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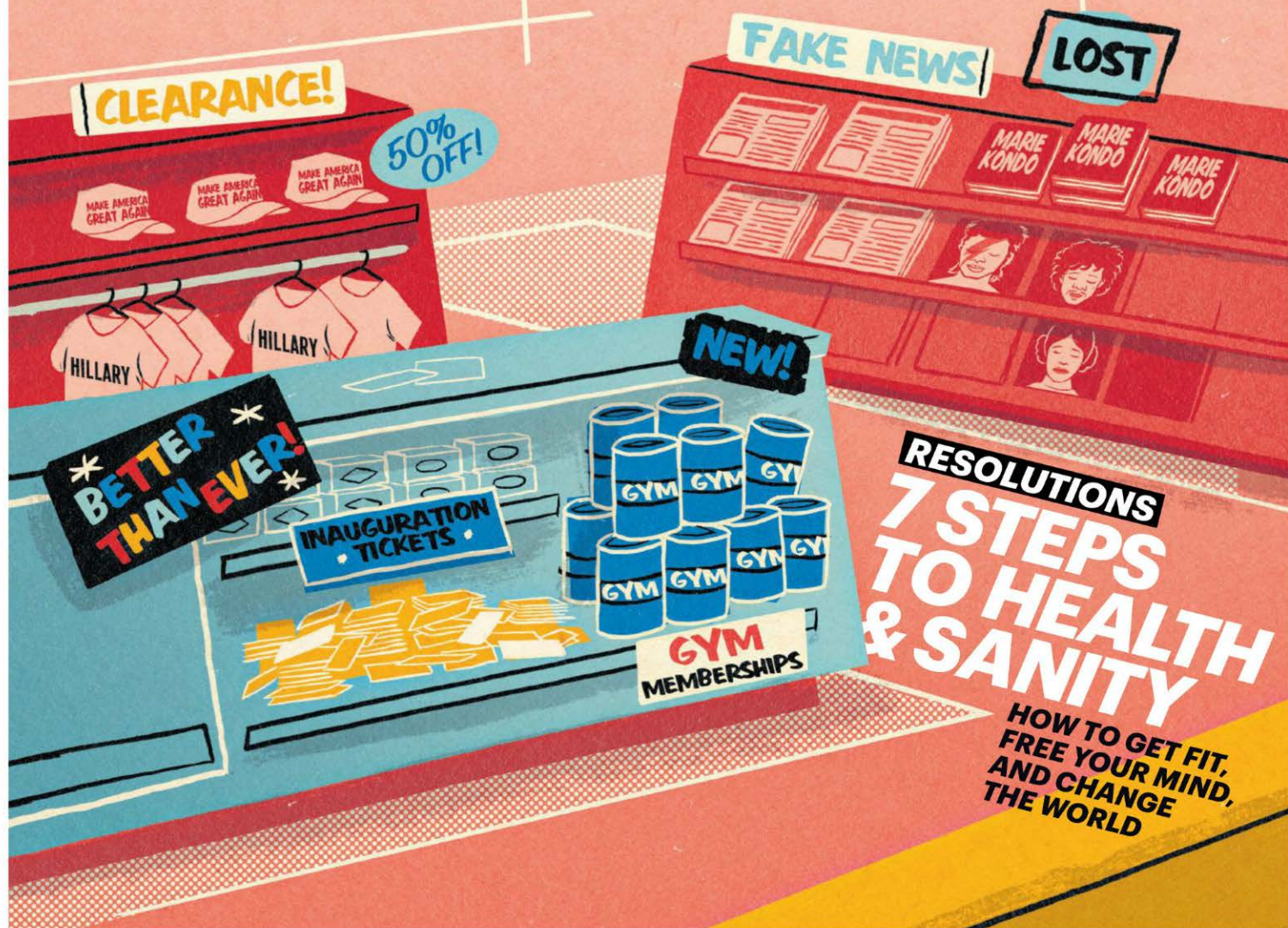
A GUIDE TO
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**TO BEEF OR
NOT TO BEEF**

VEGAN VERSUS
STEAKHOUSE
SHOWDOWN

the village

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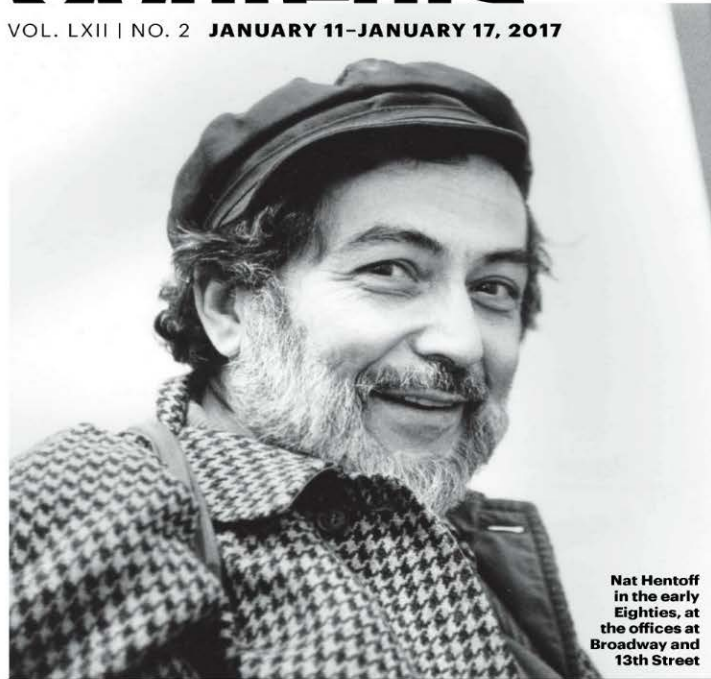
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A vegan's nightmare: La Barrita's parrillada



EATS

Bradley Hawks

DON'T CRY FOR MEAT

For cowpokes and the folks who love them, the Argentine La Barrita is like Buenos Aires in Brooklyn Heights

BY ZACHARY FELDMAN

We're living in a vegetable golden age, one in which diners no longer bat an eye at lone carrots costing twelve dollars, vegan bistros are greening up French classics, and a tiny, vegetarian fast-food joint in the East Village is worthy of a James Beard Foundation Award nomination for Best New Restaurant. From salads to grain bowls to the once nefarious veggie burger — of which there are now more proprietary blends than uber-butcher Pat LaFrieda offers for his prized beef patties — produce is where it's at.

You'll find vegetables on the menu at La Barrita, the subterranean Argentine steakhouse that restaurateur Sebastian Cardona opened last fall in first-rate-restaurant-starved Brooklyn Heights, but they're largely beside the point. Here, it's all about the beef.

Not that the vegetarian appetizers and salads, including one with beets, tart green apple, and pistachios, aren't satisfying in a homey kind of way. But colorful arrangements of arugula with pears and pecorino, and a monolithic cylinder of quinoa pressed with avocado and tomato, are supporting characters at best. Though there's undeniable comfort found in sturdy \$12.50 slabs of warm mushroom-topped polenta drenched in earthy mushroom cream, you're here for more carnivorous gratifications, like shallow platters of meatballs in zippy tomato sauce or cold beef tongue pooled with garlicky vinaigrette and chopped hard-boiled eggs.

Cardona, who hails from Mar del Plata, a coastal resort city south of Buenos Aires,

is a constant presence in his large dining room, which occupies the deep and low-slung bottom floor of a row house along historic yet overly gentrified Montague Street. A man of many hats (he favored a surfer-style bucket cap the times I visited), Cardona takes turns as host, waiter, and sommelier alongside a small, friendly staff. Running the kitchen is Cardona's countryman Marcello Lazzarin, whose homemade sausages are reason enough to seek refuge here with a glass of Quilmes, Argentina's answer to Budweiser.

La Barrita's morcillas nearly burst out of their casings, their ferric funk (from pig's blood) tamed by a spice mix anchored by paprika. They make for a filling starter, as does fresh, plump chorizo simply grilled or served with ruddy, peppery pomarola sauce. But while Lazzarin cooks up burgers and steak sandwiches, I do wish you could get a proper choripan or morcipan, the sausage sandwiches so popular among Argentinian street vendors. Instead, scratch your street food itch by tackling a pair of bulbous empanadas buttressed by well-seasoned and promisingly crunchy french fries. The dough pockets come filled with chicken, sliced steak, or a mild blend of spinach and ricotta, and are somehow heartier than they already look.

As it should be, the restaurant's strongest feature is its grass-fed beef (\$24–\$29) and the proficiency with which Lazzarin operates his grill. Ordered as standalone entrées, thick rib eye and strip steaks aren't easily conquered alone, accompanied as they are by more fries and lightly dressed mixed greens. My preferred solo move, however, is to go for one of Cardona's moderately priced malbecs and either the costilla entera, a primal-looking bone-in rib steak sporting serious char, or stout slices of rolled veal breast stuffed with garlic and herbs and bearing magazine-ready crosshatch grill marks.

If you're with a group, or if you're the kind of person who watches the Nathan's hot dog eating contest with envy, La Barrita's parrillada is a must. The intense combination platter piles together sausages and various cuts of steak, including long batons of flank and nicely marbled skirt, all cooked to the requested temperature (in my case, a rosy medium-rare) and doused in vibrant chimichurri. The price changes depending on what's in stock, but expect to pay upward of \$30 per person for the large-format feast. Add on mollejas — sweetbreads from milk-fed veal — and the bill climbs a bit. It's a worthwhile gambit, especially if you're used to the way most chefs around town cook the offal to a quivering softness. These are all about texture: firm and meaty.

Fans of dark caramel should make a point to save room for the sole dessert offered, paper-thin crêpes rolled with dulce de leche and dusted, somewhat superfluously, with powdered sugar.

Golden-brown and garnished with fresh fruit, they're less heavy than traditional American steakhouse sweets like cheesecake, and a welcome change of pace. For this neck of Brooklyn, so is La Barrita.

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