

Italians in Buenos Aires

A travel writer makes his home in Argentina and learns that few places in the world outside Italy will make you feel so at home.

Text and photos by Michael Luongo

common than Spanish ones. True enough, just as in America, Italian food from pizza to pasta sits alongside the menus with that main staple of Argentina, beef, but that cultural connection runs so much deeper.

Like many an American city, Buenos Aires has its own Little Italy, La Boca. At the turn of the last century, as in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Toronto and so many North American cities, Italian immigrants came by the tens of thousands, many starting in this neighborhood, whose name is Spanish for “The Mouth”—a reference to a natural port formed here when the Rio Riachuelo twists into southern Buenos Aires. It was a slum, dangerous, full of gangsters. Tango partially developed here, a dance which came originally from old African slave culture, and blended with Italian immigrant music and gangster folklore into what we see today. While La Boca is a tourist trap

now, it’s also a part of Buenos Aires where you’re sure to find Neopolitan favorites like *sfogliatella* pastries at restaurants like Barbiera.

La Boca is not the only locale where Italians settled after immigrating to Buenos Aires and their

I recently was at a crowded event in Buenos Aires, with tens of thousands of people milling about, waiting for an acquaintance whom I had never met. To help him find me, I gave a description of myself, mentioning my dark Italian looks. But when we finally did connect, I was greeted with a frustrated admonishment: “Telling me to look for someone Italian-looking in a crowd in Buenos Aires doesn’t help me at all,” he said. And then he added, which made me smile inside, “you look like you belong here.”

Italians might be a specific ethnic group within the United States, easily identifiable, and — for both good and bad reasons — part of cinematic and television folklore and stereotype, but that’s not the case in Argentina. Here, a place I call home part of the year to write a Frommer’s Buenos Aires guidebook, Italian last names are more



Paula Castignola sings Italian favorites at Il Fiume, an Italian restaurant in the Puerto Madero district.

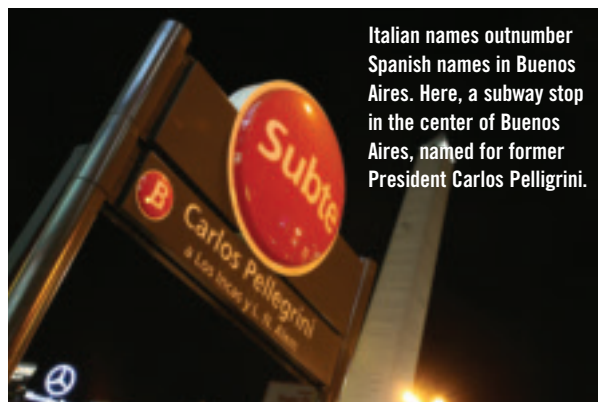
The colorful La Boca neighborhood is Buenos Aires’s historical Little Italy.

Palacio Barolo, designed by eccentric Italian architect Mario Palanti, was based on the story of Dante's "Inferno."



influence is felt in every neighborhood. Compared to New York, Buenos Aires also began to accept immigrants in large numbers as early as the 1860s and 1870s, decades before the numbers peaked in North America — a point made by author Samuel L. Baily in his 2004 book, "Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870–1914." In total, about 2,270,000 Italians came to Argentina between 1861 and 1914, a little more than half of those who immigrated to the United States in that time period.

Still, the numbers to Argentina were significantly higher than those coming to New York until the 1890s, meaning that Italian culture became more strongly steeped within Argentina than in the United States. Buenos Aires was also a much smaller city, with only about 170,000 people in 1869, in



Italian names outnumber Spanish names in Buenos Aires. Here, a subway stop in the center of Buenos Aires, named for former President Carlos Pellegrini.

contrast to New York City's population of just under one million. As a result, while Italian Americans are a specific ethnic group within the United States, the same cannot be said of Argentina, where more than half the population claims Italian ancestry. The country has nearly 40 million people, with three million in Buenos Aires, and more than nine million in the city's surrounding suburbs.

Among the early institutions established by these immigrants is the Circulo Italiano, a social and cultural institution founded in 1873. Today, its headquarters on Calle Libertad is among the city's most exquisite buildings. Even older is the Escuela Edmondo de Amicis, founded in 1858, which still

teaches the Italian language to new generations. Beyond these institutions, many of the city's greatest buildings show the hands of Italian influence, such as the Teatro Colon opera house and the Congreso, both designed by Italian Victor Meano. The eccentric Italian architect Mario Palanti, obsessed with Dante Alighieri's "Divine Comedy," designed the strange Palacio Barolo on Avenida de Mayo, using the storyline in the structure, even creating a now no longer existing tomb for the lobby to house Dante's ashes, which Italy never sent. Much of the stonework gracing these buildings and other monuments from the grand downtown boulevards to the quiet tree-lined Belle-Epoque streets of Recoleta and its famous cemetery were the work of anonymous Italian immigrants whose names will never be known.

The marks are beyond the physical as well. Even if Spanish is the language spoken here, the rhythm is Italian, an up and down cadence. Just like in Italy, words are punctuated by hand movements — pinched fingers to make a point, or a brush with the hands under the chin to make sure someone knows how mad you are. Lunfardo, an Argentine slang, has its roots in Southern Italy, and you won't find it anywhere else in Latin America. More than a hundred years after most immigrants came, some of this has been lost over time, but I find when watching old Argentine movies, that sense of the accent is even stronger.

Like those old movies, a visit to Buenos Aires can be a step back in time for Italians who come to live or vacation here.

I met Ines Rota Graziozi, a native of Bergamo, ➤



Details of the opera house Teatro Colón, named for Christopher Columbus and built with Italian immigrant labor at the turn of the last century.

Italy, at a sunset tango party on top of the Palacio Barolo. She told me that when she is in Buenos Aires, “It reminds me of Italy 50 years ago. The faces are the faces I remember when I was young.” Ines came here to tango, and it is the romance and warmth of Buenos Aires that makes her comfortable and gives her a nostalgic sense of being home. She has traveled here over the years, spending months at a time to perfect her dancing. Her excitement and fascination with the city is apparent when she tells me, “It’s like to be in Italy when I was a child, like to be in Italy in the 1960s. It’s very close to it.”

Ines is not alone in her opinions. Sandra Borello, president of Borello Travel, is a descendent of Italians from Turin who lives in Argentina and New York. She told me that, “Italy and Argentina’s cultures are very similar in many ways. Also, Argentina can offer [Italians] a diversification of things to do and [people to meet] that most likely will...attract the hot-blooded and passionate Italian heart.”

I found many others who agree while out to dinner in Puerto Madero, a chic part of Buenos Aires that had once been a terribly dilapidated industrial zone. My host, Marta Pasquali, a tour guide who speaks Italian among her many languages, had brought several guests, many of them also tour guides, to a performance by singer Paula Castignola.

Like most Argentine women, Paula was beautiful and slender, with curly black tresses flowing over her shoulders. She was singing Italian music that night, a mix of classics and modern favorites, some of which I recognized from my childhood. During the performance, I asked those at my table what Italians love about Buenos Aires. Adriana De Caria, one of the women at the table, said when she shows Italians around the city, they like neighborhoods like San

Telmo, Palermo, and Avenida Libertador, a grand avenue lined with parks and statues. Yet it goes beyond the physical attributes of the city, Adriana added, saying, “they like the open way of Porteños,” using a word which means people native to Buenos Aires and refers to its port. She continued, “The relationship of people. It’s a dialect they understand.”

Paula soon finished singing and came to join us. She was 24, with a mother from Avellino and a father from Padua. She had been to a few musical events in Italy and other parts of the world, such as the 2005 San Remo Young Person’s Music Festival, where she had learned more of the songs she sang that night in the restaurant.

Paula told us her worries that in spite of how closely connected Italy and Argentina seem, the culture of Italy might be dying out, just like the accents in old movies. “They don’t know the origins of their culture,” she said, of the many Argentines her age, and worried that over time that close connection will die out.

Whenever she is in Italy, or around Italians, Paula said she feels at home. “The people are warm in both cultures,” she explained. But most of all, “the feeling of family,” is one that is important to her, something with which Italian Americans will be very familiar.

It is hard then to separate the sense of passion and the love of art and culture in Argentina from its own Italian heritage. Paula is right, and for me as an Italian American, Argentina is a place I myself feel so comfortable and in love with. If you are Italian American, I think few places in the world outside Italy will make you feel so at home as Argentina. After all, like my friend had said when he was trying to find me in the crowd, Italian Americans look like they belong here. ▲