

FATHER FIRE

IN URUGUAY, THREE COCINERAS FEED US WITH FIERCE GRACE

by TARAJIA MORRELL — photography HEIDI LENDER

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“Francis has the things he wants to do: meat, potatoes, chimichurri and criollita sauce and that’s all, and when I would mix other things he would say, ‘No Lu, you cannot do that.’ And now, five years has gone by and I tell myself, I can mix a salad with soy sauce because he’s not looking!”
—Lucía Soria

I ate Lucía Soria’s food on my very first day in Uruguay. I’d driven to Garzón from José Ignacio, the Elysian beachtown, with a couple of friends. It took us two laps around the sleepy square and the concentric streets to find Soria’s restaurant, Lucifer.

And then, a literal moment later opposite a summer-thirsty field with an abandoned train station, we were there, at an oasis where verdant leaves shaded us late-lunchers, and delicious smoke drifted to our ready noses. Lucifer seduces first with its sense of discovery—its almost comically unexpected existence, down a dirt road like any other—much like the town of Garzón itself. Then there are the aesthetics: the white and blue accents, ignited by a splash of pink on the hodgepodge antique English china. This quiet beauty whet the appetite for what is to come.

We ordered everything on the menu—three appetizers and three entrées for our three hungry bellies. The food here is straightforward and excellent: a charred peach salad with prosciutto and bitter greens; a pizzetta cooked in the wood-burning outdoor oven, where the local fish from the Laguna Garzón are also roasted, then served with tapenade and herbs. But in the simplicity are gifts: a masterful eggplant spread, rich with Garzón olive oil, nuanced with lemon zest and paprika aside fresh baked bread; basil and mint in a tomato salad, teasing our taste buds.

“We don’t replace something we’ve run out of with a lesser quality ingredient that we can buy here,” chef-owner Soria, a petite and vibrant 31-year-old who cooks and serves clad in blouses and short skirts, explains. “We just change. We turn the oven down after service, but we put a chicken or an eggplant in overnight and the next morning it’s perfect. We use everything—even the heat.” This ingredient-driven philosophy is of course in keeping with the farm-to-table trend that’s swept the American culinary landscape, but here in Uruguay it’s different: the notion of a culinary landscape is still being born.

Birth requires parentage, and if asked who has most influenced the gastronomic terrain here in this wonderfully rugged, simultaneously sophisticated corner of the country, the answer is clear. Francis Mallmann, the chef with an Argentine father and Uruguayan mother, insistently comes up in every conversation about the region’s food. It’s no wonder given that he put two sleepy towns—first José Ignacio and then Pueblo Garzón—on the map simply by opening restaurants there. Mallmann has made cooking with fire—“gaucho style”—his life’s work, celebrating excellent ingredients, creating straight-forward yet elevated cuisine by manipulating the most primal power source. “I don’t think there’s a cook in Argentina or here who hasn’t worked with him,” says Gioconda Scott, chef de cuisine at Mallmann’s Restaurante Garzón. “Everybody comes from him. He’s like this mothership—but that’s a demonstration of his generosity, because he really gives information and then let’s you go and continue on.”

Soria worked for Mallmann for ten years, first in the kitchen at Patagonia Sur in Buenos Aires, then as an assistant as he worked on his *Siete Fuegos* cookbook, and later as manager of his hotel in Pueblo Garzón. Though of Argentine parentage, Soria fell in love with the ghost town of Garzón, just as her mentor had, and bought the property there in which she opened Lucifer in 2010. “I didn’t have much money to start everything and he lent me all the tables—he has a huge kitchen supply storage in José Ignacio and he said, ‘Go there, take whatever you want and you can start your restaurant now.’”

As someone from New York—where the competition is cutthroat, the rents are astonishing and the male-dominated kitchens have rapid turnover—I was struck first by this paradoxically patriarchal yet progressive notion: Mallmann’s kitchens as a rite of passage from which cooks here go on into the world; the number of women who have worked for him and gone on to helm





kitchens of their own; and this repeatedly referenced generosity. Mallmann, a notorious voluptuary, explains his theory of women in the kitchen in a gentle but knowing tone: “Women are stronger, more powerful, more peaceful than men. They are resilient and patient and cope with pressure much better . . . in addition to being beautiful.”

Several weeks after my first visit to Lucifer, as I sought a peaceful home for myself amid the mansion mélange in José Ignacio, I stumbled upon Posada Paradiso, a rambling red bohemian structure built in 1985 that beckoned me with its beatnik charm and the alluring aromas that wafted over the garden wall into the street.

Within the gate was Clo Dimet, a 44-year-old Uruguayan with joyful eyes, wearing a white chef’s jacket and jeans. Miraculously, Dimet knew just what I needed—somewhere small and clean and white in which to write and dream—and soon became my host, my chef and my friend. Dinner at my new home—eaten on the porch, with reeds from the thatched roof whispering and Indian lanterns casting soft light on late diners (10 PM or later this time of year)—was a dance between the streamlined, Mediterranean approach I’ve come to associate with the new food of Uruguay and the entrées that told of Dimet’s wanderlust.

Dimet, who grew up in Montevideo, began her restaurant career when she was twenty as a bartender at Posada del Mar—the first José Ignacio restaurant at which Mallmann led the kitchen. Without the funds to attend cooking school, she asked him for a stage, and for a year she worked double shifts, behind the bar during the day and in the kitchen at night, until he made her *chef de partie*. According to Mallmann, a novice is the ideal candidate for hire: “We look for people who have never worked in a restaurant before. We teach them from the beginning. Out of twenty, there are six who might stay with you for five or six years. Out of twenty, there is always a leader.”

Dimet spent the next nine years working with Mallmann first at Los Negros in José Ignacio, where the staff list of that era reads like a dream team of *cocineros* who’ve gone on to open their own adored establishments here—such as Federico Desseno of Marismo, Guzmán Artagaveytia and Martín Pittaluga of Parador La Huella—and afar, like Ignacio Mattos of Estela in New York and Paula Carosella in São Paulo.

Dimet continued with Mallmann in Argentina and Brazil, where she eventually opened two of her

own restaurants: La Table O & Co, a Mediterranean restaurant with an olive oil shop, and her namesake, Clo, a contemporary space with a market-driven menu. After eight years cooking in São Paulo for as many as 1200 covers a day, she returned to José Ignacio, ready to rearrange her life and, moreover, to return to a kitchen rhythm that sustained her passion but reconnected her with the land.

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“It’s the definition of farm-to-table,” Dimet explains. “There are no supermarkets here. If you want tomatoes you call the farmer and he will bring tomatoes from his farm. If you need a lamb, you call the man who is going to kill the lamb. This is such a privilege. This simplicity is a luxury.”

Indeed this malleable approach is impossible in a metropolis or when you are preparing a large menu for many hundreds of covers each night, but there is great elasticity to it nonetheless. “If six people or sixty walk in to dinner, I can feed them just as well,” Dimet says of her intimate Paradiso, a 23-room hotel that she and partner José Secco opened in 2012. Also, this way of life allows her to travel in the off-season when she works as a private chef, to destinations as far flung as Europe, India, Morocco and Australia. Vestiges of these trips are what drew me in from the street: the pungent whiff of fennel seed, her cardamom-laced tagine, her curry with prawns from the Laguna Garzón and of course her chutney, revered in the José Ignacio environs.

When asked how her ten years with Mallmann informed her culinary path, she says succinctly, “He opened another world for us, for my generation of cooks here. I didn’t have money to go to culinary school abroad, and working for him was my education.”

Perhaps the most striking example of Mallmann's eye for an apt pupil is his current chef de cuisine at Restaurante Garzón. Gioconda Scott's culinary education has been somewhat in reverse. The 35-year-old with the mannerisms of an English rose but the serious and passionate élan of a Flamenco *bailaora*, began cooking at Trasierra, the *molino* on 3,000 acres of olive and orange groves in Andalucía, Spain, where she grew up. When Scott was 13, her mother began to take paying guests to help afford the extraordinary *hacienda*, which now has 18 rooms. At 21, Scott made it her mission to create food that met the aesthetic standards of the historic 16th century abode. Subsequently she's gone all over the world to elevate her craft, *staging* for chefs such as Kamal Mouzawak in Lebanon, at Lo Scoglio di Tomaso on the Amalfi Coast in Italy and at River Café and Clarke's in London. Initially she approached Mallmann for an unpaid apprenticeship focusing on cooking with fire, but the Argentine chef who burns things to perfection quickly grew so confident in her abilities that he offered her this job. "Yes," Scott told him, "I'd love to, but I feel like I need to work closely with you to be able to interpret you." So she started by assisting him with events in Patagonia, Mendoza, Chicago and New York.

"Francis gives opportunities. He's generous. He sees people very well. Entrusting them to do."

Perhaps Scott's early years cooking in Spain and Italy were the perfect training ground for a restaurant in Uruguay, since those cuisines are certain influences in the gastronomy here. Her masterful organization has proved a perfect foil to Mallmann's astounding, free-spirited creativity. "He truly has shown me that as far as your imagination can go, he breaks the boundaries of that and you can go further," Scott says of Mallmann's culinary vision and audacity. After working in sub-basement London kitchens under fluorescent lights completely disconnected from the earth, the producers and even the diners, she sought a return to the land, and Mallmann is nothing if not an outdoorsman—their first trip was cooking on an electricity-free island in southern Patagonia, which was filmed for the soon-to-be-released Netflix documentary series *Chef's Table*.



Above: Wagyu steak from a local farm with a charred corn salad at Francis Mallmann's Hotel and Restaurante Garzón.
Opposite: Gioconda Scott, chef de cuisine at Hotel and Restaurante Garzón, with a freshly killed lamb.



At Garzón, where Scott was tasked with creating a menu of his dishes without his being present to lead her, she strove to develop relationships with farmers and fishermen nearby and to make their lush local ingredients the stars as she interpreted Mallmann’s recipes. The bestselling entrée this season has been the *Pescado del Día*—local *brotola*, *pescadilla* or *corvina*, which underscores that diners are looking to chefs to usher them toward what is of the finest quality from the nearest source. “We use the fishermen in Laguna Garzón and it’s much more complicated because you’re at their mercy. But it’s worth it. The fish don’t smell the same—they smell of the sea, totally fresh, alive and alert fish!” Scott expounds.

The prices at Hotel and Restaurante Garzón are astronomical, but you are paying for an experience: a utopia, where everything is exquisitely curated. From the Wagyu beefsteak from a local farm served with an accessible charred sweet corn salad, to bowls of lemons in antique white enamelware on each table, luxury and simplicity are synonymous in Mallmann’s world.

This attention to detail is evident in his culinary progeny. “Whatever you do, you have to do it with beauty—a restaurant, a house, a box. It has to be well put,” is how Soria describes Mallmann’s influence (in addition to Lucifer, she also has the wildly popular

Jacinto in Montevideo). Dimet’s bohemian Paradiso also feels like a sanctuary, even within a Shangri-La like José Ignacio. The beauty is unpretentious, slightly exotic and utterly peaceful.

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It’s no accident that these three women are making the world a more delicious and beautiful place with their soaring standards, attention to detail and empowerment to dream. This “vocation of service”—as Dimet puts it—is their nature, and their culinary patriarch nurtured it. What better job could a father do than to share with, prepare and then release his ready children of the kitchen out to achieve greatness of their own, however they each define it? Despite all three women repeatedly sighting Mallmann’s generosity, he sees it differently: “It’s me who gets the greatest gift. They give so much to me.” No, Chef, they give so much to us all.



Above: A ruin in the hills of Garzón. *Opposite:* An empty country road near Garzón, Uruguay.

