



A) Cavas Lodge with Andes view. B) Main Street in Colonia del Sacramento. C) Chocolate dessert. D) Bill and Nancy Koutsis, Greg and Ursula Pearson, and Pat and Jim Bryant in front of Sugar Loaf.

Flying Down to Rio and the Best of Argentina

ON NEW YEAR'S DAY 2016, a group of 18 serious wine and food lovers flew to Rio de Janeiro on the first leg of an unforgettable trip. We met up with another couple who had arrived earlier to experience New Year's Eve in this magical city. We stayed on Copacabana Beach and enjoyed typical Brazilian food, including the national dish, feijoada. This fabulous dish, served country wide on Wednesdays, was available on the top floor of our hotel overlooking Copacabana. The meal literally features every part of a pig served with beans and rice. This meal is, I think, to some degree an acquired taste, but I often worked in Brazil in the past and it was one of my most cherished memories of each trip. Although the meal is filling, we nevertheless made our way to a local churrasaria that evening where we dined on many varieties of Brazilian beef. We had numerous excellent wines from Argentina and Chile, which made for a memorable evening in this loud and festive restaurant.

The next day we left the hotel and boarded the Crystal Serenity for a 10-day cruise down the East Coast of South America. Before sailing, we had a welcome party for our group and then adjourned for dinner to the Crystal dining room. The following day, people were on their own to see parts of Rio

de Janeiro. Several of us went with a guide to Pão de Açúcar (Sugar Loaf). We took the funicular to the top of Sugar Loaf for a fantastic panorama of one of the world's most beautiful cities. This brought back great memories of a former trip here 40 years ago. On a Sunday in January 1976, I was skiing at Sugarloaf, Michigan, with a wind chill of -40 degrees F (only one run) and 48 hours later, I was in Rio on Sugar Loaf at 90° F. In 2016, the contrast was not so great, but it still was preferable at 85° F to Barrington's temperature.

After returning to the ship, we set sail for nine days and nights down the coasts of Brazil and Uruguay to Buenos Aires. On Wednesday, January 6, one half of our group dined in the Vintage Room. Greg Pearson and I met with the Head Sommelier, Christian Mondaca, and Executive Chef Peter Degnar to choose this and another meal featuring an Italian theme as soon as we embarked in Rio de Janeiro. I paired the wines with some input from Christian.


The event began with Champagne and it was a treat—Billecart-Salmon Rosé, Mareuil-sur-AY Non-Vintage served from a magnum. The first course was lobster thermidor "New Style." The lobster was glazed with Dijon mustard and accompanied by creamed spinach. This course was complimented by one of my

favorite Chardonnays—Leeuwin Estate "Art Series" 2011. This wine is generally considered to be one of Australia's greatest white wines. It is very age-worthy and incorporates the best attributes of America's and France's greatest Chardonnays.

Next came the potato-crust baby halibut. The fish was enveloped in applewood smoked bacon froth. This was divine and made more special by the accompanying wine, Didier Daguenu's Pur Sang, Blanc Fumé de Pouilly 2011. I chose this wine although it is only the second best Sauvignon Blanc from Daguenu as it married better because it is less intense. Both are among the world's greatest Sauvignon Blancs.

The next course is my perennial favorite for these dinners. It was a porcini mushroom risotto. It appeared and suddenly each person was in a world of his/her own. The aromas were divine and the taste was heavenly or beyond. The wine served was Guado Al Tasso, Bolgheri Superiore, 2005 from Antinori. This wine is 50 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 45 percent Merlot, and 5 percent Syrah, and is medium- to full-bodied with a blend of wild herbs, smoke, minerals, and oak to compliment the risotto.

The main course was slow-roasted Wisconsin milk-fed rack of veal. It was served with a vegetable



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bouquet, mustard-scented gnocchi accompanied by a rosemary gravy. What a dish! It was accompanied by one of Italy's greatest Super Tuscans—Ornellaia, Tenuta del'Ornellaia 2010. This was the 25th anniversary and a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot helped make this dish one to be remembered.

Dessert was warm ricotta cheese strudel drizzled with white truffle honey. On its own, it was spectacular, but with the accompanying Vin Santo, Isole e Olena 2006, it was better. This golden elixir is intense gold with sweet scents, almond paste, and dates. Although sweet, it is well-balanced by acidity.

Finally, we had a trilogy of chocolate, which was each better than the former. A perfect wine to accompany was the Graham's 30-year-old Tawny Port, which was sublime.

We visited many ports of call and saw fabulous sites, but I will talk about only one—Colonia del Sacramento, a UNESCO Heritage site in Uruguay on the Rio de la Plata, one of the world's largest estuaries, separating Uruguay and Argentina. This small town of about 30 square blocks is one of the most charming places I've ever visited. While we were there only five hours including a comprehensive walking tour and an elaborate lunch with excellent Uruguarian wines, it is a fabulous place to visit and spend the night after the day visitors leave. It is a two-hour drive from the beautiful capital city of Montevideo, but can also be reached via hydrofoil in less than one hour from Buenos Aires. A hearty "thank you" to my friend Milton Banos for recommending that we visit this jewel.

After arriving the next day in Argentina, we had a day to tour the city and departed by plane for Mendoza. Although wines are produced in other parts of the country, roughly 75 percent comes from Mendoza province. We stayed at the Cavas Wine Lodge, consisting of 14 adobe bungalows in a private 60-acre valley in the epicenter of vineyard country. This resort was recently rated the 15th highest-quality resort in the world. The architecture is Dutch/ South African in nature, with half of each duplex being about 1,700 sq. ft. in size, surrounded by vineyards with the Andes serving as the backdrop. Upon arrival in late afternoon, hors d'oeuvres and wine were delivered to each rooftop patio to help guests prior to dinner. We started with empanadas cooked over the open fire grill with the famous local white wine Torrontes (Susanna Balbo) and the terrific Bonarda Reserva (Cavas Wine Lodge) while sitting in the beautiful gardens. We ate dinner at tables which were set up in the vineyard with the magnificent snowcapped peaks in the distance. The grilled chicken, beef, and pork were sensational as the sun set over the mountains and the wines continued to flow supplemented by Catena Zapata Angelica Malbec and Catena Zapata 'Catena Alta' Cabernet Sauvignon.

The food was very good and the wines were superb, more so in this setting with friends who shared passions for food, wine, beauty, people, and other common interests. This experience was magical and will remain vividly implanted. A Votre Santé! 🍷



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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