

PASSIONS *of* PATAGONIA

Story by **WALTER HODGES**

Photos by **WALTER HODGES and PATAGONIA RIVER RANCH**

Collón Cura River in northern Argentine Patagonia.



IT WAS MID-MARCH and we were floating Argentina's Collón Cura River in northern Patagonia southwest of Buenos Aires. As it winds through the rolling hills near the Andes, this large freestone river resembles the Snake passing through Jackson Hole, cut instead through a high arid valley, similar to parts of Oregon's Deschutes. Wide, swift and deep, its girth comes from the surrounding Malleo, Allumine and Chimehuin rivers. Dusty, green, low-slung willows grace its banks, allowing the true visual expanse of the place to engulf you, the same way "Lawrence of Arabia" originally filled the widescreen. Joe Brooks fished these rivers in the '50s and recounted trout of incredible size. This is a big, gently flowing landscape. The wind owns this place. Normally, there's very little in place to stop it; on this day, if it chose to, a butterfly could land on your nose.

Six of us—two people and a guide in each raft, set up specifically for fly fishing—were on an overnight float trip arranged by our hosts, the folks at Patagonia River Ranch, our base camp near San Martín de los Andes. While waiting for the guides to get the rafts set up that first morning, I waded out into river with a 5-weight and tossed out a size 14 Parachute Adams. As my fly hit the water, it disappeared into the anxious mouth of the smallest trout I caught on the entire trip—maybe 10 inches, max. I stripped it in and gingerly brought the

fish up to my hands for a gentle release.

You know how trout flop around a little as you try to remove a barbless hook? This trout didn't flop. It thrashed. It didn't stop moving, ripping and tearing at the bonds holding it to the line. It wouldn't allow itself to give up the fight. I was astounded and I could barely get my hands on it. I swear, as I ever-so-gently let the small fish go, it turned, looked back at me as it swam away, and the little punk gave me the finger! Not that I didn't deserve it, but still, it's the principle

we're talking about here.

Ungrateful little bastard.

Once we hit the water, trout filled the day—all of them in the same foul mood as that first 10-inch fish. My friend Jim and I quickly learned that in this river, a 16-inch trout is nothing to get excited about, just a necessary nuisance to put up with. Several times, Jim and I both fought strong fish at the same time, from different ends of the boat. I just shook my head and laughed quietly.

(Left) Fighting a large rainbow on the Collón Cura. (Below) A Ranch guest with a huge brown from the freestone Chimehuin River.



WELCOME TO ARGENTINA

The first night, we camped about six miles from the take-out, just above the reservoir. We'd been hitting great fish on dry flies through the half-light of absolute dark. Our hosts arrived in camp ahead of us, set up our tents, and—most importantly—prepared the chorizo, which waited for us as the rafts snuggled up to the bank. Lanterns lit our way to the already set dining table. An amazing glass of Malbec and a smooth Fuente next to the campfire brought the day to a close under a moon holding water and a Southern Cross surrounded by more stars than words to suffice.

After a great breakfast, we got back on the river and instantly found fish. Some folks used small dry flies. Some used wet. Think Montana or Idaho, Oregon or Wyoming, late summer or early fall. The flies are pretty standard fare. In the case of Patagonia River Ranch, we actually didn't have to bring any gear at all, because they could have provided everything (including rods) if need be.

One odd thing about the Collón Cura is the minnow migration. They move upstream from the reservoir in February and March—either side of a two-to-three week window. The fish turn onto the minnows almost to exclusion,



Looking south from Patagonia River Ranch on the Chimehuin River.



(Top) The Chimehuin braids up just above the Ranch, making casting easy. (Bottom) A typical "small brown" from the Collón Cura.



Photo: Jeff Edvalds



and if you hit it right, a sparsely tied inch-and-a-half long Clouser-like fly has the potential to change your life.

Seriously change your life.

Most of my fly-fishing career has been similar to everyone else's, meaning of course that I "should have been here yesterday, or last week, or last year." You never see this sort of stuff coming. Like love, it simply appears and lands in your lap. After all, it's not like you really deserved anything other than a fair chance to score.

Half awake from no sleep. One more run. Just above the take-out on the second day of the float, stripping streamers, thinking about what it must have been like when I should have been here last year, when suddenly last year became today.

Became right now.

I might have waded 20 meters here to there. An hour. Twelve fish: the smallest 16 inches and rainbow; the biggest 24 and brown. Pound for pound, each the strongest trout I've ever encountered—nearly every one into the backing, mimicking the behavior of a Pacific Northwest steelhead. They weren't the huge browns that this part of country is famous for, but still, an incredible experience to catch. In between trout, I

laughed a lot. I'm supposed to be the photographer, so there isn't a photo to prove I did any of this. But I do own the memory. The most amazing hour of fishing I've ever seen. Possibly the best I'll ever see. All that success and I still didn't make the Blue Label Club. What's a guy to do?

The Blue Label Club: Ken Gangwer thought this one up. He owns Patagonia River Ranch about an hour outside of San Martin de Los Andes in northern Patagonia. In order to get your name on the five-year-old Blue Label Club list, you've got to catch a trout over 25 inches. There are more than 125 names on this list in five years. As in more than 125 people caught trout over 25 inches. In five years.

Well, whoop-dee frickin' doo.

Back at the Ranch, putting the Blue Label Club in perspective after what had just happened to me was so problematic that I simply ignored the fact I wasn't putting my name on the list and toasted my health and good fortune with a huge glass of Havana Club rum and a cigar before dinner.

To hell with that Blue Label Club I chuckled to myself.

This day—not when I should have been here yesterday or even last year—I

"I was stripping streamers, thinking about what it must have been like when I should have been here last year, when suddenly last year became today."

(Clockwise from top left) Coffee's on early in camp on the Collón Cura. In camp a guide sips an early morning mate—a traditional South American tea. Another of Patagonia's huge brown trout. A leggy fly box sampling from one of the guides.



Before the day's fishing, Patagonia River Ranch guides gather for a portrait.



was the world's greatest fisherman. At least 'til I finished the cigar and the glass of rum.

A spectacular meal in the lodge dining room was peppered with conversation. Each guest had a different adventure to relate and all the stories had the common foundation of fish and more fish, and if that wasn't enough, there were more stories of fish. Before bed, we checked in with Raphael, our assigned guide for our stay at the Ranch.

The guides at the Ranch are focused. They impressed each guest with their energy and expertise in creating trout-

catching opportunities. To the very last guide, they were relentless in their pursuit of our goal, which was, naturally, to catch fish. Our group had beginners, experts and folks in between. Yet the guides treated each of us equally and were respectful of our individual abilities. The Ranch is all-inclusive, so you can show up naked and they will get you dressed and provide all the gear and flies. If you want a beginner's lesson, they'll use the front lawn and teach you to cast. No matter what, you will almost certainly catch fish. The guides will simply not allow for another option.

The options to fish are many. There's a mile of riverfront right outside your



Photo: Jeff Edvalds

(Left) Heavy water and a long cast produced results on some sections of the rivers. (Above) A brown trout gently released into the crystalline Patagonia water, ready to fight again.

“I’m trying to get my head around the fact that there are rivers still left in the world where at any moment there’s an even chance you’ll talk about the next cast for the rest of your life.”

window. The Chimehuin is arguably one of the top five trout rivers in the entire world, and the lodge sits in a perfect position on the river, due to limited public access in this particular area. The incredible dry-fly river, the Malleo, is nearby, as is the Collón Cura, the Caleufu and Alumine. You can basically choose any experience you want: wading, daylong floats, two-day overnight float trips as well as a spring creek close by to test the best of technicians. After the camping float on the Collón Cura, Jim and I opted for the day-long float trips on the Chimehuin. These are freestone rivers. They feel like you’re close to home. The great American sporting writer Charles Gaines noted that this area was basically Montana, but 75 years ago. Seventy-five years and 75 light years from what we’re used to. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen.

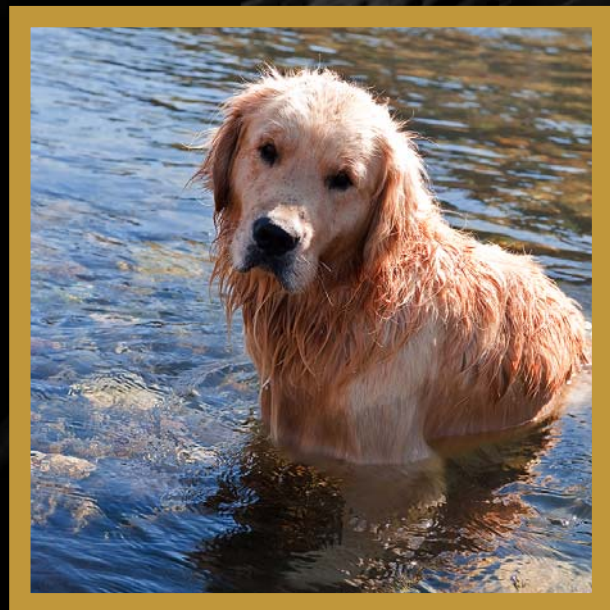
If you choose to float, your guide will be unswervingly dedicated to getting you into fish. If you’re traveling with someone who doesn’t fish, they will be enchanted by the scenery and wildlife going by. On our daily floats, everyone saw a lot of bird life as well as red deer. There aren’t a lot of other people on these rivers, so the floats remain pretty idyllic. Every day the guides set up a great lunch for everyone right on the river, often next to a grove of willow trees. At one of these meals, we ate a ter-

rific lunch of chicken and sausages, with yet another red wine and some killer chocolate chip cookies, which I assume were made by Patricia back at the Ranch. The cookies appeared to be the real hidden reason why most of us were actually eating lunch as opposed to continuing to fish.

On one of our first day-long floats we drifted into the shank of the afternoon as I cast a small blue-winged olive up next to the bank. I had not touched a fish in a while (that’s a relative phrase) and for all intents and purposes, I was standing up in the stern of the raft basically asleep in the sun. The fly luckily bounced off some grass and hit the water three inches from the bank at the head end of a three-foot slick. You know how west-slope cutthroats surface and porpoise onto a fly? In the instant the facts registered in my head, my hand snapped the rod tip into the air and the 5x tippet broke against the fish. I just stood there knowing the fish was gone and it was all my fault. No idea why I felt it was necessary to strike so hard, but I was sure enough to know that the head of the fish was about the size of a Chevy S-10. I raised my right hand to my mouth, closed my eyes, let out a deep, low-pitched sigh and smiled this little cynical, disgusted, whiny, pissy little smile I get when I know God and everybody is watching me stand there with my



(Top) Floating the Chimehuin, casting to eager brown and rainbow trout. (Bottom) A guest cradles a striking brown pulled from the clear waters of the Chimehuin.



(Top) Guanacos along the bank of the Chimehuin look similar to a llama, but are smaller. (Bottom) A dog's life is a good one at Patagonia River Ranch.

“Get it while you can. Don’t you turn your back on love.” In this case, you might get it on the very next cast. Stand in an Argentine river. You’ll fall in love.

pants around my ankles. I sat down in the boat and wistfully pondered the scene going by. That might be the biggest rising fish I’ll ever miss.

Sometimes I think missing a fish like that is more worthwhile than actually catching it. The memory sticks. It has an elasticity to it as the experience matures over time.

I’m not going to explain this real well because sometimes understanding things as they happen gets past me before I know exactly what just happened in the first place. Maybe it’s a function of age, or maybe if we’re not very careful, at any age life can seductively slip by way too easily. Often I’ve found myself right in the middle of an experience, and it isn’t until much later when I see the reality of the whole thing, and often I wish I had been more observant when things were going down, because some things just don’t happen every day. Truthfully, wading or floating in these Patagonia rivers is simply not real. I remember clearly standing there, often without casting, simply looking at the river, much the same way people just stand there staring up at the Lincoln Memorial. I’m sitting here months later, trying to get my head around the fact

that today there are rivers still left in the world where at any moment you can cast a fly on just about any reasonable looking piece of water, and there’s an even chance you’ll talk about the next few minutes for the rest of your life. At Patagonia River Ranch, it’s the magnitude of the potential that drives this stuff. You may not catch-and-release the biggest trout of your life, but it surely lives here, and you will have one of the world’s best shots at making it happen. It seems to me as fly fishers and human beings, one of our most valued possessions has got to be the unswerving belief in the potential that at any given moment everything might change for the better. With a nod to Tom McGuane, who in describing his early years in Key West with Jim Harrison and Guy de la Valdene suggested that Janis Joplin had it right back in the ’60s when she said, “Get it while you can. Don’t you turn your back on love.” In this case, you might get it on the very next cast. Stand in an Argentine river. You’ll fall in love.

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The
RANCH

Sunrise at Patagonia River Ranch.



PATAGONIA RIVER RANCH sits in the expansive rolling plains of northern Patagonia about 50 kilometers southwest of the mountain resort town of San Martin de los Andes, which is about an 800 kilometer flight southwest of Buenos Aires. As the road rises from the valley surrounding San Martin, the dense forests surrounding the city gradually give way to a more arid plain, the foothills of the Andes, and some of the best fly fishing for trout available on earth. The lodge itself sits on the banks of the Chimehuin River, about 20 kilometers down a dirt road near the famous trout fishing village of Junin. If fly fishing for trout had a summer place in the country, this place is about as close as it gets to home.

As we all know, fly fishing isn't just about fly fishing. It's a three-dimensional experience that includes the fishing, where you stay and how you stay. Sometimes you want to rough it with a backpack, a tent and a can of beans. There's a place for that. On other occasions you might seek out comfort and service. On this particular trip, we were

looking for a quality experience provided by a quality host. We didn't know it at the time but for all of us, the bar was about to be raised. I've noticed with age I have a steadily increasing need to seek out people who know how to take care of me. That runs true of my profession as well as my relaxation. My personal definition of what constitutes a professional

(Above) Flower pots adorn every sunny window at the Ranch. (Right) The interior of the Ranch is done in the style of a finely crafted Argentine estancia ranch house, complete with a stone fireplace and antler chandelier.

is simple. A professional does what they say they do. I just don't have time to deal with the impostors any more. Patagonia River Ranch is the real deal. Simple as that. They offer a quality experience and that's exactly what you get.

ELEGANCE, BUILT FROM LOGS AND STONE

The Ranch was built in 1998 from native logs and stone. It has the feel of an elegant estancia with a mile of riverfront. From the very start, the property was defined by an expansive approach with very finely tuned attention to detail and appropriate style. Its presence fits the landscape and its purpose and feels like part of the natural surroundings. The entire property is around 500 acres. To take the edge off the arid nature of the landscape, they've planted

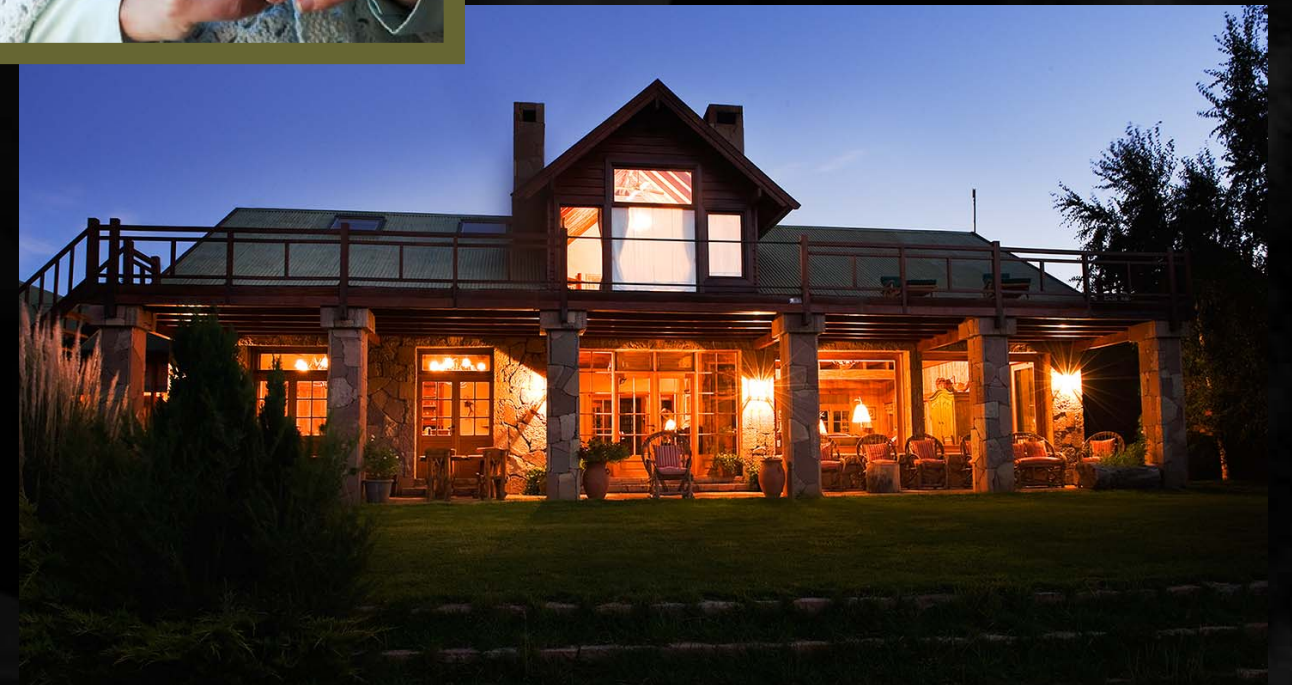
more than 200 acres of native grass and more than 30,000 trees. Over 60 kilometers of underground drip irrigation helps feed the grounds, the incredible vegetable gardens as well as the rose garden, which boasts over 300 varieties and more than 4,000 rose bushes blooming at any one time. It's absolutely amazing. Eduardo Cobelo, a trained Argentine forester, is the superintendent of the entire Ranch and its staff of 22 people. All of the employees are native Argentines. This atmosphere provides each guest with a truly authentic cultural experience. With a limit of eight to ten guests per week, the staff-to-guest ratio sits squarely at two-to-one, and every single employee is dedicated to making this the trip of your lifetime. Right down to the folks who clean your room. You will love it.

Inside, the elegant interior feels like a





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finely crafted ranch house with a perfect combination of locally influenced architecture, furniture and art that somehow conjures images of Argentina, Ralph Lauren, Sundance, Canyon Road in Santa Fe and a fishing lodge all at the same time. It's personified in the vaulted ceilings of the living room with its stone fireplace, mounted red deer stag head, photos of fishermen, fly-tying bench and deep leather chairs, as well as the antler chandeliers and crystal in the dining room. You know how difficult it is to combine a bunch of agendas into a focused whole. It hardly ever works and most often seems pretentious. They did it, and it works.

Ken Gangwer from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, owns the Ranch and from what we could tell, he's set the expectations, hired the staff to get it done and gotten the hell out of the way. Salomé Audisio, a gorgeous young Argentine

translator is the hostess. She's the day-to-day contact between the Ranch and the guests. Her job is not simple. She entertains you or leaves you alone, and makes certain you have everything you need. She conducts the orchestra that is the Patagonia River Ranch. Nothing is out of tune and if it is, she'll get it fixed one way or another. My guess is you'll want to hire her away to help run your business—or your life. I made an offer and got nowhere. Others from around the world have tried as well. Get in line.

CUISINE

A day at the lodge starts the same as it ends: with a plate of incredible food. After just a few days there, it became humorous.

"Damn it, here comes another astounding round of food."

Words just don't do the cuisine justice.

Every meal was different, every dish amazing. Master chef Claudio Abraham and his staff turn out plate after plate of food that could compete anywhere in the world. Listing all the dishes is pointless, but my personal favorites were the Chicken Crêpes with Morels from France, the spaetzle from northern Germany, the pork tenderloin from California, and any pastry or dessert or wine touched by the hands of Patricia

Inez Dalton, the pastry chef and *sommelier*. If I had to choose a desert, I'd have to go with the Almond Semifreddo.

Argentine grapes dominate the wine cellar. Every night Patricia would present (and Salomé would translate) the evening's offering to the guests at the table. For those of you who understand the nuances of wine, I can't offer any because that's not my expertise, but here's one evening's story from Patricia



(Left) Claudio Abraham and the kitchen staff at Patagonia River Ranch. (Above) Dinner with guests in the elegant dining room of the Ranch.

about reds from Mendoza. See if you can imagine what these wines (Malbec and Cabernet) by Ruca Malén in Mendoza might taste like:

“Legend has it that *Mapuche* women used to walk with their eyes fixed on the ground for fear of confronting the piercing look of a god which, it was said, was young and good-looking. One day, a most defiant woman left her fears behind and looked at him. A flash of lightning captivated her and she fell madly in love. The god, moved by this young *Mapuche* woman, took her with him up north, to the peak closest to the sky from where light came, the Aconcagua. At its foot, the sun shone more brightly, the waters crystal clear and its virgin lands enclosed all the world’s richness. He had to leave, as it was written. Yet, he offered her a home—*Ruca Malén*, the ‘young girl’s house’—and also, an everlasting promise: a spell. Nectar from which she could drink. And she would re-experience for eternity all the joy of his look.”

Dinner conversation was typical fare. A story here, a story there. I love it when the logic of something becomes hilarious and inescapable. As evidence, consider this dinnertime observation from Bill Weaver. Bill is a wonderful, gentle soul (retired dentist) who is reasonably inexperienced as a fly fisherman, but like some people you probably know, he’s a guy who always catches fish. No matter what. Often to the chagrin of experts

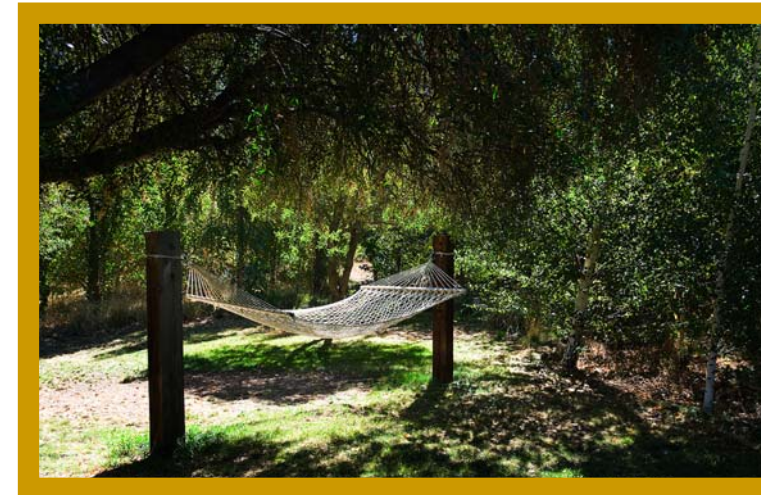
who don’t catch fish. We were talking the merit of dry flies versus wet flies. Technical conversation. You needed at least some expertise to even get started talking.

“Wait a minute,” Bill chimed in. “I don’t get it. Aren’t we casting flies to the water in the first place? So all flies are wet right? That’s the nature of it.”

Jim choked a little on his wine, smiled, chuckled and shook his head. Later on, to no one’s surprise, Bill caught fish. A bunch of them. Again.

RANCH ACTIVITIES

The Ranch offers ample options for the non-angler guest as well, including a stable run by the gaucho Gabriel. The horses are mild-mannered and well-behaved on the multiple trails surrounding the property. The lodge also runs day trips into San Martin for shopping and gallery hopping. Then, there’s trail bike riding, hiking and bird watching. (This is the land of condors and real flamingos as well as falcons, hummingbirds, herons and a small, bright green parrot called a *cachaña*.) Within a day’s ride there are two beautiful national parks—Nahuel Huapi and Los Arrayanes. In the spring, literally thousands of flowers bloom in the gardens just outside the lodge, and rope hammocks slung into the trees invite the time-honored Argentine notion of doing absolutely nothing at all for extended periods of time.



(Clockwise from top) Mountain bikes are available at the Ranch to explore the arid, beautiful countryside. Patagonia is the home of soaring condors and wide-sweeping rivers. Hammocks invite the time-honored notion of doing nothing at all.



(Top) The Ranch grows the papa meilland, said to be the most fragrant rose in the world. (Above) Sommelier Patricia pours a Malbec from the wine cellar. (Right) A room with a view in the Ranch.



The
ASADO
Celebration

Under the stars, the dinner was an expanse of food, wine, laughs, stories and conversations from a week of delightful experiences in Patagonia.



ASADO STARTED AS A METHOD the gauchos used to cook meat on the grasslands of the pampas. A banked fire was used with meat impaled on vertical spits stuck in the ground next to the heat. The definition today can include any grilled meat on any grill pretty much anywhere, with lots of people invited. There were no women at these early gaucho meals, and in Buenos Aires even today, there are a number of *asado* where there are no women at the meal. It's simply men getting together to eat, drink and talk.

That narrow definition doesn't work at the Ranch. It's a party. There's an *asado* at the end of every week's worth of fishing at the Ranch. All the guests, a number of staff and the fishing guides gather at a huge picnic table under a

massive silver poplar tree in the gardens. For our dinner, Claudio had two lambs on vertical spits going for about three hours. At the site of the *asado*, the Ranch installed a special historic-style oven made from mud and clay called a Horno De Barrow. It took months to build. They used it to bake the best empanadas I've ever had.

Under the stars, the dinner was an expanse of food, wine, laughs, stories and conversations from a week of delightful experiences in Patagonia. John Freeman's toast to the assembled group included a graceful thank you to the staff and closed with the words, "life is to be lived." And so we did.

Somewhere around midnight, the dinner crowd headed back to their rooms. The next day would be long and would include the journey home. The



John Freeman's toast to the assembled group included a graceful thank you to all the staff and closed with the words, "life is to be lived." And so we did.



(Left) The lamb is trussed on vertical spits to be cooked at an angle to a banked fire. (Above) Ranch kitchen staff create the empanadas in preparation for the asado.

kitchen staff began to clear the table and the grounds. Jim and I grabbed another glass of rum and a cigar, and pulled chairs up close to the embers of the fire. With a little post-dinner buzz from the food, the conversation, the wine and the rum, we lounged like a couple of gloriously tired bloodhounds after days spent running and barking up trees. We didn't know it, but one of the staff members had brought a boom box down to the *asado* site for a little clean up background music for the kitchen crew. We also didn't know that some time ago the staff had installed outdoor speakers in the branches of the tree covering the site. We eagerly anticipated a late night tango concert. The two of us doubled over laughing when we heard Jim Morrison and The Doors coming from somewhere up in the tree filtering down through the branches to our chairs in front of the

fire. Between the combined experiences from the past 10 days, and the current glass of Cuban rum and the stars and the food and the friends and Jim Morrison screaming, "Come on baby light my fire," the scene was a little much. Jim laughed and suggested an unknown fact that Morrison actually faked his own death and moved to Patagonia to become a fly fisher. All those pilgrims were leaving flowers at his grave in France when, in reality, Jim Morrison was alive and well living up in a tree at Patagonia River Ranch. He was fly fishing and having the time of his life in Argentina.

Everything considered, I'd have to agree. Go. You will have the time of your life.

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Patagonia River Ranch

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