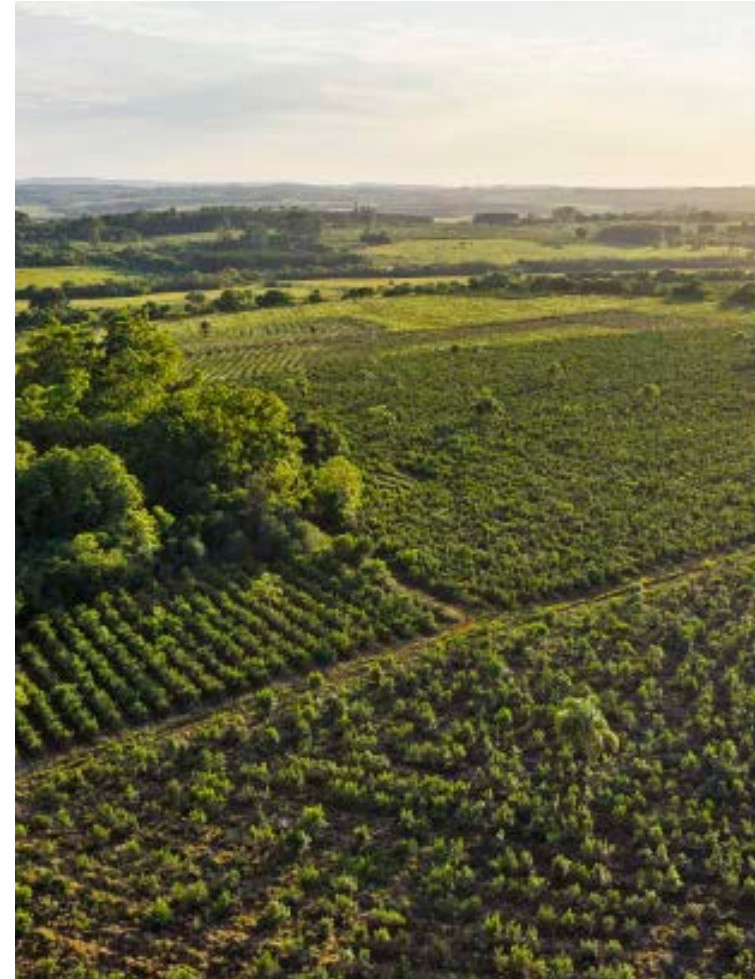




STEEPED IN TRADITION

On a ramble through Argentina's Misiones province, writer and photographer **CHRISTOPHER BAGLEY** captures the region's rugged terrain, the genial spirit of its people, and the alluring rituals surrounding its most revered homegrown beverage, mate.



THE FRENCH HAVE their wine, the Belgians have their beer. For Italians, espresso serves as the de facto national drink—a kind of social superglue, prepared and shared according to precise rituals. In Argentina, it's mate. And if you've spent any time in that country, you'll know that it might be the world's ultimate communal beverage. Made from the leaves and twigs of the native *Ilex paraguariensis* (yerba mate) plant and sipped from a hollow gourd passed around between small groups, mate is not just an infusion but a source of ceremonial kinship.

Consumed by all ages and social classes, it's the subject of songs and poems; it has even been called the key to the nation's soul. "Whenever someone arrives at your house," wrote Argentine author and newspaper editor Hernán Casciari, "the first thing you say is 'Hello.' The second is, 'How about some mate?'"

Visitors to Argentina, however, can find it difficult to partake of this national ritual. During my first trip to Buenos Aires 25 years ago, I saw plenty of people drinking mate on park benches—Porteños often carry their own cups around—but I never managed to taste any myself. A handful of cafés now have it on their menus, but locals typically prepare it at home, steeping the crushed leaves and stems in their hot-water-filled gourds and sipping the infusion through a metal straw.

It was on a mid-hike break on a later trip, at a mountain hut in Patagonia, that I discovered the mood-boosting wonders of the gently caffeinated liquid, which tastes a bit like green tea mixed with roasted grass. All day long at the hut, chatty groups of Argentine hikers gathered

▲ Clockwise from top left: Producer Sol y Lluvia uses a centuries-old technique of drying yerba mate leaves over a wood fire for at least 12 hours before grinding them into a fine powder; most plantations in Misiones are owned and operated by small-scale farmers; yerba mate seedlings in the nursery of Las Marias; the ruins of 17th-century mission San Ignacio Mini; Luis Felipe Pawluk, founder of Sol y Lluvia, holds a traditional mate gourd; iron-rich soil makes for ruddy country roads.



...the leaves
at least a
warehouses,
the belonging
Piporé.

...arrived in the late
commercialized its
ruins of San Ignacio
World Heritage—
built by the Catholic
11 miles down the road
Santo Pipó. This spectacularly
crumbling complex of orange
sandstone, carved by Guaraní
craftsmen, merits its own day trip
from Iguazú. I spent the night farther
south in the laid-back provincial
capital, Posadas, where a bartender
at one of the cafés on the bank of
Río Paraná told me he meets roughly
five U.S. tourists per year.

The following morning, when I
stopped at the neighborhood bakery,
where the counters were piled with
cassava-based *chipas* and other
regional pastries, I saw that the
cashier was drinking a cup of *tereré*,
which is the local answer to iced
coffee—a cold, usually sweetened
form of mate that’s especially popular
in Misiones and in neighboring
Paraguay. I told her it was my first
time in the region and I hadn’t yet
tasted *tereré*. “Well, now’s your
moment,” she said, offering me
a sip of her grapefruit-juice-spiked
version—refreshing, but a bit too
sugary for my taste.

...by the campfire. As they passed
gourds, they invariably invited me
to join them. “¿Unos mates, Chris?” soon
became my favorite Spanish sentence.

In January, I decided to return to Argentina
for a deep dive into the culture of mate and
the region where most of the world’s supply is
grown. The heart of it all lies in the northeastern
province of Misiones, where more than 10,000
independent farmers cultivate and harvest yerba
mate. The area is a few hours’ drive south from
Iguazú Falls, which is forever jammed with fly-in,
fly-out travelers. The rest of Misiones remains
little-visited, even by Argentines. It’s a languid
region where copper-colored dirt roads weave
past hilly fields of yerba mate, some shaded
by araucaria pines and thickets of bamboo.
You won’t find much in the way of tourist
infrastructure, or any stately estancias. But for
the adventurous, a drive around Misiones is
one of those side trips that turn out to be more
enlightening than the main destination.

Heading south from Iguazú, my first stop was
Santo Pipó (pipore.com.ar), which, along with
Amanda (yerbamanda.com.ar), is one of a few
large mate producers open to visitors. An exhibit
with a short film explained that, for centuries,
mate was consumed by the area’s indigenous
Guaraní people for its medicinal benefits. After

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ILLUSTRATION BY MAY PARSEY



My next stop was the manicured Las Marías
compound in the province of Corrientes, where
several major mate brands, including the widely
available **Taragüi** (taragui.com), are produced.
Here, the leaves are harvested by hand, dry
roasted, and aged in sacks for anywhere from
several months to two years before they’re
milled into the leaf-and-powder mixture that
forms the basis of the infusion. Las Marías,
with its guided tours and gift shop, evokes the
tourist-friendly wineries of Mendoza. The
company buys much of its raw material from

small family producers that are
scattered around Misiones.

Near the town of Oberá, I
visited the 42-acre plantation
of Luis Napoleon Bielakowicz, a
third-generation *yerbatero* who told
me about the growing market for
artisanal and organic mate brands.
Despite Argentina’s economic woes,
demand has been very high lately,
and small producers have an edge
when it comes to quality. “We know
the plant because we grew up with
it,” explained Bielakowicz, whose
grandfather started the business after
emigrating from Belarus.

If the outside world has yet to
catch on to the appeal of Misiones,
it’s definitely getting the message
about mate. As more studies support
the drink’s bona fides as a super-
beverage (mate has more than twice
the antioxidant content of green tea),
ready-to-drink versions have been
turning up all over Europe and the
U.S. from brands like Guayakí. Mario
Barbaro, owner of traditional mate
label La Obereña, gives some credit
to the drink’s top ambassadors, soccer
legend Lionel Messi and Pope Francis:
two Argentines often photographed
with gourds in hand.

By the time I got back to the Iguazú
airport, my coffee habit had turned
into a mate habit. I love how time
seems to pause when you share a
round with friends—or total strangers,
like the wisecracking farmer named
Osvaldo who sold me some fruit from
the back of his truck and then casually
handed me the gourd he was sipping
from, prompting a 10-minute chat
about local mango varieties. (Since
COVID-19 hit this spring, most
Argentines have stuck to their own
personal kits instead, but many
believe that the tradition will resume
once the virus is tamed.) Over the
course of my trip, I amassed so many
packets of mate that I had to give most
of them away to the guys at the car-
rental counter. Though my suitcase
was over the weight limit, I decided to
bring three pounds of the stuff home.
I’m drinking some right now. ■

GETTING THERE

Most U.S. travelers would visit mate
country as a side trip
from Iguazú Falls.
Major American
carriers offer both
nonstop and con-
necting service to
Buenos Aires. Then
catch a two-hour
regional flight to
Iguazú, where you
can rent a car to
drive to the mate
plantations through-
out Misiones.

WHERE TO STAY

While there are five-
star hotels near the
falls, options else-
where in Misiones
are more simple.
Your best bet: **Hotel
Urbano** ([alvarez
arguelles.com](http://alvarez
arguelles.com);
doubles from \$50),
a well-located bou-
tique property in the
center of Posadas.

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