

# Eating around the world



Springtime is here and braais are being lit all over the country. While **Nick Dall** waits for his coals to be ready, he reflects on his travels and the special dishes that have fuelled them.

ILLUSTRATIONS  
**NICOLENE LOUW**

**I**braai a lot. If my doctor allowed it, I'd probably braai every night. As I stand here now, watching the flames lick the braai grid clean in preparation for tonight's event, some light still in the sky after a long winter, I think back to all the places I've travelled to and all the wonderful things I've eaten.

I wouldn't go so far as to call myself an epicure, or even a foodie, but when I travel I enjoy trying as many local delicacies as possible. Everywhere I've been there's been at least one meal or drink that I've wished I could take home with me.

There have also been things that have made my stomach curdle, but this is not the time or the place to focus on such digestive mishaps.

I've sipped single malt in Islay and eaten nigiri in Kobe, but if I could whittle down my favourites to a single day's menu, here's what it would be:

For a pre-dawn snack I'd travel to La Paz in Bolivia

for a glass of *api* and a couple of *buñuelos* while the sun lights up the snow on the slopes of Illimani, the 6000m peak that watches over the city.

*Api* is a mulberry-coloured hot drink with a sweet cinnamon flavour and the consistency of a banana milkshake. The colour comes from the purple maize that makes it more of an energy drink than a plain old tea alternative.

A *buñuelo* also sounds curious if you haven't tried one, considering that it comprises a slice of unpasteurised cheese deep-fried in billowing batter and dusted with castor sugar. But I can assure you the combination is delectable.

By mid-morning I'd be hungry again, so I'd pop across the Andes and down to the beaches of northern Peru. I'd rent a beach chair and a luminous umbrella and rinse away the cobwebs in the crystalline waters of the Pacific.

I wouldn't bother with drying myself, opting

instead to drip-dry in the sun's heat. Before long my appetite would get the better of me and I'd ask one of the beach vendors for a bowl of *ceviche* and an ice-cold *Cusqueña*, the local brew.

*Ceviche* is a dish of raw white fish, marinated in lime juice and served with sliced onion, chilli and some chunks of boiled sweet potato and white corn. Unlike sushi, the lime juice actually cooks the fish, so hospital-style hygiene isn't as important as you'd think. Of late, *ceviche* has become popular in the fancy restaurants of the world, but in Peru it's simple, traditional fare. And nothing could be more refreshing.

For lunch I'd teleport to the Italian hill town of Perugia for a pizza. There's a restaurant next to the main piazza where the chefs roll the bases by hand in full view of the customers. Merely watching them bash, spin, throw and tease the elastic dough is an attraction in itself.

But I wouldn't go just to watch. No, I'd order what I ordered the first time I ate there, and every time since: *pizza Margherita extra*. This is a variation on the original recipe, the only change being that standard mozzarella is replaced with buffalo mozzarella and fresh basil is added when the pizza comes out of the oven.

Buffalo mozzarella *really* is made from the milk of Asian water buffalo – which by some strange twist of destiny ended up living in the fields outside Naples – and it's more like ricotta than mozzarella as we know it in South Africa.

Forget the fancy cheese, though. The true heroes of my Perugian pizza are its delicate, springy base and the sweet Italian tomatoes – nature's most delicious candy.

**Come mid-afternoon**, I'd be crossing the time zones again for a pick-me-up at one of Hanoi's famous *bun cha* stalls. Here, pork rashers and meatballs are cooked over pavement fireplaces and served with rice noodles, aromatic Asian herbs and a soup of fish sauce and garlic.

If you arrive early enough you can dunk fat bean-sprout spring rolls into your soup, but these will have run out long before I'd be able to get there on my whirlwind world tour.

*Bun cha* is another one of my obsessions that has to be tasted to be believed. The sweet saltiness of the soup cuts through the fat of the pork and combines with the crunchy noodles to deliver a flavour explosion that I've never managed to recreate anywhere else.

*Bun cha* is hot, though, and Hanoi is hotter. I'd definitely be sweating by the time I'd finish my

bowl. To restore equilibrium I'd wander over to the café across the road and order an iced coffee and a lemonade. Vietnamese coffee is so strong, sticky and altogether hair-raising that I can only handle it iced. The lemonade is freshly squeezed and, if you ask for no sugar, delightful.

**After all this eating** I'd be well advised to call it a day and retire to bed, but the best would be yet to come. At dinner time, I'd strap on my jetpack and fly from Hanoi to exactly the opposite side of the world: Mendoza in Argentina.

There, I'd meet up with my friend Edgardo and we'd take a bus to one of the campsites in the vineyards outside the city. We'd find a nice spot on the grassy banks of a lake and we'd light a fire of algarrobo wood. We'd drink *Malbec*, that full-bodied fruity red wine that expresses itself best in Argentine soils, while we wait for the coals to form. When the first coals start peeling from the logs, we'd rake them under the grid and cook our meat slowly, carefully.

The meat would be a feast of Argentine beef, with some irresistible South African favourites: Karoo lamb chops and half a kilo of Grabouw boerewors. Chops and wors need little explanation so I'll focus on the Argentine components of our feast: We'd start with some *chinchulines*, or intestines – fat and crispy like Mozambique prawns and doused in lemon juice. Next up would be *molleja*, the big gland in the cow's neck, which is almost 100% cholesterol but tastes so good it seems worth the risk. We'd eat the boerewors wrapped in crispy rolls and doused in spicy *chimichurri* sauce. The chops? Salt and pepper and nothing else.

Finally, we'd be ready for the real meat: a huge hunk of *vacio* – a cut that you don't get in South Africa, which most closely resembles a flank steak. We'd rub it liberally with coarse-ground salt and cook it extremely slowly, so that it's evenly done and moist throughout.

By this stage I'd probably have fallen into a cholesterol-induced stupor, but if I still had enough space for dessert, I wouldn't say no to a slice of New York baked cheesecake, washed down with a glass of Calitzdorp port.

It's properly dark in Cape Town now and my coals are glowing. The memory of all these different treats has left my mouth watering. I might be hungry but I'm not overly nostalgic, because I know that wherever I go next, some new treat will be waiting...

Read Nick's braai gear special on page 84.

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