



# Long live the braai

South Africans love to braai. It's part of our national psyche. But we're not the only ones, says Nicholas Dall.

South Africans like to lay claim to the cultural event that is the braai. We afford boerewors the kind of nation-building significance that Italians give to the Renaissance, and we belittle American or Australian barbecues, or "barbies".

Yes, the braai is more South African than pretty much anything else, Steve Hofmeyr and Shaka Zulu included. We like to say that the braai is unique, which by extension makes us unique.

If you think about it, though, it's not exactly the most groundbreaking culinary achievement. Making bread involves more ingenuity: picking wheat, deciding to grind it

into a powder, discovering that yeast causes the dough to rise...

The braai, on the other hand, involves putting a dead animal on a fire. Even a caveman would have come to this post-hunt conclusion somewhere along the line. He would have learnt, probably by trial and error, that the meat tastes better without hair on it, that coals provide a more reliable source of heat than flames, and that regular turning prevents the meat from burning.

But, I hear you shout, we've made the braai our own! We no longer braai like cave-men did! And I guess you're right. Coriander seeds do magical things to wors, tender Karoo lamb really can't be beaten (charred

mammoth meat doesn't come close) and the sizzle and smell of Castle Lager dousing flames is one of the things that makes us most homesick.

Braaivleis, biltong and the Currie Cup – at the beach or in the bush – can't be matched anywhere in the world.

Or can it?

You can disqualify the Yanks because they use gas braais and genetically modified meat. The Brits, with their pathetic braai weather, don't even get a mention (the people who braai in England are South African anyway). And the Aussies? Well, any nation that names a braai after a doll...

But the world of the charred animal is not

Anglocentric. In fact, the word "barbecue" is originally derived from the Taino (Caribbean) word *barabicu*, which translates as "sacred fire pit" and which entered European languages as the Spanish *barbacoa*.

Every nation I've ever visited has some kind of interpretation of the barbecue: Vietnam does a damn fine grilled squid; the Kenyan dish *nyama choma* isn't half bad; even continental Europeans aren't averse to tossing a boar in the direction of a fire.

But there is one place that stands head and shoulders above the rest: Argentina, a country where the cow is king. The Argentinians don't use the Spanish word *barbacoa*; the term *asado*, which means "roast", is used to describe the slow grilling of large chunks of beef. Maybe there's some kind of anticolonial sentiment there, but that's beside the point. The point is that the meat tastes fantastic.

In the two years I spent living in Argentina I ate, by conservative calculations, at least 120 kg of beef. A typical weekend involved a Friday night *asado*, during which the eating only happened at around 1am; a Saturday night *asado*, which was much the same; and a Sunday afternoon *asado* to coincide with 3 pm football.

Argentinians celebrate birthdays, promotions, weddings and first communions in one way and one way only: They eat beef.

This is not surprising, as the Argentinian economy is based on beef exports. Its next biggest export is soya, which is basically beef for vegetarians, and another major export is leather. A few years back, the Argentinian president suspended all beef exports to keep local prices down and hopefully ensure re-election. It worked. These guys take their cows pretty seriously, and there's nowhere they take them more seriously than when they're sizzling on a grid.

**The differences between the braai and the *asado*** are numerous. We drink beer (or something stronger); Argentinians drink red wine. We favour a generous bed of coals, whereas our trans-Atlantic neighbours opt for a sparse scattering. In South Africa, pap and baked potato are almost as important as the meat itself; in Argentina, bread is the staple starch.

But there are many similarities, too. In both countries, briquettes are for sissies and the owner of the braai facility is the designated braai master. The braai master's glass must be perpetually refilled by the members of his support circle, and – of course – the braai is an exclusively male pursuit that is

profoundly linked to sporting events.

In Argentina, the meat that hovers above the fire invariably comes from a cow. I have Argy friends who have never eaten lamb (in spite of the fact that Patagonia is just as sheep-ish as the Karoo), let alone rabbit, ostrich, pork or – God help us – fish.

What they lack in variety of species they make up for in multiplicity of body parts. I don't consider myself a squeamish person, but I have never had an appetite for innards. This had to change when I moved to Argentina. I tucked into blood sausage, stomach lining, tongue and even nipples (or are they teats?). I ate squares of heart, slices of liver, chunks of kidney, wedges of thymus gland and even squiggles of brain.

The cow is a big animal – so too are its internal organs – and the aforementioned parts are invariably cooked whole before being hacked up by the chef with an ornamental gaucho knife and devoured by men, women and children alike.

At one *asado* I was unable to eat any of the main course (a large hunk of succulent steak), because I had already gorged myself on half a kilo of crispy intestines drizzled with lime juice. Of all of these grisly bits, the only part that I had trouble getting (and keeping) down was *mondongo*: a white spongy substance that comes from one of the four stomachs of the cow and looks like it belongs on a coral reef, not a braai grid.

The *asado* is not limited to nausea-inducing delicacies, though. They're just starters. The

pièce de résistance of any *asado* is the meaty main course. The chunks of steak are heavily salted, slow-cooked and well done – and there should be at least half a kilogram (not including offal) per person.

**It must be said** that there are enough differences between the braai and the *asado* for both nations to be proud of their heritage. But our brothers in Argentina are sounding an important warning: Be careful, you're sitting on a shaky throne.

In many ways the *asado* is like the braai was 30 years ago, when rugby players had names like Moaner, Vleis and Piston, and when a firefighter was a dead bush or the Sunday newspaper.

The gas barbie invasion is coming. If we don't look back to our roots and rediscover the basics of the braai, it'll end up as bland as the American and Australian barbecue – a fate worse than death.

Luckily, we can fight back. On 24 September, Heritage Day, head to your local butcher and get some secret-recipe boerie and a kilo or two of the finest Karoo lamb chops money can buy.

On your way home, pick up a bundle of firewood (you earn extra points if you chop it yourself) and gather some kindling. When you get home, crack open a Castle, whip out a jumbo box of Lion matches and braai like you're Bakkies Botha clearing out a Puma ruck.

Yes, braai as if your life (and national pride) depends on it. ■

