

CHEFS' GRILLING SECRETS: BBQ SAUCE, SPICE RUBS & MORE P.100

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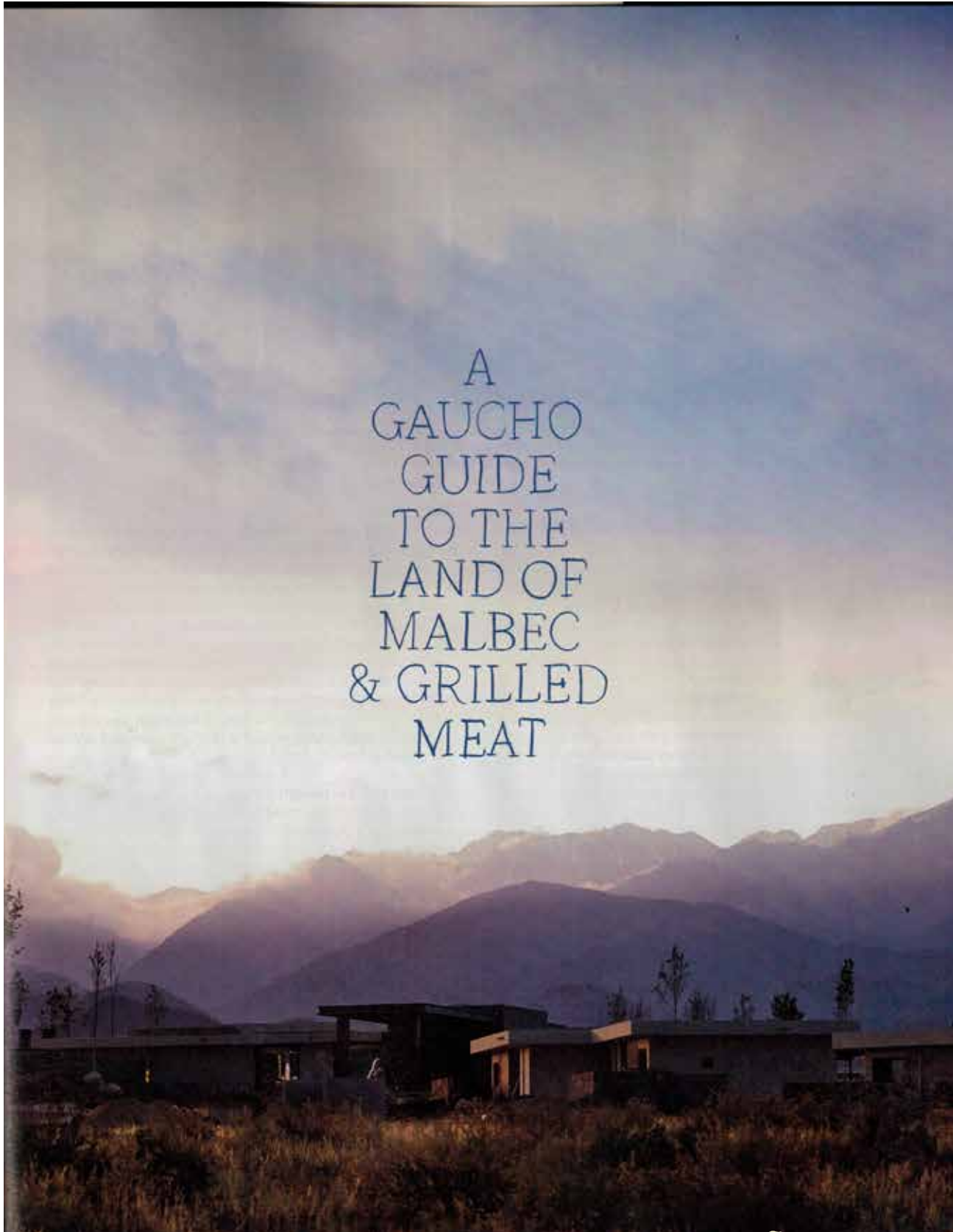
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With a gaucho by her side,
F&W's Megan Krigbaum explores Argentina's
Uco Valley, a once-overlooked region that
now offers spectacular wines, fantastic resorts
and seven different ways to cook with fire.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FREDRIKA STJÄRNE



Star chef Francis
Mallmann serves
gooey grilled provolone
topped with basil,
oregano and tomatoes
(p. 118) to accompany
all the beef at his
new restaurant at The
Vines resort, OPPOSITE.





The owners of The Vines of Mendoza, Pablo Gimenez Rilli (in red striped shirt) and Michael Evans, persuaded grilling genius Francis Mallmann to open a restaurant at their luxurious new resort. OPPOSITE: Mallmann (in hat) and chef Diego Irrera make a zucchini salad to serve right on the butcher block.

A LOT OF PROMISES ARE made in midtown Manhattan office buildings, but after the words “Sure, I’ll ride a horse” jumped out of my mouth (knowing full well that I’d not saddled up in at least 15 years), they stayed in my brain and echoed around for a good couple of months, until one early morning in Argentina. At which point, I was so transfixed by the 4:30 a.m. Mendoza sky—where not only a jaw-dropping concentration of stars but truly the entire Milky Way spilled out above me—that I hardly noticed being boosted up onto my perfectly slow (if not a tad reluctant) steed.

I was part of a cavalcade from The Vines of Mendoza winery and resort, in the Uco Valley, and we were heading up a mountain to see the sunrise. When we reached the peak, someone pulled biscuits, *chicharrones* and a carafe of coffee from a backpack and began filling espresso cups for the group. But Michael Evans, The Vines’ co-owner, was too busy for breakfast. He was there to photograph the sun as it inched up the Andes, turning the sky and everything beneath it pumpkin orange. This is precisely what made him move to Argentina from Los Angeles 10 years ago and cofound The Vines with Pablo Gimenez Rilli, a Mendoza native.

Their concept for The Vines of Mendoza was novel: allowing ordinary people to buy parcels of land on the property to make wine. These owners select a plot and choose the grape varieties, and The Vines does everything else under the supervision of consulting winemaker Santiago Achával (who has his own highly respected Mendoza winery, Achával-Ferrer, as well as a couple of other projects, even one in California). During my week in Argentina, I met several owners—including a pet cremator from Missouri, no less—who were there to weigh in on the blending of their wines.

The world generally thinks of Malbec, and only Malbec, when it comes to Argentinean wines. Yet The Vines property is planted with 20 different kinds of grapes, from Cabernet Franc to Chardonnay. This diversity reflects a bigger and really exciting change in the Uco Valley. I’d traveled to Argentina to get a better sense of that change, to see how winemakers are taking advantage of the extraordinary growing conditions to produce wines from seemingly countless grape varieties. The Uco Valley has really only come into its own in the last 15 years or so, making it a very young wine region. Back in New York, I’d tasted a range of Uco wines—vibrant, concentrated, distinct. I wanted the chance to taste these wines in the place where they were made.

At the same time that Uco wines are becoming more enticing, so is the region as a travel destination. Some of its best wineries, like Sopenha and Clos de los Siete, only recently opened tasting rooms to the public. And now there are incredible resorts with star chefs—including The Vines, with a restaurant by grilling legend Francis Mallmann. Another resort and winery, Casa de Uco, just opened this spring, with a restaurant by talented Mendoza chef Pablo del Río.

Also onboard at Casa de Uco is world-renowned wine consultant Alberto Antonini. When I asked him why he decided to come to Uco, he spoke of the region as if it were almost mythical. “The Uco Valley has the best *terroir* in Mendoza,” he said. “It has warm days and cool nights. I have so much energy when I’m here—it’s sunny and dry and makes me feel so fresh.”

WHEN I FIRST PULLED through the gate at The Vines of Mendoza, I thought I’d been tricked. There was no building in sight. The 10-minute drive down a bumpy dirt road from the entrance to the lodge is lined with enormous boulders that snake through the desert into row after row of lush grapevines, and just at the moment when I was sure I’d been kidnapped, there was the resort. The place defines a sort of gaucho glamour: Most of its 22 villas come with indoor and outdoor fireplaces and fully stocked kitchens (though why would one want to cook when Mallmann’s restaurant is only yards away?). Everything is situated with a view of the magnetic Andes Mountains. The place is unobtrusively luxurious, down to the bright red hand-knit wool pouf cushions from Indias Argentina and the delicious Fuegula 1833 soaps from Patagonia.

One of the more amazing parts of staying at The Vines is that every guest is assigned a gaucho. By definition, gauchos are cowboys who live in the countryside or *pampas*, but colloquially, a gaucho is just a straight-up good guy. In Argentina, when you do someone a *gauchada*, it means you’ve done them a favor. My gaucho, Matias Soria, a slender, big-eyed and big-hearted Mendoza native, embodies everything a gaucho ought to. I was completely taken care of. He gave me a cell phone to call him whenever, kept my fridge stocked with sparkling water and set me up in front of the fireplace in the lodge with a glass of late-harvest Torrontés. He even arranged for me to plant a couple of Malbec vines with vineyard manager Francisco Evangelista.

Matias also rode along with me to the top of the mountain on our sunrise horseback trek, naming all of the surrounding peaks along the way. We tried to spot Tupungato though the clouds; it’s the tallest mountain in the valley, and everyone spoke of it as if it were a loyal friend. They all promised I’d see it during my visit. That was not to be.



Hazelnut-Zucchini Salad

🕒 Total 30 min; Serves 4

- 1/4 cup hazelnuts
- 3 small zucchini (1/4 lb.), very thinly sliced lengthwise on a mandoline
- 1/2 tsp. grated lemon zest
- 3 Tbsp. fresh lemon juice

- 3 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- Sea salt and pepper
- Mint leaves and shaved Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, for garnish

1. Preheat the oven to 375°. Spread the hazelnuts in a pie plate and toast for 12 minutes, until fragrant; transfer to a

clean kitchen towel and let cool slightly, then rub together to remove the skins. Coarsely chop the hazelnuts.

2. Arrange the zucchini strips on a platter and sprinkle with the lemon zest and lemon juice. Drizzle with the oil; season with sea salt and pepper. Scatter

the hazelnuts over the zucchini and garnish with mint and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese.

WINE The high-altitude Uco Valley produces crisp Sauvignon Blancs that are great with this salad. Pour the 2013 Zorzal Terroir Único or the 2013 Bodegas Salentein Portillo.



“I LOVE MEAT,” CHEF FRANCIS MALLMANN SAID. “I EAT MEAT EVERY DAY.”

Later, Matias set up a tasting and blending session with The Vines' generous, knowledgeable wine director, Mariana Onofri. We sat outside and tasted through more than a dozen owners' barrels and bottles, while watching an intense thunderstorm roll in over the desert. She was checking on how the wines were coming along. The young Malbecs were still quite juicy and fruity, while those with age had taken on structure and depth. The Vines bottles its own wines, too, and exports them to the U.S., including a crisp, fragrant Torrontés and its signature Malbec, a ripe, black cherry-scented wine.

There seems to be a lot of talk in Mendoza about how not to go down the same path with Malbec as Australia did with Shiraz—where the wines had become homogenous and predictable, with the expectation of low prices to match. Based on the Malbecs I tasted in the Uco Valley, there's little risk of that. The region is actually composed of many subregions, each of which has its own influence on the Malbec grape, depending on proximity to the Andes.

One producer, Familia Marguery, is making a Malbec unlike any I've had before. I was joined at The Vines lodge one afternoon by Marguery's owner, Guillermo Donnerstag, who spends his days as a philosophical professor at a university in Mendoza. He applies a philosophical approach to his wines, focusing on the subregions rather than the region as a whole. His Casa Malbec, a blend of Uco and Luján de Cuyo fruits, was structured and grassy, and tasted like tea leaves, different from the floral or fruity flavors I'd found in other Malbecs. His single-vineyard Familia Marguery Malbec, from Uco's La Consulta subregion, went in another direction, with spice and dense, dark fruit. These two bottlings alone show the extreme diversity of the *terroir*.

The next phase of The Vines is a winemakers' village, where 12 up-and-coming winemakers have purchased land and are growing grapes. They'll each have their own winery and tasting room. I spent an afternoon spitting wine off a brick wall with Luis Reginato, one of the winemakers involved in the project. “There's not another place in the world where, within walking distance, you can find 12 wineries

with 12 different winemakers telling their own stories,” Reginato said. “I like that.” His plan is to plant varieties never grown in the region before, to see if there might be a future for them.

Blue-eyed, red-haired Reginato came off as quite soft-spoken when we first met, but after spending the better part of an afternoon in a truck with him, I realized he was just thinking a lot. He is the director of viticulture for Bodega Catena Zapata, one of Argentina's best-known producers. The Adrianna vineyard, where our tasting took place, is the source for many Catena Zapata wines, the most interesting of which are two Chardonnays—White Bones and White Stones—named for the different types of soil from which they come. Reginato had dug big holes in each plot (just rows away from one another) so that I could see the surprising variations. “We don't think *terroir* is a picture,” Reginato told me. “It's a movie.” I could taste the movie of this place in the wines, too. The White Bones is savory and ripe, the White Stones crisp and powerful.

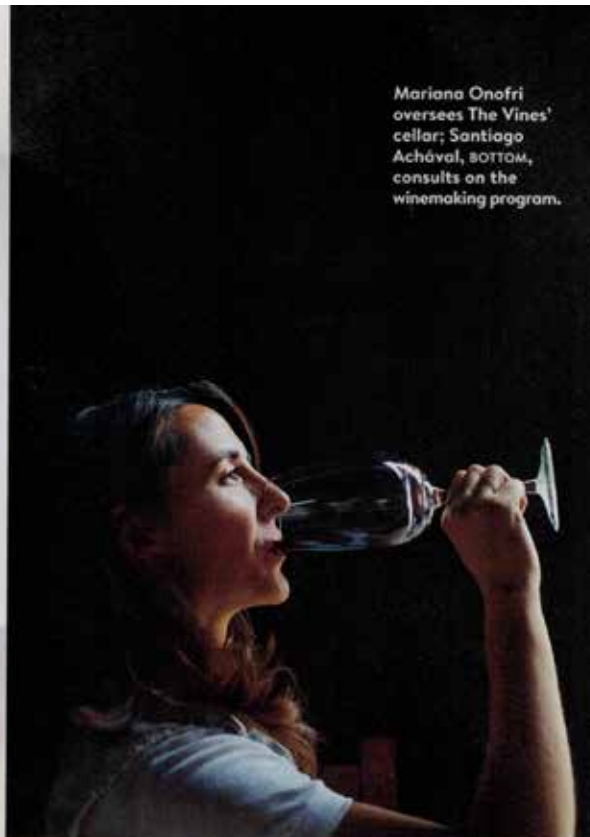
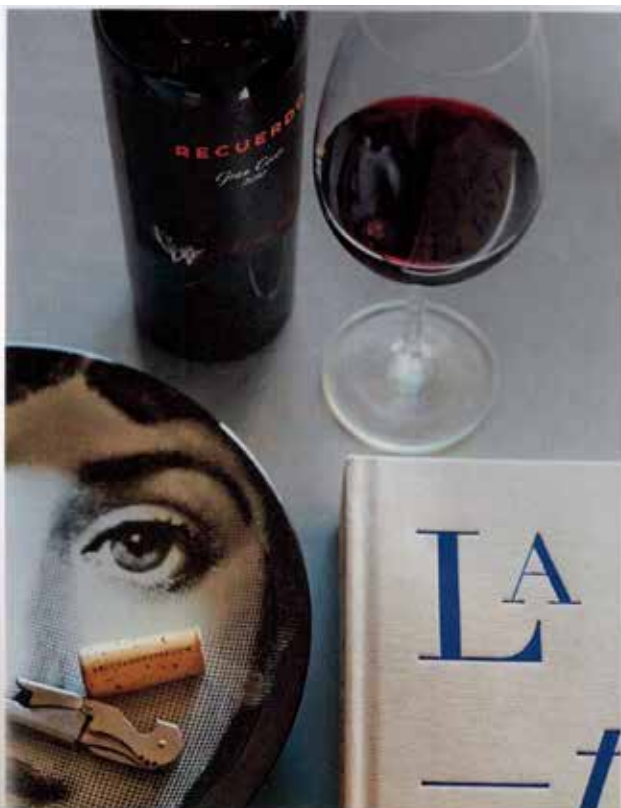
One morning I went even farther afield and drove out to the Ruca Malen winery, located in Mendoza's Luján de Cuyo region, though it sources about 60 percent of its grapes from the Uco Valley. “We discovered the quality potential in the Uco Valley,” winemaker Pablo Cuneo told me as we tasted samples straight from the barrel. “The cold nights and warm days concentrate all of the colors, flavors and aromas in the grapes.” This was certainly true of his intensely fragrant Reserva Malbec from Vista Flores. The wine was so vibrantly magenta that I could make out the spectacular color even in the poorly lit cellar.

BACK AT THE VINES, Matias set up a cooking lesson for me with Francis Mallmann. Evans said he courted the idiosyncratic chef for months before he agreed to open Siete Fuegos (“Seven Fires”) at The Vines. The cooking gear in his outdoor kitchen ranges from a *plancha* to an enormous wood-fired oven to a fire pit with medieval-looking metal structures for roasting whole animals. “When you're cooking with fire,” Mallmann said, “you have to have a strategy; you have to be calm with a good plan. You don't have to rush. It's like a day off.”

Mallmann's idea of a day off is different from mine. He moved quickly, paying not one bit of attention to the flies that also turned up for the lesson. Nearby were his sweet one-year-old daughter, Heloisa (it was her birthday), and his girlfriend, Vanina Chimenó, a chef at her own restaurant, María Antonieta, in the city of Mendoza. Although Mallmann took frequent breaks to tickle the baby, somehow, within hours, he and his head chef Diego Irrera prepared charred gauchos steaks (p. 118) and trays of beef-and-onion empanadas (p. 130). He created a stunning zucchini salad with mint and toasted hazelnuts (p. 115) to serve right on a gorgeous butcher block. And he made the loveliest crêpes (p. 131), with ribbons of dulce de leche, in the wood-fired oven. “Dulce de leche really is just a cry of happiness,” he said.

On a whim, he decided to make what he calls a mason's steak. “If you go to any construction site in Argentina, you will find a grill,” he said. “The workers bring thin cuts of meat with them because they cook fast.” I had a hard time believing any construction worker would bring to a job site avocados, bacon, tomatoes, thinly sliced sweet potatoes and cilantro, but that's what Mallmann deftly roiled up in the hugest sirlion I'd ever seen, resulting in a delicious generosity. “I love meat,” Mallmann said. “I eat meat every day.”

I'd also been eating meat every day—not my norm. So in my last hours at The Vines, rather than confronting yet another steak, I sat with my feet in the pool, with a bottle of Uco Sauvignon Blanc, and tried to spot Tupungato one last time. It wasn't there.



Mariana Onofri oversees The Vines' cellar; Santiago Achával, bottom, consults on the winemaking program.

Uco Wines to Buy Now

2012 CASA MARGUERY MALBEC (\$15)

Guillermo Donnerstag, a philosophy professor at a university in Mendoza, started this small winery in 2000. This fantastic Malbec is a blend of Uco and Luján de Cuyo grapes.

2012 RUCA MALEN RESERVA MALBEC (\$19)

From one of the oldest vineyards in the Uco's Vista Flores subregion, this wine is remarkably fresh and floral but will still age beautifully.



2011 CHAMAN (\$20)

The stunning magenta color of this wine is enticing. Producer Luis Reginato shows off the prettier side of Petit Verdot with his first vintage of this red wine, a blend of 55 percent Petit Verdot with Cabernet and Malbec.

2012 RECUERDO MALBEC (\$22)

The Vines of Mendoza grows grapes for others but keeps some fruit for its own wines. This one is quintessential Malbec—ripe and black-cherry-scented.

2013 ZORZAL EGGO SAUVIGNON BLANC (\$40)

The Michelin brothers are biodynamic zealots—unusual in the Uco Valley. They make this zippy Sauvignon Blanc in enormous, concrete, egg-shaped tanks.

2010 BODEGA CATENA ZAPATA WHITE STONES CHARDONNAY (\$100)

This small-production Chardonnay comes from vineyards full of softball-size white stones—giving the wine minerality and structure.



Griddled Gaucho Steak with Bread-and- Basil Salad

Active 30 min; Total 1 hr
Serves 4

To turn beef tenderloin into a quick-cooking cut for the grill, Mallmann butterflies it into a quarter-inch-thick slab (learn more about the technique on p. 84). "I love charring things very, very fast so that they're still raw in the middle," he says. If you aren't comfortable butterflying the tenderloin yourself, ask your butcher to do it.

- 1 head of garlic
- ½ cup plus 2 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling
- 2 Tbsp. red wine vinegar
- Sea salt and freshly ground pepper
- ½ lb. rustic bread, cut or torn into 1½-inch pieces
- 1 lb. center-cut filet mignon

- 1 large bunch chives (1 oz.)
- ¼ cup basil leaves
- 1 cup microgreens

1. Preheat the oven to 425°. Cut ½ inch off the top of the garlic head and set the head on a piece of foil. Drizzle the garlic with olive oil, wrap tightly and roast until tender, about 45 minutes. Unwrap the garlic and let cool slightly, then squeeze the cloves into a small bowl. Mash with a fork until smooth. Whisk in ¼ cup of the olive oil and the vinegar and season the dressing with sea salt and pepper.
2. Meanwhile, in a large non-stick skillet, heat ¼ cup of the olive oil. Add the bread and cook over moderate heat, tossing, until golden and crisp all over, about 5 minutes. Arrange the croutons on plates.
3. Using a sharp knife, make a ¼-inch-deep cut down the

length of the filet mignon. Turning the filet and rolling it out as you go, spiral-cut the meat until you have a long, rectangular piece that's about ¼ inch thick; alternatively, have your butcher butterfly the steak for you. Make ½-inch-deep slits every 2 inches along the grain all over the steak. Rub the steak with 1 tablespoon of the olive oil. Season with sea salt and pepper and arrange the chives on top, tucking them into the slits.

4. Preheat a cast-iron skillet. Add the remaining 1 tablespoon of olive oil to the skillet and cook the steak, chive side up, over moderate heat until browned, about 3 minutes. Flip the steak and cook until the chives are charred and the steak is medium-rare inside, 2 to 3 minutes longer. Transfer the steak to a cutting board and let rest for 5 minutes.

5. Top the croutons with the basil and microgreens and spoon the roasted garlic dressing on the greens. Slice the steak against the grain and serve alongside.

WINE Malbec is understandably sublime with steak. Try this massive cut with the 2012 *Recuerdo* or the 2012 *Casa de Uco*.

Provoleta with Oregano and Tomatoes

☑ PAGE 112

🕒 Total 15 min; Serves 4

According to Mallmann, the success of this dish—provone seared in a cast-iron skillet until crisp, browned and melty—depends on the quality of the cheese. "You want a sharp, mature cheese that's about eight or nine months old."

- One 1-inch-thick slice of provone cheese (½ lb.)
- 2 Tbsp. small oregano leaves
- ½ tsp. crushed red pepper
- 6 grape tomatoes, halved
- Sea salt
- Basil leaves, for garnish
- Crusty bread, for serving

Preheat the oven to 450°. Heat a cast-iron skillet until hot. Add the cheese and sprinkle with

1 tablespoon of the oregano and ¼ teaspoon of the crushed red pepper. Cook over moderate heat until the cheese begins to melt and brown on the bottom, about 2 minutes. Flip the cheese and cook until the bottom begins to melt and brown, about 2 minutes. Sprinkle all over with the remaining 1 tablespoon of oregano and ¼ teaspoon of crushed red pepper and top with the grape tomatoes. Bake until the cheese is melted and the tomatoes are warmed through, about 4 minutes. Season with sea salt and garnish with basil. Serve with bread.

WINE This crusty *provoleta* is so rich that it's best with a sparkling wine to refresh your palate. Pour one from Mendoza, like the NV *Ruca Malen Brut* or the NV *Reginato Rosé* of Malbec.

Sautéed Golden Potato Salad with Leek and Black Olives

🕒 Total 40 min; Serves 4

"I love opposites: raw and cooked, hot and cold," says Mallmann. "I don't believe in harmony; that's for children." Here, he redefines potato salad by tossing contrasting ingredients together in unusual combinations, like warm, crisp potatoes and sautéed leek with fresh mixed salad greens.

- 3 small baking potatoes (1¼ lbs.), peeled and halved
- 1 quart low-sodium chicken broth
- 2 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling
- 1 leek, white and tender green parts only, sliced crosswise ¼ inch thick
- 4 cups mixed lettuces, such as arugula, mesclun and sunflower sprouts
- 12 pitted black olives, chopped
- 6 anchovies, thinly sliced
- Kosher salt and pepper
- Red wine vinegar, for drizzling

continued on p. 130

