



**CARRY ON** A woven-leather bag in the private-apartment showroom of Las Cabrera, one of the many artisanal brands that have surfaced in Buenos Aires in the wake of Argentina's economic instability.

WORTH THE TRIP

## HECHO EN ARGENTINA

The creative community in Buenos Aires is making the most of a changing economy by tapping the country's abundant resources and rich history.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUIS RIDAO

**S**TEPPING INTO designer Maria Zolezzi's Buenos Aires apartment, on the eighth floor of an elegant midcentury building overlooking a park, means entering her showroom. The neat living room, with its polished wood floors, bookshelves and dining table, also features a rack of intricately knitted sweaters, scarves and throws made from organic merino, llama and baby alpaca. After 15 years in Paris working for brands such as Sonia Rykiel and Hermès, Zolezzi returned to Argentina in 2012 and started her own line, which she titled after her nickname, Maydi, in 2014. "When I decided to come back, I thought about the best thing to do in my country and that was to use our fabrics. In terms of merino, for example, we have the best; it's called white gold."

Local craftspeople, most of them between 55 and 70 years old, hand knit the chunky pullovers, soft as cashmere, and weave the oversize shawls on traditional looms. Dyes made from tara and guayacan trees in the country's northwestern province of Salta are used to color the products in soft lavenders, greens and browns. Zolezzi's aim is to create fresh pieces that speak to Argentina's present as well as its past. "Here we often value foreign designers more than our own," she says. "This is why I decided to use the organic fabrics we have, to make knitwear with the excellent artisans we have, but in a contemporary way." Production is small, around 45 styles a season, but Zolezzi has fostered a strong base of customers, including many in Japan, who appreciate her label's exquisite craftsmanship.

Argentina's changeable economy and the high inflation rate of the past couple of years have encouraged its creative community to look inward, starting small businesses with local products and taking inspiration from Argentina's history and culture rather than seeking ideas from abroad. As a result, Buenos Aires, always a creative hub, is now bursting with >



energetic *porteños*, like Zolezzi, who are making their mark. Designers often sell from their own homes, avoiding hefty overheads and cultivating an in-the-know clientele; cocktail bars hype local producers and spin old-fashioned Italian-inspired *aperitivos* into modern creations; and everything from men's leather shoes to gourmet sausages is being made by hand.

The founders of accessories label Le Bas, Lucila De Paula and Dolores Mouriño, started out designing clothes but changed to leather bags and minimalist canvas backpacks in 2012 after the government imposed extremely strict currency regulations. "[It] was good for us," says Mouriño. "The government made it hard to bring things in, in order to protect national industries. Imports were stuck in customs. Since not many fabrics were produced here, we completely switched at that point." De Paula adds, "I went to Italy and realized that our Argentine leathers were amazing." Le Bas's rectangular cross-body bags and deep leather totes are made in small batches from vegetable-tanned leather, sewn by families of artisans who work in the formerly industrial Villa Crespo neighborhood. These days, the country has made it easier to import to Argentina—and theoretically, for multinational brands to open stores there, but Mouriño and De Paula feel that the market for their products is strong. "Even if H&M comes here," says De Paula, "we're not competing with them."

Helena Cabrera, who with her two sisters started the Las Cabrera line of handbags in 2016, says the three were inspired by their childhood memories of time spent on a farm in Sampacho, Córdoba, in the country's interior. "We wanted to do something related to our roots," she says. "We used to see gauchos making their own bridles, knives, belts, all by hand. We decided to do the same thing, but in the city." Their collections, also sold out of an apartment, rely not just on the country's famous leather but also on handwoven raffia from the Argentine littoral.

Terrible Enfant, a line of men's dress shoes from husband-and-wife team Hache Caillaud and Luz Bauzá, taps into the country's long history of Italian immigrant cobblers. Assembled in an 11-person workshop in the city's working-class Boedo neighborhood, the footwear is stitched almost entirely by hand, lined in goat leather and playfully adorned with denim, cork and removable silver sheaths. The couple—he was formerly an investment banker and she is a designer—launched Terrible Enfant in late 2011 and have two shops already. Caillaud credits some of their success to a growing interest in Argentine-made products that he compares to Peru's successful embrace of its own culinary heritage, a willingness to appreciate what's domestic rather than what's imported—plus, he says, an increasing sense of adventure when it comes to men's shoes that aren't plain brown or black.

At cocktail bar Doppelgänger, owner Guillermo Federico Blumenkamp leans heavily on Argentina's long-held love for bitters and vermouths, once a common post-work libation for laborers, many of Italian descent. Yet, rather than serve a glass of vermouth with a siphon of sparkling water, the way it would have been presented half a century ago, Blumenkamp adds smoked Tabasco, flambéed grapefruit peel or cider-and-cinnamon syrup, turning a worker's drink into something for today's more worldly *porteños*. The bar's concoctions also boast Cynar, Fernet-Branca, Hesperidina and Gancia Spritz—a sort of antiquated who's who of spirits that Blumenkamp showcases in his very modern cocktails.

Buenos Aires has more than 70 *bares notables*, landmarked all-day cafe-bar-restaurants, most of which date to the early 20th century and remain little changed from when they opened. In 2015, restaurateur Julián Díaz relaunched one such spot from 1930, Los Galgos, making significant improvements to the offerings (he added negronis on tap) while ensuring that the mirrored bar and window frames were left as is. "We upgraded the kitchen and the bathrooms, but otherwise it looks exactly the same," he notes, but cautions against nostalgia for nostalgia's sake: "You can't live only with the romantic idea. You need good products, good service, good standards if you want to fight a war against Starbucks and international chains." In

the high-ceilinged restaurant, which seems to be full all day, patrons nibble on croissants, slices of tongue in vinaigrette, and *milanesas*, a breaded steak that Díaz calls "the national passion."

Another classic Argentine dish, the humble *choripán*, is the country's ultimate street food: At its most basic, it's a sizzling sausage on a roll, one that makes an appearance at every barbecue and birthday party. Chori, a bright-yellow shop front in trendy Palermo Soho, has been doling out handmade choripán sandwiches and elevated gin and tonics, made with local Príncipe de los Apóstoles gin, since it opened in late 2016. Co-owner Pedro Peña makes the sausage from pork from Córdoba and the occasional wild boar; cabbage slaw, orange zest and cucumber-yogurt sauce bring the sandwich to the next level. He calls the choripán the emblematic sandwich of Argentina. "We need to reassess it," he says. "We need to cultivate our own."

What is Argentine and what isn't has become a big question in the city's culinary scene. "We have this big argument. When we say Argentinian identity, we say it's the *parrilla* [grill], it's the ingredients from the north, from the Andes. But it's also the heritage of immigration: Jewish cuisine is part of that, and Chinese and Peruvian," says Tomas Kalika, co-owner

of Fayer, which opened in 2017. The restaurant, in the Palermo neighborhood, combines Argentina's deep love for cooking over fire with Middle Eastern recipes: Think Israeli-style roasted cauliflower or sweetbreads straight off the grill and served with a tahini sauce. "Thirty years ago, if you came to B.A., we had French restaurants, Italian restaurants, Spanish restaurants. To be a good restaurateur meant French dining."

"YOU CAN'T LIVE ONLY WITH THE ROMANTIC IDEA. YOU NEED GOOD PRODUCTS, GOOD SERVICE, GOOD STANDARDS." —JULIÁN DÍAZ

Now Fayer and its sister restaurant, Mishiguene, are championing a newly sophisticated mix of immigrant cuisine and homegrown traditions.

Argentine identity can be experienced through other senses, too. Fueguia 1833 is a perfume company that has developed an international following for its fragrances inspired by Argentine painters, places and animals. Founder Julian Bedel says the scents, with names like Cactus, El Mono de la Tinta and Jacarandá, "are very related to how Argentinians see the world." The small boutique in tony Recoleta could be mistaken for a jewelry store, with the bottles gleaming in the

dim light. Editions are always limited, based on the scarcity of the natural botanicals, including mountain cypress and coigue that Bedel sources from Patagonia.

Speakeasy Florería Atlántico is hidden underneath a flower shop, although it's hardly a secret anymore: It's one of the city's best-known bars. Co-owner Renato Giovannoni and head bartender Ivo Chiodo are, like Blumenkamp, laser-focused on Argentine products, and their particular mission is to find small producers from around the country. The most recent iteration of their cocktail list reflects their discoveries in drinks like the Equeco, which features an Argentine corn spirit and a three-corn chicha, both from the northwestern province of

Jujuy. Giovannoni's own gin, Príncipe de los Apóstoles (the same used at Chori), is infused with yerba mate, the earthy tea he sources from the Misiones province. "When we launched Apóstoles, five years ago, there was an idea 'It's Argentinian, so it won't be good,'" he says. "Now Argentine people are more open to local products, and we're finding new things to work with every month, every year." From cactus-flower honey to lemon verbena vinegar, the menu reflects Argentina's immense variety of climates and cultures. "We have a beautiful country," says Giovannoni, "and I want to be able to show people that." ●



**LOCAL COLOR**  
Left: Bright bouquets next to a shelf of Argentine wine and spirits at Florería Atlántico. Right: Fueguia 1833's perfumes on display at the brand's boutique.



**PAST FORWARD**  
Left: Beet hummus at Fayer. Above: A poster of tango legend Carlos Gardel watches over wooden lasts at the leather-footwear shop Terrible Enfant.



**SWEET SPOTS** Left, from top: The downstairs speakeasy at Florería Atlántico; Los Galgos, one of the city's *bares notables*, remains much as it was when it opened in 1930.



**CRAFT CULTURE**  
Left: The interior of designer Maria Zolezzi's apartment, which doubles as a showroom for Maydi, her line of knit shawls, sweaters and other soft goods. Below: The cocktail bar Doppelgänger.