

NORBERTO PIATTONI
OF NYC'S METTĀ
RESTAURANT HOSTS
A REUNION THAT
SETS MONTEVIDEO,
URUGUAY, AFLAME AND
PAYS HOMAGE TO THE
ASADO TRADITION.

IT TOOK FLYING TO THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE,

but I'd escaped a New York winter. It was summer in Uruguay, and even at twilight the air was hot. In the kitchen fire, potatoes crisped with paprika and tallow in a pan, and onions roasted in glowing coals. Outside, children lay half asleep on their mothers' laps, and music married with the clink of glasses. A breeze floated up from the wide mouth of Montevideo Bay a few blocks away.

A year ago, I'd helped to open Metta, a wood fire- and fermentation-centered restaurant on a quiet corner in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. In February, at the apex of South American summer, our chef, Norberto "Negro" Piattoni, invited his restaurant team to join him on another quiet corner—in another hemisphere—to celebrate Metta's first birthday and immerse ourselves in the culture of cooking with fire.

For Piattoni, who grew up in Federación, Argentina, and learned to cook on his grandfather's farm, the *asado* is a long-established tradition, a ritual to honor time with friends and family. But for Piattoni, the asado also had become a vocation. He perfected his technique over four years as head chef at Restaurante Garzón, Argentine chef Francis Mallmann's temple to grilling in the Uruguayan ghost town of Garzón. While there, Piattoni also met Agustina Gagliardi, now the chef-owner of Amorín Provisión, the Montevideo restaurant Piattoni took over for the reunion.

Friends, family, and former culinary cohorts poured in from the street, greeting Piattoni as he plated heirloom tomato salads with tart slices of plum and fresh shiso leaves. Guy Zarate, a brawny Argentine winemaker, showed up with a case of Rivus Malbec, a special delivery from his Patagonia vineyard. We settled down for supper at flower-strewn tables.

Piattoni stationed himself at Amorín's *parrillas* and *planchas*, tending the blaze in the hearth. To bridge this meal with his work at Metta, he weaved in fermented flavors, such as using fermented carrots to accompany whole-roasted white fish. Sweet potatoes, which would furnish a smoky dessert, smoldered in their skins. No South American meal is complete without meat, and this homecoming dinner was no different: We tucked into tri-tip steaks with singed spring onions and dollops of bright chimichurri, washed down with swallows of tannic Uruguayan Deicas Tannat.

Piattoni passed dishes from the kitchen to his family, some of whom were tasting his food for the first time since he'd left South America. Lu Arjol, a friend of Piattoni's who'd cooked at Metta, watched her tablemates react to their dinner. The fire flavors were familiar, but the fermented notes were strange and new, a nod to Piattoni's time abroad. "It's like a lovely little corner in Brooklyn that's suddenly appeared in South America for just one magical night," Arjol said, wistfully surveying the scene. She then turned back to her plate: "Please pass the chimichurri!"



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Norberto Piattoni (in black T-shirt) shopping at the local farmers market in Montevideo for the asado; Tri-Tip Steak a la Parrilla with Chimichurri and Roasted Onions (p. 95); ripe heirloom tomatoes; Agustina Gagliardi (right), chef-owner of Amorín Provisión, embraces an early arrival to the party. PREVIOUS SPREAD: Piattoni at the parrilla.



Piattoni's Heirloom Tomato and Plum Salad, topped with shaved persimmon and toasted sesame seeds (recipe at right).

Beef Tallow Potatoes with Spicy Paprika

PHOTO P. 96

ACTIVE 30 MIN; TOTAL 1 HR 15 MIN; SERVES 8

These roasted potatoes get their shatteringly crisp edges and rich flavor from a generous basting of rendered beef fat. Ask your butcher for beef fat trimmings from prime cuts like ribs and brisket.

- 4 lb. fingerling potatoes**
- 2 Tbsp. kosher salt, divided**
- 6 oz. beef fat trimmings**
- 2 Tbsp. red wine vinegar**
- 1 tsp. chili powder**
- 1 tsp. garlic powder**
- 1 tsp. hot paprika**
- 1 tsp. sweet paprika**
- 1 tsp. onion powder**
- 1 Tbsp. finely chopped fresh chives**

1. Preheat oven to 500°F. Place potatoes in a large saucepan, and add water to cover by 1 inch. Season with 1 tablespoon salt, and bring to a boil over high. Reduce heat to medium, and simmer until potatoes are tender, about 10 minutes. Drain potatoes and let stand until cool enough to handle.

2. While potatoes cool, place beef fat in a small saucepan; cook over medium-low, stirring often, until rendered to about ½ cup melted fat, 15 to 20 minutes. Pour through a fine wire-mesh strainer into a bowl; discard solids.

3. Arrange potatoes on a rimmed baking sheet. Place a second rimmed baking sheet on potatoes, rimmed side up, and press down gently to crush potatoes without breaking them apart. Drizzle potatoes with half of the melted beef fat; turn potatoes to coat.

4. Roast potatoes in preheated oven until bottoms are golden, about 15 minutes. Remove from oven, and drizzle with remaining melted beef fat; turn potatoes to coat. Return to oven, and roast at 500°F until crispy and golden brown, 25 to 30 minutes.

5. Transfer potatoes to a large bowl. Sprinkle with vinegar, chili powder, garlic powder, hot paprika, sweet paprika, onion powder, and remaining 1 tablespoon salt; toss to combine. Place potatoes on a platter, and top with chives.

MAKE AHEAD Rendered beef fat may be cooled, then covered and refrigerated up to 30 days.

Heirloom Tomato and Plum Salad

TOTAL 10 MIN; SERVES 8

Juicy plums and ripe tomatoes have a similar texture and summertime sweetness, making them a natural match for this colorful salad. Toasted sesame seeds add crunch, while fresh shiso and purslane make this quick side savory.

- 2 Tbsp. olive oil**
- 2 Tbsp. red wine vinegar**
- 2 tsp. kosher salt**
- ½ tsp. black pepper**
- 2 lb. heirloom tomatoes, cut into 2-inch pieces**
- 1 lb. plums, cut into ½-inch wedges**
- 8 fresh shiso leaves, thinly sliced, divided**
- ½ Fuyu persimmon, shaved crosswise on a mandoline (optional)**
- 2 Tbsp. small purslane sprigs, stemmed, or 1 tsp. fresh lemon thyme leaves**
- 1 Tbsp. toasted sesame seeds**

Whisk together oil, vinegar, salt, and pepper in a large bowl. Add tomatoes, plums, and half of the shiso leaves to oil mixture; toss to combine. Transfer to a platter. Top with remaining shiso leaves; persimmon slices, if using; purslane; and sesame seeds.

Tri-Tip Steak a la Parrilla with Chimichurri and Roasted Onions

PHOTO P. 93

ACTIVE 20 MIN; TOTAL 1 HR SERVES 10

Fish sauce and lots of fresh marjoram add oomph to the chimichurri for Norberto Piattoni's grilled tri-tip, which he serves with "rescoldo" onions, ones that have been roasted in the embers of the fire.

- 4 cups packed fresh flat-leaf parsley leaves, finely chopped (about 1½ cups)**
- 1 cup loosely packed fresh marjoram or oregano leaves, finely chopped (about ¼ cup)**
- 1 cup canola oil**
- ½ cup red wine vinegar**
- 4 large garlic cloves, grated**
- 1 tsp. crushed red pepper**
- 1 tsp. colatura (Italian fish sauce) or Asian fish sauce**

Robust Malbecs and Tannats are classics for an asado. Try the peppery **2016 Achaval-Ferrer Malbec Mendoza (\$18)**, the black cherry-inflected **2015 Ricardo Santos Malbec (\$20)**, or the **2012 Château Bouscassé Madiran (\$20)**, a blend of Tannat, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Cabernet Franc.

- ½ tsp. hot paprika**
- ½ tsp. sweet paprika**
- 5 tsp. kosher salt, divided**
- 1 (4-lb.) tri-tip steak**
- 1½ tsp. black pepper**
- 8 large spring onion bulbs (about 2 lb.)**

1. Stir together parsley, marjoram, oil, vinegar, garlic, red pepper, colatura, hot paprika, sweet paprika, and 1 teaspoon salt until combined. Set chimichurri aside. (Chimichurri may be stored in an airtight container in refrigerator up to 3 days. Bring to room temperature before serving.)

2. Open bottom and top vents of a charcoal grill completely. Light 2 charcoal chimney starters filled with briquettes (about 8½ cups of briquettes per chimney). When briquettes are covered with gray ash, pour in an even layer on bottom grate of grill. (Internal temperature should be about 375°F to 400°F.)

3. Place steak on a rimmed baking sheet, and season with black pepper and remaining 4 teaspoons salt. Place steak on oiled grate, fatty side down, and grill, uncovered, until charred and browned, about 15 minutes. Flip and grill, uncovered, until a thermometer inserted in thickest portion of steak registers 135°F for medium-rare, about 13 minutes, or to desired degree of doneness. Remove steak from grill, and transfer to a cutting board; let rest 10 minutes before slicing.

4. While steak rests, cook onions. Carefully remove cooking grate from grill and set aside. Push coals to one side of grill, and arrange onions in a single layer in cleared space; scatter coals over onions. Cook until onions are charred and insides are crisp-tender, about 8 minutes. Transfer onions to a metal baking dish, and let

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STOKE THE FLAMES

South American asado-style grilling is having a seven-year moment. Disciples of Argentine grillmaster Francis Mallmann like Norberto Piattoni, Ignacio Mattos, and Germán Martitegui are taking inspiration from the custom, which traditionally is done on a parrilla, an expansive, multilevel, wood-fired Argentine grill. But do you need a parrilla to host an asado? Not really. At their heart, asados are all about gathering, cooking, catching up, and eating together.

Use all aspects of your grill, and take your time: Remember that hot coals—rather than huge flames—offer the best heat for slow cooking. Frying pans can rest on embers. Roast squash and potatoes in ashes, as Piattoni does for his Charred Sweet Potatoes with Elecampane Cream and Honey Gastrique. Char lemon or orange halves on a plancha; their roasted juices make for a great finishing touch for grilled vegetables, meats, and salads. (See “The Technique,” p. 21, for tips on grilling on a plancha.)



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Asado fires burn late into the night in Montevideo; asado guests enjoy a dance after dinner; Beef Tallow Potatoes with Spicy Paprika (p. 95). OPPOSITE: A dessert of Charred Sweet Potatoes with Elecampane Cream and Honey Gastrique (p. 98) provides a smoky, sweet finish to the meal.

stand until cool enough to handle, about 5 minutes. Brush away ashes with a paper towel.

5. Cut steak against the grain into ½-inch slices, and cut onions in half lengthwise. Serve with chimichurri.

Charred Sweet Potatoes with Elecampane Cream and Honey Gastrique

PHOTO P. 97
ACTIVE 35 MIN; TOTAL 2 HR 35 MIN; SERVES 8

Coal-roasting sweet potatoes caramelizes the flesh while imparting a smoky aroma. These are drizzled with a honey-and-vinegar reduction and served with whipped cream infused with musky, lightly bitter elecampane, a dried root used in homeopathic remedies (available from mountain roseherbs.com).

- ¼ cup granulated sugar**
 - 1 Tbsp. elecampane root pieces**
- ½ tsp. kosher salt**
 - 1 cup heavy cream**
- ¼ cup honey**
- ¼ cup honey vinegar or rice vinegar**
- 8 (12-oz.) sweet potatoes**
- 8 sweet potato leaves, for garnish (optional)**
- Bee pollen, for garnish (optional)**

1. Process sugar, elecampane, and salt in a food processor until finely chopped, about 1 minute. Transfer mixture to a bowl; add cream, and stir until sugar dissolves. Cover and refrigerate 2 hours.

2. Meanwhile, preheat oven to 350°F. Bring honey to a boil in a small saucepan over medium, and cook until melted and reduced by one-fourth, about 3 minutes. Stir in vinegar; cook, stirring occasionally, until mixture is slightly reduced and syrupy, 3 to 4 minutes. Cool to room temperature, and refrigerate until chilled.

3. Pour cream mixture through a fine wire-mesh strainer into a bowl. Discard solids. Beat cream with an electric mixer on medium-high speed until soft peaks form, about 3 minutes. Chill until ready to serve.

4. Arrange sweet potatoes on a rimmed baking sheet, and bake in preheated oven just until fork-tender, 35 to 40 minutes.

5. While potatoes bake, open bottom and top vents of a charcoal grill completely. Light a charcoal chimney starter filled with briquettes (about 8½ cups of briquettes). When briquettes are covered with gray ash, pour in an even layer on bottom grate

of grill. (Internal temperature should be 375°F to 400°F.)

6. Using tongs, nestle sweet potatoes in coals, and roast until skins are charred and sweet potatoes are cooked through, 15 to 20 minutes. Transfer to a metal baking sheet, and let stand until cool enough to handle. Brush away ashes with a paper towel. Cut sweet potatoes into ¾-inch slices and divide among 8 shallow bowls. Dollop 2 tablespoons whipped cream next to sweet potato in each bowl, and drizzle with honey gastrique. Garnish each with a sweet potato leaf and a pinch of bee pollen, if desired.

Grilled Whole Fish with Tomato-Fennel Sauce

ACTIVE 20 MIN; TOTAL 55 MIN
SERVES 8

Piattoni slow-grills whole fish (pictured below) so it stays juicy and serves it with a Basque-style sauce of melted tomatoes and fennel, seasoned with paprika, that you'll want to put on everything.

- 2 Tbsp. canola oil**
 - 1 large white onion, thinly sliced (about 2 cups)**
- 1 fennel bulb, thinly sliced (about 1¾ cups)**
- 6 garlic cloves, thinly sliced (about ¼ cup)**
- 4 tomatoes, cut into 1-inch cubes (about 3 cups)**

- 1 tsp. chili powder**
- ½ tsp. hot paprika**
- 2 cups fish or chicken stock**
- 5 tsp. kosher salt, divided**
 - 1 (4- to 6-lb.) whole fish, such as black sea bass or snapper, or 4 (1-lb.) whole fish, such as branzino, cleaned**
- 2 Tbsp. grapeseed oil**

1. Heat canola oil in a medium saucepan over medium. Add onion, fennel, and garlic to pan; cook, stirring often, until onion is translucent, about 8 minutes. Stir in tomatoes, chili powder, and paprika. Reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer until tomatoes are softened and slightly broken down, 5 to 6 minutes. Stir in stock, and increase heat to medium; cook until reduced to about 3 cups, about 10 minutes. Season with 1 teaspoon salt. Remove sauce from heat, and cover to keep warm.

2. Rinse fish under cool running water, and pat dry with a paper towel. Place on a large rimmed baking sheet; drizzle both sides with grapeseed oil, and sprinkle all over with remaining 4 teaspoons salt.

3. Open bottom and top vents of a charcoal grill completely. Light 2 charcoal chimney starters filled with briquettes (about 8½ cups of briquettes per chimney). When briquettes are covered with gray ash, pour in an even layer on bottom grate of grill. (Internal temperature should be 375°F to 400°F).

4. Place fish on oiled grate, and grill, uncovered, until charred and meat pulls away from bones, about 9 minutes for large fish and 5 minutes for smaller fish. Using 2 large fish spatulas, carefully flip fish, and grill, uncovered, until fish is opaque and flaky, 6 to 8 minutes.

5. Using fish spatulas, carefully transfer fish to a serving platter; spoon sauce over fish, and serve immediately.



Friends and family celebrate the homecoming of Piattoni (standing, in apron), including: his sisters (seated, with their children); Mettá partner Henry Rich (in glasses); Agustina Gagliardi, owner of Amorín Provisión (standing, pouring wine); Peter Dowling, another Mettá partner (in blue shirt); and the author, Tarajia Morrell (seated, in green).