



The Steaks are High

Well, they are if you opt for the opulence of the third-floor restaurant at Gaucho's impressive flagship London restaurant on Swallow Street, says **EUGENE COSTELLO**

I NEVER THOUGHT I'd find myself saying it, but it's a good job that in 1982 Margaret Thatcher found herself with such a low popularity rating in the polls. If she hadn't, she might not have been quite so inclined to embark on a jingoistic adventure in the South Atlantic to prop up her standing with the electorate by portraying herself as a wartime leader in the mould of Churchill.

We might not have had the short-lived but bloody war over the far-flung Falkland Islands, up until which point, had we been asked, we might have guessed that lay between the Shetlands and the Orkneys.

We might have agreed to some form of power-sharing with Argentina or even an eventual handover of power à la Hong Kong. And Argentina, suddenly finding itself with around half a million head of sheep under its supervision might have become specialists in lamb dishes.

Fortunately for us, history dictated otherwise, and Argentina has stuck to specialising in its natural sphere of culinary excellence – steak to die for.

And you don't have to travel far to experience Argentinean supremacy when it comes to steak. Swallow Street, off Piccadilly, should do it. This is where you'll find the superb Gaucho restaurant, beautifully laid out over three floors. On the ground floor, enjoy an aperitif at the bar – it seems none of the beast in which they excel goes to waste. Every chair is covered in brown- or black-and-white cow hide.

We came late on a Sunday night, yet they were doing tremendous business with large groups of Spanish speakers. Not so much coals to Newcastle as a thumping vote of confidence from experts. After a refreshing mojito to get into the Latin vibe, we were taken up to the enormous third-floor restaurant to our table. I started to count how many covers they catered for but gave up well on the way to triple figures.

Our waiter came with a wooden slab on which he showed us the different cuts on offer. Sirloin, rump, ribeye, fillet, but for us there was only one show in town. Fillet – or *bife de lomo* – with peppercorn sauce.

That just left us with the small matter of the starter to get out of the way. What looked most interesting were traditional *ceviches* and *tiraditos*, the former, seafood cured with citrus



HOLY COW: Nothing goes to waste in the Aztec-temple like shrine to the humble bovine, with cow hide used to cover the leather seats in the ground-floor bar and even to adorn the walls

juices and served with a spicy blend of red onion, chilli and coriander, the latter a kind of Argentinean sashimi made up of fresh fish diced and sliced, and served with onion chilli and lime. We plumped for a sampler that offers three dishes for £18.75.

Anticipating the meaty steak that was to come, the slightly Oriental delicacy of seafood, matched with a medium chardonnay from the Andes, lent a refreshing, delicate zing to proceedings.

All good, but one stood out as something rather special – king scallops teamed with red onion, chilli, mango and coriander, and a dressing of coconut and citrus. Mouthwateringly good – the next time I visit a Gaucho restaurant, I'll get straight to the point and order a full portion starter of this, it was that good.

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If the curtain-raiser told us we were in for a special evening, the main event was as spectacular as we had hoped. Two 400g filets arrived, pink from a few millimeters in just as requested. And the meat! At *Hedge*, we have banned the hackneyed phrase melt-in-the-mouth, so I won't – all I will say is the only way to make these babies slip down even more easily would be to liquidise them and turn them into steak smoothies. (Actually, not a bad idea – if a patent lawyer is reading this, it was my idea first.)

Much as I would have been happy simply to gorge myself on this almost erotically attractive strip of drooling good beef, the sides lend an impressive supporting role. Hand-cut chips, of course, but thoughtful additions such as grilled Portobello mushrooms the size of tricycle wheels, *bumitas* (a traditional sweetcorn puree, served in corn leaves) and spinach fried with garlic and lemon.

Not for nothing has Gaucho regularly been voted best steakhouse in London, and this (incredibly) my first visit saw me become a confirmed *gauchero*. After a palate-cleansing cognac, I sauntered back out onto Piccadilly a happy, replete and very impressed midnight cowboy. **H**
From £50pb. 25 Swallow Street, W1; 020 7734 4040; gauchorestaurants.co.uk; see the website for the full list of Gaucho restaurants across London