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# Mercedes, Argentina

WORDS AND PHOTOS ED STOCKER

Outside the windows it's another cloudless day over the Argentinian pampas, the bright sun illuminating the rich agricultural terrain and crumbling towns that smatter this vast, flat expanse of land that stretches south-west of Buenos Aires. Inside, it could be morning, afternoon or night – it doesn't matter. All are transfixed. For here, in a virtually unknown corner of the southern hemisphere, a group of old-timers have the audience well and truly in the palm of their hands.

La Pulpería de Cacho is a taste of another age – another world altogether – lifted from the pages of the most dramatic *gaucho novela* and reluctantly dumped into the 21st century. *Pulperías* functioned as the bar, shop and meeting place of horsemen and farm labourers in the 19th and early 20th centuries, a refuge for drinking away troubles, laughing, fighting, gambling and making merry. But they're a dying breed, being replaced by conventional bars and becoming tired and overlooked as the country became industrialised and people moved to the cities in search of the riches of the metropolis. Cacho's place claims to be the last pulpería, run, until his untimely death in 2009, by the so-called last *pulpero* in Argentina.

Built in 1830 and still looked after by Cacho Di Catarina's family who inherited it in 1930, the bar has changed little since it originally opened. Inside is dark and smoky, decked out with wooden stools and a long saloon bar. On the walls an assortment of dusty bottles, old pictures, several antique 'Wanted' posters and fading black and white photos cluster every available inch of spare wall space, as a huddle of locals neck Quilmes beer and tuck into *picadas* of local salami, cheese and olives. The only nod to modernity is the mounted television on the wall showing the latest dramatic twists and turns of a football match from the Argentinian league.

Sat around one of the tables, a group of world-weary musicians are working their way through a repertoire that includes *milongas*, *chacareras*, *zambas* and *chamarritas*. Gruff, raw and improvised, and fed by scores of cigarettes and



From top: José Larralde holds court, sat at the centre of the pulpería to sing songs and tell stories; an eye-boggling array of dusty bottles; Luis Bustos accompanying Larralde on the bombo drum

countless refills of Vasco Viejo red wine, they meet up to tell stories through their music and busk a dime or two to be able to buy a nice cut of meat for the weekend. It's about as far from a snooty tango performance at a highbrow theatre as it's possible to get.

Maybe it's the intimate setting or maybe it's the dizzying virtuosity of the musicians, but this feels like privileged listening. The crack unit is lead by José Larralde, a silver-haired fox in his 60s who is a natural performer. Engaging the audience with a constant stream of dialogue, his *milongas* tell stories of vice and intrigue in Buenos Aires as he points to the sky with one hand, his voice swooping and soaring as it fills the room. One of his songs 'Alfonsina y el Mar,' also reprised by Mercedes Sosa, tells of famed writer Alfonsina Storni who committed suicide in 1938, throwing herself into the Mar del Plata sea.

Accompanying Larralde, Luis Bustos stands tall thumping away on his huge *bombo* (bass drum) with two sticks. Often the songs are strikingly simple – just voice and drum – but it's a tried-and-tested formula that works. Yet it's perhaps a tango guitar duet from Miguel Ferraro and his young apprentice that steals the show. With Ferraro seated and his opposite number standing majestically with one leg planted on a stool, their guitars weave in and out of each other, building to a dramatic crescendo.

And for several hours they continue working their way through a vast repertoire of traditional and folkloric songs from Argentina's past. The audience isn't full of tourists. Nor is it spilling out the doors with Argentinians. For this is Mercedes, a small agricultural town famed only for its salami and largely off the tourist radar. Those who had the luck or the good sense to stay to listen were treated to a moving, often sentimental, time warp: a time when the last *pulpero* of the last pulpería was just a whippersnapper. Earlier that evening, several songs had been dedicated to the much-missed Cacho, whose presence still seems to cling to the very fibres of the wooden interior. "Cacho is in every chord of the guitar," Larralde tells *Songlines*, his voice laced with emotion. ●