

GAUCHOS WITH SKEWERS SERVE GREAT MEATS AND FUN

By Mary Welch

When it comes to choosing the perfect restaurant, some occasions make it easy as thaw-and-serve pie. For instance, lunch with two maiden aunts or your sainted grandmother has The Swan Coach House embroidered all over it, while a post-contract signing dinner with an executive client might best be conducted amid the VSOP-laced ambience of Morton's Steakhouse or Bone's.

But most occasions aren't that easy, such as: a table of three carnivores and a vegan; a fancy family affair that includes teens, toddlers and septuagenarians; a party that includes your brother-in-law who considers ties and jackets shackles of the establishment; or an elegant lunch that will be served fast enough to get your chairman on the plane by 2 p.m.

There well may be a one-restaurant-fits-all place in Atlanta and we had to go all the way to Southern Brazil to get it. It's called Fogo De Chao, an authentic gaúcho churrascaria Brazilian steakhouse which, in February, will celebrate its sixth successful year on Piedmont Road in Buckhead.

While meat may be the headlining item(s) on a menu so large it's never read, the first thing you actually encounter is a pile of vegetables. Right up front is a magnificent salad bar in the round where quantity vies with quality – piles of jumbo asparagus nestled next to iced hearts of palm and artichoke hearts, propped alongside smoked trout... and that's just one corner of the salad bar.

The wine list includes a wide variety of wines by the glass so that individual tastes are easily accommodated. The sommelier does politely nudge patrons towards the heartier reds that will be able to stand up to the roast meat offerings.

Diners (who seem to come from all walks of life and dressed in

suits and jeans, polo shirts and little black dresses) are seated and drink orders are taken. They then are invited to sample the salad bar. **WARNING: DO NOT** fill up here, lest the feast to come overwhelms you.

The restaurant operation revolves around a little red and green coaster placed discreetly near your plate. When the green side is up, a constant cavalcade of gauchos with skewered meats – whole tenderloins, top rounds, lamb legs, bottom rounds, rib eyes, chicken, sausage, and on and on – carefully roasted in their own juices are offered up and sliced onto your plate.

"No marinades or sauces are used in our beef or lamb entrees," our maitre d' Aryn said. Only a "little sea salt" in the preparation of its meats, he added. But he avoid revealing the secret to the delicate, yet intense, flavor of the meats other than to say they are "very careful" in their preparation. That preparation – slowly roasting the meat over an open fire – is on display in the front window. The experience is, as Aryn said, a way to understand how the different meats taste – how, for instance, filet mignon tastes different from aletria, which is top sirloin.

Aryn is equally proud of the level of service provided, amid a seemingly chaotic jumble of gauchos running here and there presenting their tasty fare. When told of an instance where a waiter quickly presented a diner with a replacement knife moments after dropping one, our host quipped, "He should have caught the knife in mid air."

Authentic Brazilian side dishes, including fried bananas, are served with the meal and offer an exotic overtone to the dining experience. The bread is authentic Brazilian, but the cornucopia of food offered overshadows it. It may be hard, but try to save room for dessert. Our flan was the best we've tasted this side of Puerto Rico.

One afterthought. Those who might have imagined an unhealthy, overwhelming orgy of fat laden meat and sides might be surprised that they did not leave uncomfortably full. The experience of tasting small portions brought in rapid succession gives the impression of excess, but perhaps not the reality.

The Fogo De Chao quality is on par with Atlanta's prime steakhouses, but it may offer more value and a lot more relaxing and fun experience.



where to go

Fogo De Chao Churrascaria Brazilian Steakhouse
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