

Open wide at wide river

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RIO ANCHO, Uruguay – What happens when a nuclear engineer and an artist from Santiago del Estero get together with one of Argentina's foremost chefs? A farm-to-table restaurant and three-room guesthouse on the outskirts of Colonia del Sacramento in Uruguay.



Riverside at Río Ancho

In fact Marcelo Susevich and Miri Fioramonti have been married for donkey's years, owning a rural summer house in Paraje El Caño neighbourhood for the past two decades. Then, with their children all grown up, they realized they could fuse their passion for gastronomy – Marcelo helped found Colonia's farmers' market – with hospitality, an inadvertent hobby given the stream of friends who came to stay over the years.

Three years ago, they decided to take the plunge and convert their home, adding an extension to create **Río Ancho**. Taking a rationalist approach to architecture, the lodging is built into the side of a small hill that offers up an epic panorama of the wide river (hence the name), a perfect spot for sunsets as well as an intimate 20-seater restaurant.

Throw into the mix Marcelo's professional change of heart that saw him move into film and TV production (he just finished shooting his latest film about Pope Francis in Madrid last week). Along this new path he met Martín Molteni, executive chef of LatAm 50 Best Restaurant Pura Tierra, started a foodie bromance and filmed a gastronomic journey in Peru together.

Sadly that project never made it to any size screen but the seed was sown. And while Martín doesn't exactly have much free time what with a new baby and a new restaurant in 2014, he gladly came on board the Río Ancho project, which opened in January.

A day trip to Colonia will never be the same again should you dine here. On a dollar run? Walking up the lighthouse gets dull so splash out and enjoy the rural side of the Unesco heritage town. Open Thursday to Sunday and strictly only attended by the adorable Miri and Marcelo, go with the intention of having lunch. That three-course meal – I guarantee you, however – will turn into something else rather more special and unique. So much so that you'll never go to José Ignacio or Cariló ever again.

This is the deal. Reserve a table for lunch (US\$50 per person), upgrade to a day pass (US\$100). After dipping into the seasonal tasting menu that deals specifically in local produce from goat's cheese to tuna cactus fruit, almonds, olives, lamb, and the catch of the day, Río Ancho becomes your personal playground.

Kick back on the elevated deck for a little bird spotting with the telescope, wander the lush grounds or head down to the sandy beach. The kindly owners will even lend out two-man kayaks and if that seems totally awesome on a sunny afternoon, wait until you paddle out towards the sun as it sets on the horizon.

But the piece de résistance is cocktail hour. Miri and Marcelo set up a small bonfire on their section of beach – private in principle though it can be accessed via the coast – lay out some deck chairs and serve up the house cocktail, the eponymous Río Ancho made with Cynar, tonic water and homemade grapefruit syrup, topped with an orange slice to represent that glorious descending fireball.



River catch of the day

On Thursday evening, Martín had also set up a small grill on the beach with his Pura Tierra sous chef Arturo Abadía to sizzle up long green beans and courgettes topped with brie, but that was the whole shebang because I had to catch a ferry. The full length version is a seven-course tasting menu, "and you eat with your feet in the sand," says Marcelo. Without a doubt, you'll want to stay the night.

But if a midday eat and greet is only within your budget, here's the lowdown. While Martín hops over everything three weeks or so, Arturo has made Colonia his new permanent base, and much like Pura Tierra, the focus is on sourcing top quality local produce.

And it's not like Martín has a lot of time on his hands, running two restaurants, leading the Bocuse d'Or team, preparing for next week's Masticar food fair and so on. What made him get involved in another new project?

He says: "I'm a nature enthusiast and I like the challenge and everything directed towards that, and this project transmits this. It's a beautiful place to try things out and use it as a base for development. Not only do I scout for products in Uruguay but I can then apply that to other projects. The dairy farm is a mile away, the fishermen are also really nearby and so that is something I can take advantage of here that I can't in Buenos Aires. It releases some frustration!"

Lamb is one cut that features regularly on the weekly menu, given it is sourced locally though there's also a strong emphasis on catering for vegetarians, given that it's Marcelo's lifestyle choice. (He does admit to trying dishes though, so he knows what's being served up.)

One highlight of a special nine-course tasting menu so I could get a real sense of it was the stuffed cherry tomato in a light gazpacho-style jus. Finely chopped red and yellow bell pepper, courgette and aubergine formed the stuffing, while a bite of melon was a surprising and refreshing combo with the tomato.



Rabbit is also sourced locally, and both Marcelo and Martín say that the more they use it on the menu, the more the producer will respond to their demands, creating a positive food circle. The terrine and fillet duo was backed up by a tasty olive mayo, and sprinkled with crunchy black olive ashes, the fillet succulent and both matching well with the olive.

My star was the free-range pork, slow cooked *al vacio* (vacuum) for 12 hours before being taken apart then put back together for a final heat blast in the oven to crisp up the crackling. Apple sauce, perfectly fresh given the autumnal harvest, oven-roasted red shallot and a perfect sea salted miniature roast potato served with the pig's own juices. Tender, flavourful, locally sourced and probably slaughtered yesterday. Hearty, modern, locally sourced fare.

One of the dessert options showcased local cheese including the semi-hard Colonia, a young fresh goat's cheese and a Gouda from Carmelo, recently anointed the best in Uruguay. Washed down with Botrytis Noble 2009 from Familia Deicas in Canelones, a five white grape late harvest wonder, and it was all happening in my mouth.

If you can upgrade to the seven step tasting menu (US\$100), do so as it will truly showcase this part of Uruguay's ever expanding local produce, plus regional wine is included in the price.

This is an undiscovered gem – and you heard it here first.

Río Ancho

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www.rioanchocolonia.com, Thursday to Sunday