

Crazy for Mate

Spend any amount of time in Argentina, and you're going to become familiar with *mate*, a drink deeply ingrained into the country's psyche. We first encountered it in Spain, when we saw a group of kids passing around a round container with a metal straw sticking out of it. "Argentiniains", our Spanish friend explained. "That's all they do. Drink mate".



He wasn't exaggerating. Mate is a way of life here. It's consumed at all times of day, at work, at home, on the street, in the park. Traditionally, the mate is served in a hollowed-out gourd, but we've seen people drink from metal and even plastic containers. A desperate Argentinian would probably sip it from his friend's cupped hands.

We educated ourselves about mate immediately upon arriving in Buenos Aires. The gourd the mate is served in is also called a *mate* or *matecito*. The caffeinated drink is prepared by partially filling the mate with yerba leaf, and then pouring hot water into it. Sugar can be added, and the steeped drink is then sipped through a silver straw called a *bombilla*.

Sound easy? Well, there are a whole lot of rules to follow if you want to do it correctly. The water must not be boiling, otherwise the mate will be bitter. The dry yerba should be arranged in a slope, which allows each serving to retain flavor. The bombilla is thrust into the leaves, which are then dampened with cool water, releasing desirable nutrients. While sipping, the bombilla shouldn't be used to stir or agitate the leaves. When in a group, the *cebador* is the person who prepares the mate. He or she will drink the first mate to test its flavor, then refill and pass it around. When it's your turn, you drink the entire mate, not just one or two sips, before passing it back.