

Rei Do Gado — Brazilian cowboy cuisine

San Diego Dining

By David Rottenberg

The Old West has its cowboys. Hawaii has its paniolo.

Brazil has its gauchos. There are similarities but also wide differences between them. The similarities — they all herd cattle (“cowpunchers,” so to speak) and they all treasure their horses, because their safety and livelihoods depend on a reliable mount.

They all have become folk heroes, mostly in the United States where characters like Hopalong Cassidy and Roy Rogers stood up for good family values and morality.

But they do things differently and dress differently. The American cowboy often wore chaps and spurs, a wide-brimmed hat (10 gallon?), used a lariat to rope cattle and usually carried a gun.

He would graze cattle and then drive them, often for hundreds of miles, to the railway to be shipped to market.

The paniolo (the name derives from “hispaniolo,” as

the early Hawaiian cowboys were Spanish, but the Hawaiians had difficulty pronouncing the word) also used a lariat and also drove their cattle to market but then would actually swim the cattle into the ocean onto boats that waited offshore. Cattle were introduced to Hawaii by Capt. James Cook, who left less than a dozen head. Within a short time, the free roaming cattle multiplied so quickly that they denuded much of the vegetation of the big island.

Gauchos (the term seems to derive from Quechua, a native language that is older than the Maya language) dressed in wide pants with a diaper looking crotch and used ponchos to stay warm. In addition to the lariat, they developed the boleadora, two or three rope strands tied together, each with a heavy object at the end. When thrown at the legs of a cow, the boleadora would wrap around and trip the animal. Gauchos lived on the pampas, wide flat plains with lots of grass for grazing. The pampas



Courtesy photo

A chef shows one of the culinary offerings from Rei Do Gado, a noted Brazilian restaurant.

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borders on Argentina and Brazil.

The diets of all three groups were similar — they ate lots of meat, because it was all around them. Cowboys were usually accompanied by a “chuck wagon,” and a cook would prepare meals. Paniola cooked their meat in pits, with hot stones. Gauchos barbecued their meat on spits. The style of cooking was called *churrasco* (pronounced shoo-RAS-koo) or Brazilian barbecue.

Very little seasoning is used to prepare the meat. White meats are marinated overnight in a mixture of garlic, salt, and lime juice. The red meats are seasoned with sea salt only. The barbecue is often self-basting. As the spit turns, the juices that come out roll over onto the other side of the meat. The result is tasty and tender.

Restaurants have sprung up all over the world to serve these dishes. Called *churrascaria*, they have become extremely popular.

San Diego is home to Rei Do Gado, a local “churrascaria” that is located conveniently across from Horton Plaza. In

fact, it is a *churrascaria de rodízio* because waiters move from table to table bringing different types of meats on skewers from which they slice portions onto plates of diners.

A meal begins with a visit to the salad bar. There is a wide choice of salad fixings, but it is wise not to fill up. When salad plates are picked up, a parade of waiters brings a dozen or more choices of different meats, which are then carved to order at the table off the spit. It couldn't be hotter, fresher, or tastier.

Meats include beef, chicken, turkey, sausage and lamb. Not all meats listed on the menu may be available at any one particular time.

Waiters will keep coming back as often as desired, carving more meat for hungry diners. Wise diners will also save room for the dessert trays, located near the salad buffet.

This is an “all you can eat” arrangement and the food stops coming only when the table raises a small flag. I call it a “flag of surrender.”

The wine list is representative of the more popular labels and pricey by the bottle. Wines

are better priced by the glass, featuring a good choice of reds from Chile.

Rei Do Gado is a fun place to dine. The experience of servers cutting chunks of meat off the skewers tableside is different.

The variety of meat choices can be overwhelming. The sheer volume of food one may eat is staggering. There is live Brazilian music nightly, to add to the fun. Often, a live Samba show entertains. Prices depend on the meal (lunch or dinner) and the day of the week. Weekends are more expensive. If one enjoys enough of the meats, this can be a bargain.

Rei Do Gado is located at 939 Fourth Avenue in the Gaslamp. Call (619) 702-8464 for information and reservations or visit its Web site at reidogado.net

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