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UP IN FLAMIES

COOKING WITH FIRE IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF ARGENTINA'S CULTURE. BY EMULATING HIS MENTOR FRANCIS MALLMANN, **CHEF SEBASTIÁN BENÍTEZ** IS SHARING HIS COUNTRY'S TRADITIONS AT FAENA MIAMI BEACH'S LOS FUEGOS RESTAURANT.

By CHRISTIE GALEANO-DEMOTT | Photography by JERRY RABINOWITZ

Fire creates while it destroys, an element that has been revered for millennia. Fire illuminates, gives us warmth, and allows us to cook. These days, when most of us think of fire, we think of sitting around it with mulled wine and a s'more. But fire in its purest form is a profound necessity that enables life to flourish. It has sustained the people of Argentina for thousands of years, with Argentinians fostering a rich cultural tradition of cooking meat by flame across the country's varied and rugged terrain.

Celebrated Argentine chef Francis Mallmann rose to fame by honoring and elevating the fire-focused cooking methods he learned as a child in Patagonia—and introducing those techniques and flavors to the masses. Lucky for South Floridians, Faena Miami Beach debuted Mallmann's restaurant, Los Fuegos, eight years ago with the help of chef de cuisine Sebastián Benítez. A Buenos Aires transplant who worked at the Argentine

capital's Faena Hotel nearly from its inception, Benítez was ready for a new challenge and jumped at the opportunity to open the brand's next property in Miami Beach.

Mallmann's passion for cooking over fire is rooted in Argentine gaucho culture, the nomadic horsemen of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who are frequently compared to America's cowboys. Living off the land, gauchos relied on fire to cook the animals they hunted. Building the fire, preparing the meat, and then slowly cooking it was all part of their tradition. There was no hustle, no other tasks to complete—just the primitive notion of sitting by the fire while tending to its flames.

It might be easy to light a match and start a fire, but properly cooking on fire takes some know-how. Still, the culinary world initially underestimated Mallmann's cooking. While some saw only burnt food, others began to understand its beauty and the harmony





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—CHEF SEBASTIÁN BENÍTEZ

LEFT: THE STARTER COURSE AT LOS FUEGOS' SUNDAY ASADO INCLUDES ROASTED TOMATO WITH RICOTTA AND PESTO, FIRE-ROASTED ARTICHOKES ON A BED OF SESAME CREAM, EMPANADAS STUFFED WITH HAND-CUT FILET MIGNON, YELLOWFIN TUNA TARTARE WITH ALMOND CREAM, AND BURRATA WITH ROMESCO SAUCE AND LEEK VINAIGRETTE.

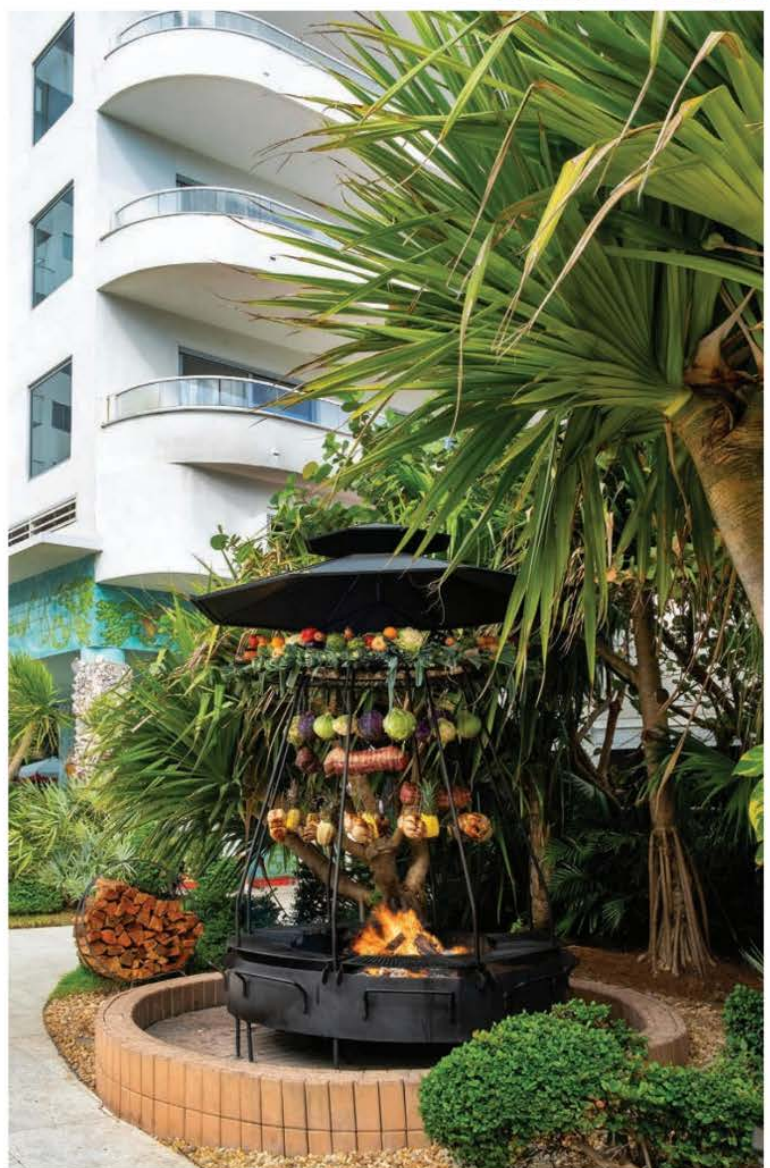


that's necessary to achieve it—the balance between charred and raw or crispy and soft, for example.

“You really need to cook with all your senses—looking, feeling, smelling, listening,” Benítez says. “It's not easy, and you really need to be present in that moment.”

Cooking outdoors—as Benítez does each week for Los Fuegos' Sunday asado—comes with its own set of challenges. Monitoring the wind's direction, for instance, is vital. If left to its own devices, a draft could easily redirect the heat and, even after countless hours, the meat could still be raw.

In conjunction with Argentina's tradition of cooking over fire, Mallmann also spotlights different ancient cooking modalities and has even created one of his own. He translates the Argentine native techniques of slow cooking and salt baking into his cuisine with salt-crusted fish and his world-famous fiery dome. The dome (Mallmann's own invention) is inspired by the gaucho's way of slow cooking an entire animal on crosses strategically placed around an open fire, Benítez explains. The contraption is handmade of metal and can accommodate a variety of proteins, vegetables, and even fruits hung around the fire on hooks or grilled on the dome's lower portion.





But it's not a cooking method that works for all types of food, Benítez adds. Pieces of meat must be thick, and fruits and vegetables need to be hard, like pineapple, cauliflower, or cabbage. Meat is suspended high above the fire so it gets a full, smoky flavor. As the hours progress, it's moved closer to the heat to cook through. Just before serving, it's placed right next to the flames to achieve Los Fuegos' famous char.

"After working with Francis, I learned everything can be cooked over the fire—bread, fruits, vegetables, seafood," Benítez says. "With the correct technique you can cook almost

everything over the fire."

Most Argentine homes have a barbecue grill, so cooking over fire is ingrained early. The weekly Sunday asados—or barbecue dinners—are their own quasi-religion, never to be missed and always with a focus on friends and family. For Benítez, the family-style meal is complete with a few choice proteins his dad grills such as chicken, chorizo, and steak, plus a fresh salad, bread, and a bottle (or two) of red wine, of course. At Los Fuegos, Benítez strives to give guests a similar experience, complete with roaring fires and endless delicacies.

ABOVE AND LEFT: THE FIRE DOME AT LOS FUEGOS IS THE CENTERPIECE (AND RED-HOT WORKHORSE) OF CHEF BENÍTEZ'S SUNDAY ASADO.



LEFT: GRILLED DELIGHTS INCLUDE SKIRT STEAK, SLOW-COOKED HANGING PRIME RIB EYE, BRANZINO FILLET, PRAWNS, HANGING ORGANIC CHICKEN, FIRE-ROASTED ARTICHOKE, AND DOMINO POTATOES. A GRAPEFRUIT SALAD AND A TRIO OF SAUCES—CHIMICHURRI, CRIOLLA, AND AIOLI—ENHANCE THE FOOD'S SMOKY CHAR. OPPOSITE PAGE: CHEF SEBASTIÁN BENÍTEZ PRESENTS HIS FIERY FEAST.

GRILLING TIPS FROM CHEF BENÍTEZ

- 1. PATIENCE IS KEY:** Embrace the fact that cooking over fire isn't fast and furious. It takes hours. Accept that, Benítez says, and the outcome will be worth it.
- 2. PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT:** There's no manual Benítez can share. He says proficiency comes from making mistakes and learning from them.
- 3. COMMIT TO THE INVESTMENT:** Slow cooking needs an investment—in quality produce and proteins as well as time.
- 4. BUILD YOUR BURN:** Start with hardwood charcoal, which offers an even heat

and temperature, making it easier to cook with than wood. "You need to understand the language of the wood that is totally different than charcoal," Benítez says. So, work your way up to playing with wood.

5. CHOOSE THE RIGHT WOOD: Once you've graduated to wood, Benítez suggests using oak, hickory, or mesquite. Build a chimney-like structure with the logs, making sure there's nothing in the middle of it. In the hole, place a few pieces of paper and light the fire from there. Once the wood is lit, you

can add charcoal in the middle.

6. IT'S ALL IN THE PREP: First, make sure you have the right cut of meat. For slow cooking, choose a thick cut, like brisket. Then, consider your seasoning. In Argentina, Benítez explains, meat is only seasoned with coarse salt before cooking. That means no brining, rubbing, or marinating. "We're not really famous for putting too much stuff on the meat," he says. Finally, there's temperature. Ensure the meat is at room temperature before placing it over the fire.

"It's a very genuine experience of what it feels like eating in Argentina," Benítez explains. "That's why we do it on Sunday and not any other day. It really brings the vibe of a genuine Argentinian table."

For Benítez, his *pièce de résistance* is cooking fish over the fire. It's a difficult task due to the inherent fragility of the fish, he says, but it's a challenge he enjoys. For grilling novices, Benítez suggests starting with meat—specifically easy cuts like tenderloin, which you can quickly grill on both sides to the desired temperature. This way, you can experiment and practice tending to the fire. Once you've nailed the smaller cuts, graduate to thicker selections like short rib or brisket.

A grill and its roaring flames aren't just a carnivore's delight—fruits, veggies, and desserts needn't be an afterthought. One of Mallmann's most famous desserts is grilled pineapple, which is brined in vanilla, spices, and simple syrup for 24 to 48 hours and then hung to grill in the dome. The balance of its sweet flavor with its charred exterior results in a concentrated smoky flavor reminiscent of mezcal, Benítez describes. "When you serve it with ice cream, believe me, there's not many things more delicious than that," he says. Home chefs can grill just about any fruit can. Try throwing a banana on the grill until the skin gets dark and starts to peel away. Serve it with vanilla ice cream, and thank Benítez later.

Although chef Benítez often doesn't even have time to eat while running his kitchen, he appreciates the simple pleasure of popping out of the trenches to survey the dining room and see guests savoring the food. "It's not very romantic in terms of how much we enjoy the food, but there's a lot of joy in giving," he says.

His personal indulgence comes when he's outside, under the sprawling sky, building the fire. It's a time for him to disconnect, concentrate on the fire's hypnotic flames, hone his craft, and just be one with nature. ◀◀

