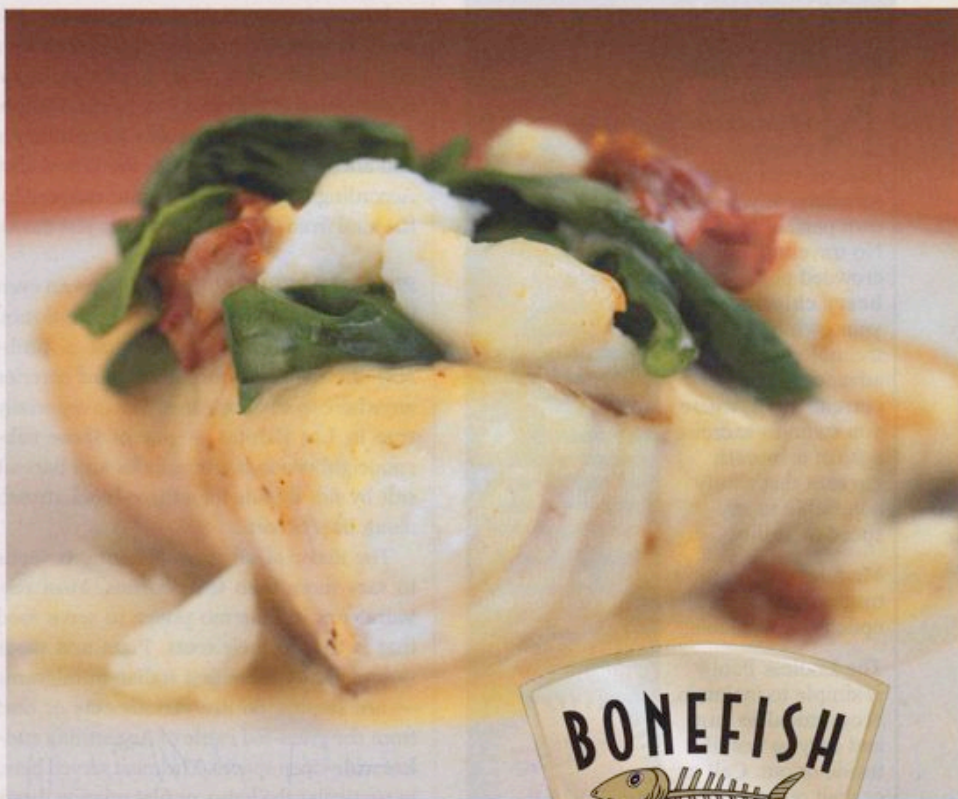
Most of those who made their homes in Palermo, with the exception of the ones in the wealthy Palermo Chico barrio, were middle class. Palermo Viejo was a particularly humble enclave. Too humble, perhaps. By the 1980s, when Argentina's continually troubling inflation rate was out of control, Palermo Viejo's businesses began closing. And many continued to sit vacant even through the economic recovery that followed a decade later, preceding the major 2002 crash. Only now is the whole of Palermo Viejo coming back to life.

Locals like Kulfas are responsible for that resuscitation. Kulfas had just graduated from college when the economy collapsed. Unemployed for more than a year, she decided that the only way to make a living was to go into business for herself. So she scraped together enough money to start Atípica. Untrue to its name, the store is very typical of the new breed of Palermo Viejo

businesses in that it pushes local products. Indeed, with a few exceptions, most of the product labels you see in the shops here read "Industria Argentina."

One of the exceptions to this is at Claudia Vairo Boutique, just a few blocks from Plazoleta Cortázar. That's not because the store doesn't carry fashions exclusively from local designers — it does. It's just that

you wouldn't know it, because most of the clothes here have no labels. And no sizes, for that matter. It seems that in many Palermo shops, size is a relative concept. Shopkeeper Claudia Martha Vairo Parra tosses merchandise at my aforementioned imbibing companion (a.k.a. my wife, Rachel), encouraging her to try on virtually everything in the store. "Handmade," she says. Most of the



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items don't fit, but Parra couldn't care less. She doesn't speak a lot of English, and we don't speak a lot of Spanish, so Parra enlists another customer, whom she seems to know, to translate. She grabs a skirt by its seam and makes a scissors motion with her fingers. The customer tells us, "She says if you take to a tailor, he can fix it. So she gives a discount — 10 percent." Some 600 pesos later, we are on our way with a large pile of, yes, handmade clothes.

It is a quintessential Palermo moment: We meet an engaging and savvy business owner and a friendly local, and we pick up some high fashion at everyday low prices. Despite Argentina's growing economy, its currency is still anemic, compared with the U.S. dollar. According to the exchange-rate conversion, the haul from Claudia Vairo costs just \$200.

PALERMO RESTAURANTS MAY be an even bigger bargain than the area's boutiques. The neighborhood houses what is probably the densest concentration of eateries anywhere in Buenos Aires. That's especially true in Las Cañitas — one of those sub-subneighborhoods. Here, cafés and bars sit side by side by side for a three-block stretch along Baez Street.

The decor of all these restaurants tends to vary more than their menus. Most restaurateurs in Palermo prefer to serve food that is true to their roots. Pizza and pasta — brought by those first Italian immigrants — are staples. So are various cuts of beef from the grass-fed cattle of Argentina's endless wide-open spaces. The meat served here, in particular the lomo, or filet mignon, bests high-dollar Kobe beef any day of the week. It is especially good in old-school places like La Cabrera, Social Paraiso, and Lo de Jesus. The last of those is a traditional *parilla* (steak house), meaning tile floors, black-and-white photos covering the walls, a meat-filled menu, a few dozen of Argentina's still-underrated wines — that kind of thing. On my visit to Lo de Jesus, I opted for the lomo al champignon, which consisted of a French mushroom sauce covering an Argentine filet mignon that, though cooked just on the medium side of medium rare, was so tender, so delicious, that it confused me — I almost spit out my first bite, which would have been a shame. But at \$9 for the entrée, I suppose I could have had seconds.

For visitors who want to live life beyond



Mott

If You Go ...

These are the places you should know about.

Shop

Atipica
4510 El Salvador
011-54-11-4833-3344
www.atipicaobjetos.com.ar

Claudia Vairo Boutique
1425 Serrano
011-54-11-4522-2008

Positive
1415 Serrano
011-54-11-4862-4065

Vintage
4635 El Salvador
011-54-11-4833-5450

Visit

Buenos Aires Zoo
2827 Sarmiento
011-54-11-4011-9900
www.zoobuenosaires.com.ar (Spanish only)

Jardín Botánico (botanical gardens)
3951 Avenida Santa Fé
011-54-11-4831-4527
www.argentinatango.com/ba_neighborhood.html

Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA)
3415 Figueroa Alcorta
011-54-11-4848-6500
www.malba.org.ar/web/en/mission/index.php

Sleep

SoHo All Suites
4762 Honduras
011-54-11-4832-3000

Eat & Drink

Bar Uriarte
1572 Uriarte
011-54-11-4834-6004
www.baruriarte.com.ar/uriarte

Casa Cruz
1658 Uriarte
011-54-11-4833-1112
www.casa-cruz.com

La Cabrera
5127 Cabrera
011-54-11-4832-5754

Lo de Jesus
1406 Gurruchaga
011-54-11-4831-1961
www.lodejesus.com.ar

Malasartes
4999 Honduras
011-54-11-4831-0743

Mott
4685 El Salvador
011-54-11-4833-4306

Social Paraiso
5182 Honduras
011-54-11-4831-4556

Palermo has developed a café culture comparable to (and in my opinion, better than) Paris's. Its bars scream L.A., and many of its boutiques could hold their own in Manhattan.

lomo, trendier locales like Mott, Bar Uriarte, and Casa Cruz have sprung up, serving modernized takes on classic Argentine food in settings that would not be out of place in West L.A. or in TriBeCa. Casa Cruz, in either Palermo SoHo or Palermo Hollywood — depending on who is drawing the lines of the sub-subneighborhoods — is the city's most glam restaurant. Enter through the giant metal doors, and you're greeted by an oversize oval-shaped bar that's surrounded by low couches. In all Palermo, this is the place to be seen. Beyond the bar, the dining room offers almost nonexistent lighting, plush seating, red walls (I think — it's very dark), and a techno soundtrack. On the menu are rabbit and seafood, a surprising rarity in this neighborhood. The night we called for a dinner reservation, we were told a table could be available for us *a la una* — at one a.m. We chose to eat elsewhere.

ALL OF THIS begs a question. Palermo has developed a café culture comparable to (and in my opinion, better than) Paris's. Its bars scream L.A., and many of its boutiques could hold their own in Manhattan. Several, like Vintage and Positive, sport English names. Add to that the large number of tourists who come here to drink and eat and shop, primarily so they can take advantage of the extremely favorable exchange rate, and it makes you wonder: If Palermo Viejo is leading Argentina's comeback, is it leading the country somewhere, well, not Argentine?

Nancy Kulfas doesn't think so. "Argentina is definitely profiting from tourism," she says. "A lot of jobs have been created, and it is nice that people from all over the world can finally discover Buenos Aires — this beautiful city." She points out that her store stocks the work of 50 local art-

ists, designers, and craftspeople, including pieces by native artists whose culture predates the Spanish settlers' arrival in Buenos Aires. The message: Sure, Palermo Viejo is becoming more cosmopolitan, but it's doing so while promoting and profiting from that which is uniquely Argentine.

And that makes a lot more sense to me than, say, drinking at dawn. **AW**

American Airlines currently offers the following service to and from Buenos Aires, Argentina: two daily round-trips from Miami, one daily round-trip from Dallas/Fort Worth, and one daily round-trip from New York's John F. Kennedy airport.

www.americanwaymag.com

JOSEPH GUINTO, a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C., recommends panguecas con dulce de leche (crepes with caramel cream) for breakfast after an all-nighter.



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