

"With suspense and heartbreak . . .  
explores the human toll of Argentina's Dirty War."

—JENNIFER EGAN

# ON A NIGHT OF A THOUSAND STARS

A NOVEL

ANDREA YARYURA CLARK

## BOOK CLUB KIT

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The novel alternates between the perspectives of Paloma in 1998 and Valentina in 1973. What parallels did you draw between both characters' lives in terms of passion and personality? Did you prefer one timeline to the other?
2. In the first half of the novel, we see the gradual erosion of civil liberties in Argentina, such as the elimination of the free press, the acceleration of arrests, and the state's sponsorship of the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance. How did these changes lay the foundation for the atrocities that were later committed by the dictatorship? Were you familiar with Argentina's "Dirty War" before reading *ON A NIGHT OF A THOUSAND STARS*? How did reading about these events affect you?
3. HIJOS, The Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice Against Oblivion and Silence, and the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, were formed to expose the human rights violations committed during the dictatorship, and overturn the regime's mandate of Silence Is Health. "The only course of action was for us to become activists," said Franco in Chapter Twenty-One. "Our mission is to reveal the truth. We won't remain silent and let our country continue to bury its past." What would it mean to dedicate your life to a cause with so few answers and so much pain? How do groups like HIJOS support and protect one another while pursuing such difficult work?
4. In Chapter Nine, Paloma meets Martín Torres, a professor at the University of Buenos Aires. He is one of the many people Paloma's father, Santiago, helped to flee the country in the 1970s. Torres tells Paloma about Argentina's democratic election in 1983, when Raúl Alfonsín was elected president: "Many decided to stay in their adopted countries. Those who came back to Argentina soon understood that living in exile had changed them in ways they hadn't foreseen. They would remain foreigners when they returned to their homeland." In light of this statement, why do you believe Martín Torres called his first book "Death by Exile"? How else does the theme of displacement present itself in the novel?
5. As an architect, Valentina's greatest desire was to provide affordable housing, as she believed everyone had the right to adequate shelter. How else did Valentina's creative and professional aspirations reflect her social and political leanings?
6. In Chapter Eighteen, the nuns look benevolently upon Valentina and Máximo, "seeing something of themselves in these young people's desire to improve the world, if only with small actions." In your own life, how have small actions led to big changes? How have young people in recent generations worked together to bring about a better world?

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## CONTINUED

7. Could you find any similarities between Santiago, Máximo, and Franco's aspirations for Argentina? Where did their dreams for their country overlap—and where did their worldviews diverge? How did Franco's Argentina differ from Santiago and Máximo's?

8. In Chapter Twenty-Two, Valentina decides to commit to her relationship with Máximo and end her affair with Santiago. In his sadness, Santiago concedes that the two are a more “natural fit” for one another because of their passionate desire to help the poor and shared socio-economic background. Do you agree or disagree with Santiago's assessment here? What do you believe is most important when it comes to cultivating and sustaining romantic love?

9. In Chapter Twenty-Five, at the pizzeria with Franco, Paloma admits that she feels more at home in Argentina than she does in New York, despite being born and raised in the city. Franco replies: “Your heritage is in you. You can't change who you are just by being born somewhere else.” Discuss the sense of home and homeland in the novel and the benefits and disadvantages of being raised in two cultures. How much does a physical place—or the absence of it—characterize a person?

10. The lives of so many characters in the novel are defined by events that transpired under the dictatorship. Have any world events played a defining role in your life? Are you generally influenced by politics?

11. How did learning of Santiago's revolutionary leanings change Paloma's preconceptions of her father? Have you ever learned something about a parent that changed your understanding of who they are—and who you are by extension?

12. Family, both biological and chosen, is an important theme in *ON A NIGHT OF A THOUSAND STARS*. In your opinion, what is it, exactly, that makes someone family? Is it blood? Marriage? The choice to share your life with someone? How would you cope with the destabilization of your family unit, as Paloma did?

13. In the Epilogue, Franco tells Paloma that their mothers spent their final days at the same concentration camp, a notion that comforts them both. Do you believe in destiny or coincidence? Have you ever felt like a greater force has been at play in your own life?

# A CONVERSATION WITH ANDREA YARYURA CLARK

What kind of research did you do for *ON A NIGHT OF A THOUSAND STARS*, and how long did the process take? What was your most surprising discovery?

My research dates back to when I was living in Buenos Aires in the late 1990s (the same era as Paloma and Franco's story in the novel). It began when a family friend, a human rights lawyer, told me about a group that was meeting weekly, whose members were children of the disappeared. The children were now young adults, coming of age about twenty years after the 1976 military coup.

These gatherings, held at a Human Rights Center for Families of the disappeared/detained for Political Reasons, were under the umbrella of a recently-formed national organization known as HIJOS, which stands for "*Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio*" (Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice Against Oblivion and Silence). I attended a few HIJOS meetings and, after gaining their trust, asked certain members of the group if I could document their stories. I initially envisioned making a documentary and filmed several of the subjects, both in interview settings and going about their daily lives. I also wrote a few drafts of creative nonfiction and even took a stab at a screenplay based around these narratives. Although this material never evolved into a viable product, the stories stayed with me. Years later, they would serve as the inspiration for the novel.

The book in its current form took about seven years to write. Originally, it focused more on Paloma's journey, but after some excellent feedback, I realized I needed to spend more time with Valentina and Santiago in the 1970s. Before delving deeply into their story, I did more research. Books that were helpful included: Marcelo Larraquy's *The 70s, A Violent History*; Horacio Verbitsky's *The Flight*; Uki Goñi's *The Real Odessa*; Rita Arditti's *Searching for Life*; Jacobo Timerman's *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*; and *Never Again*, a compilation of survivors' depositions prepared by CONADEP, the Argentine National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons. I also studied old issues of popular magazines, newspaper articles, watched movies, and conversed with family and other contacts who lived through those times.

My most surprising discovery during this process was how much I personally began to recall about those years. Childhood memories of daily life in Buenos Aires, including a few encounters with the security forces, came flooding back. I remembered my friend's older sister, a university student, suddenly leaving Buenos Aires one day. I later found out, as an adult, that one of her classmates had disappeared, and that she had left the city fearing she might also be targeted.

*ON A NIGHT OF A THOUSAND STARS* takes place in the context of true events. What license did you give yourself to write imaginatively while re-creating historical persons and events?

I'm not a historian, and the era in which Valentina and Santiago's story unfolds—from Perón's return in 1973 to the beginning of the military dictatorship in 1976—was a particularly bewildering and complex time in Argentina's history. I worked hard to grasp the relevant historical figures and timeline of events. At the same time, this is fiction, so mainly I let my characters guide me through the landscape. Valentina and Santiago appear, at first, to be the architects of their own destinies,

but eventually larger forces overtake them.

I was living in Buenos Aires during both periods when the novel takes place: the 1970s and the 1990s. My family left the country in 1975, when I was in middle school, and I returned as a young professional in 1992, making Argentina my home again for another eight years. I remember being surprised by the absence of any talk about the dictatorship among my relatives and friends. Simultaneously, I understood how difficult it might be for a country to confront its troubling past.

Salman Rushdie once wrote, "The only people who see the whole picture are the ones who step outside the frame." I would never presume to say I see the whole picture—certainly not a picture as complex as Argentina in this period. That said, I believe that leaving the country as a child gave me a certain distance and perspective that were key to being able to write this novel.

**Take us through some of the choices you made while writing in terms of structure, voice, plot, and scene settings.**

There were two stories I needed to tell: the experiences of young adults in the years leading up to the dictatorship, and the discovery a daughter makes about her family's past. I wanted to alternate chapters between both timelines, and found that the stories developed at a similar pace, which pleased me enormously. Initially, I wrote Paloma in the third person, but then I tried her in the first person and that's when her voice really came through.

I knew from the beginning how the story would end, as it sadly had to follow the fates of the thousands of disappeared. The mystery for me, therefore, was in crafting how the characters' journeys would unfold, and learning more about them along the way.

**Are there any "beind-the-scenes" details that didn't make it into the book?**

Several! I was deeply engaged with all my characters, including the ones who didn't get much space on the page, like Máximo Cassini, Martín Torres, and Soledad Goldberg. For example, in a very early draft, I wrote about Soledad's family's experience when she disappeared and how their neighbors ostracized her (and her parents) when she returned home. I included passages from Professor Torres's memoir about his years in exile in Spain, and I described Máximo's time as a political refugee in France. I also had more detail about Paloma's life as a privileged teenager in New York, and at one point, even Pedro García had a couple of short chapters devoted to him.



Even though these pages didn't make it into the final version, writing them further enriched my understanding of these characters. (And some of these tangents have provided ideas for a future book.)

**How did you deal with the emotional impact of writing a story that hinges on such a troubling and heartbreaking period in history?**

It is difficult knowing that my characters, having only recently embarked on their existence as adults with all their hopes and dreams, would have the course of their lives changed in profound and violent ways. When writing difficult passages, I often found solace in music. I listened to a lot of Argentine artists, everything from tango to folk to *rock nacional*. Listening to music brought me closer to the places and events I was trying to re-create.

There are also elements of fear and menace in the book, and I felt these emotions at a personal level more than I expected, and more than I ever had before. My family left Argentina several months before the coup. Knowing what I now know, I realize how lucky we were to leave when we did. My father was a prominent psychiatrist and a published author, and intellectuals were viewed with suspicion by the security forces at the time. Although the circumstances of my family's departure were multi-layered, my father had experienced and witnessed enough to know it was a good time to leave the country.

**What in your opinion, are the most important elements of good writing?**

I don't have any formal creative writing training and am tempted to look up what creative writing professors have to say about this!

As a reader, I consider good writing to be any story that transports me, teaching me something along the way. Complicated ideas, emotions, or story lines that are conveyed simply also qualify as good writing for me.

As a writer, I find that writing from the heart usually gives me rich material to work from. Once I have a rough first draft, it's time to revise. This is where structure, logic, and coherence need to be addressed (and where more new ideas may emerge). Relentlessly trimming the "fat" improves my writing, too. If a scene doesn't move the story forward, it needs to go. Finally, I try to pick the best possible words to create simple, clear sentences.

**Describe your writing space and take us through your process. Any interesting quirks?**

Given how long it took me to write the book, I have had the pleasure of occupying various writing spaces: cafés, the dining room table while the kids are at school, a friend's borrowed cabin in Maine, a hotel room with a desk. Luckily, I can often tune out whatever is going on around me if I'm wearing headphones, listening to music. I love listening to music, especially during the early stages—it feeds my imagination!

We recently moved into a bigger place in Brooklyn and, for the first time, I have my own office. It's a narrow space, but it has a window that looks out onto a ginkgo tree. I usually light a candle and leave my cell phone outside the room. My plants, my books, and my dog keep me company. I prefer writing in the morning. Sometimes I have to trick myself into sitting at my desk.

I tell myself all I have to do is write one page, or review only what I wrote the day before. Or, if researching, I have to look up just that one article, or if revising, go through just one edited chapter. Next thing I know, I have been fooled and am immersed in the project once again.

Which books or authors have most influenced your life? Have you ever read something that made you feel or think differently about fiction? Did a particular story or novel influence the way you wrote *ON A NIGHT OF A THOUSAND STARS*?

I'm drawn to books that read as if someone is telling me a story out loud. The writing flows in an uncomplicated, conversational (or confessional!) way. Elena Ferrante, Sigrid Nunez, Kazuo Ishiguro, to name a few.

I equally love reading books so beautifully written that after one or two pages I may pause and meditate on what I just read. Toni Morrison, Marilynne Robinson and Tracy K. Smith come to mind.

These powerful books have expanded my thinking on fiction: Anna Burns's *Milkman*, George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo*, and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

I grew up reading North American authors like S. E. Hinton, Judy Blume, Kurt Vonnegut, and John Irving, but I also discovered at a young age in my father's library Latin American authors like Gabriel García Márquez, Ernesto Sabato, Julio Cortázar, and Jorge Luis Borges. Reading authors from around the world reminds me time and again how much we have a shared human experience in our joys, suffering, struggles, and love.

Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* influenced the way I approached writing a novel with interplay across two different time periods.

What book do you wish everyone would read?

I can't think of just one book—I love and carry many within me!—so here are a few suggestions: Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* and her more recent novel, *A Long Petal of the Sea*; Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*; Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*; and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*.

Ultimately, I hope young people will, at one point or another, come across a book that ignites a love of reading for the rest of their lives.

What do you hope readers take away from this novel?

Readers, even those familiar with the history, will hopefully gain new or further insight into this tragic chapter in Argentina's history. My book is a work of fiction, but it was inspired by real people I have met or read about who suffered unspeakable tragedies at the hands of a cruel regime. I have great admiration for those who survived and for those who seek out truth and a measure of justice. I hope I have honored them through this story.

# JUSTICE FROM A WINDOWLESS BASEMENT IN BUENOS AIRES

## (HOW I CAME TO WRITE THIS NOVEL)

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In 1995, a former commander of Argentina's Air Force publicly confessed to drugging political prisoners and throwing them out of airplanes during the country's 1976-83 military dictatorship. Thousands of people, known as the "desaparecidos," were kidnapped, tortured and killed during this period, but the military and security forces went largely unpunished. I had moved back to Buenos Aires and was working as a television producer when the commander's confession hit the newsstands.

Much had been written about the students, working-class people, political activists, professionals and intellectuals who were forcibly disappeared. Little was known, however, about the sons and daughters left behind. Familiares, a Human Rights organization, had recently granted a space to a group of young people to meet on Thursdays. They called themselves HIJOS, an acronym for "Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice Against Forgetting and Silence."

When I was a child in 1970s Buenos Aires, my father, a psychiatrist, was secretly approached by government authorities to examine political prisoners. He turned down the offer. He was also a writer, and his editor was disappeared, potentially putting my father at risk. Moreover, psychiatrists and psychotherapists would be targeted during the dictatorship. Fortunately, we were able to freely leave the country before the coup d'état. So, I wasn't quite sure what drove me to attend an HIJOS. meeting. But, when I entered the windowless basement of the Familiares building one Thursday night with a vague explanation, I was invited to stay.

Everyone went around the room introducing themselves. Some spoke confidently. "My name is Nicolas, I'm 19 and my mother is a desaparecida." Others spoke in voices conveying pain. "I'm Malena. My parents were held captive in ESMA." ESMA, formerly known as the Higher School of the Mechanics of the Navy, housed the most notorious clandestine torture center. When it was my turn, I said I wanted to learn more about what had happened to the people of my generation affected by the so-called Dirty War.

As the meeting came to end, my reason for being there became clear. I would accompany these sons and daughters, learn their stories and, if possible, record them. Those I approached were eager to talk. Most had grown up without ever sharing their experiences. Some had lived with false identities and been forced to conceal the fates of their parents from friends and teachers. Others would tell me that, for years, their grandparents lied to them about their parents' whereabouts, hoping to shield them from the horror. All but one person wanted their real names to be used. As one hijo told me, "It would be awful to think that we still have to hide from who we are and where we come from."



In the time I spent with the group, I joined them in protests and travelled to the first national meeting of HIJOS. in Cordoba province. It was around this time, I decided I would record video footage and make a documentary.

As the group gained prominence, the Argentine secret service started making itself visible to the group. Some members began receiving anonymous, threatening phone calls. A founding member of HIJOS. had her apartment broken into. One day, after my camera crew filmed an *escrache* – a form of protest that consists of publicly confronting, exposing and condemning a past perpetrator of human rights violations who has gone unpunished— a green Ford Falcon, the ubiquitous car of the 1970s death squads, slowly followed my producer and me as we walked, parking across the street from my apartment building.

I hadn't planned on leaving my beloved childhood city ever again until I met my future husband and we moved to New York in the early 2000s. My documentary remained unfinished, but the stories stayed with me. They will never leave me.

One morning, I woke up to the remnants of a dream about a young woman, the daughter of Argentines, who grows up in New York and, on a visit to Buenos Aires, uncovers a family secret. That dream would eventually become my debut novel *ON A NIGHT OF A THOUSAND STARS*.

# Beef Empanadas

SERVES 20



## INGREDIENTS

- 2 tbsp. olive oil
- 1 lb ground beef
- 1 medium white onion, finely chopped
- 2 tbsp. ground cumin
- 1 tbsp. sweet paprika
- 2 tsp. dried oregano
- 2 packages of empanada discs (for baking not frying) at room temperature. Goya makes good discs.

*Note: My father, Anibal, liked adding 1/4 cup raisins, 2 broken up hard boiled eggs and a handful of pitted chopped green olives to the filling.*

## COOKING INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Add a little olive oil to a shallow pot and add onion. Cook until golden. Add beef and cook until browned. Add the spices and stir.
2. Arrange discs on parchment paper on a flat surface.
3. Place a spoonful of filling in middle of disc. If you want my father's version, add a bit of the extra ingredients on top of the filling.
4. Brush a little water around the brim of the disc. Then fold up the disc and pinch with fingers to close the dough around the filling.
5. Bake empanadas, rotating halfway through until golden brown. Around 20 minutes.

*\*You can make cheese empanadas with the same type of empanada discs. Add your favorite shredded hard cheese instead of beef and follow instructions above. Extra ingredients include: grilled sliced onions, chopped tomatoes, basil.*

# Anibal's Chimichurri

## INGREDIENTS

- 12 oz jar (mason jar)
- 3 oz red wine vinegar
- 3 oz. Olive or vegetable oil
- Plenty of fresh (finely chopped) parsley.  
\*You may substitute with two tbsp of dry parsley.  
If so, add a tsp oregano, and soak spices first in  
3 oz water.
- 1 teaspoon black pepper

Mix ingredients in the mason jar and salt to taste.

For spicy version, add 1 tsp crushed red pepper flakes and/or one minced garlic clove. Let sit for a couple of hours before serving.

## CHORIPAN

Slice and open a fresh crunchy baguette. Cut in half lengthwise a grilled sweet italian sausage and put on bread. Drizzle chimichurri over the sausage and enjoy!



# ON A NIGHT OF A THOUSAND STARS

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## PLAYLIST

"Hasta Siempre" by Veronica Rapella

"El Dia Que Me Quieras" by Carlos Gardel

"The Morning After" by Maureen McGovern (theme song from The Poseidon Adventure)

"Cancion Para Mi Muerte" by Sui Generis

"En El País de La Libertad" by Leon Gieco

"Como La Cigarra" by Mercedes Sosa

"Sueño Con Serpientes" by Silvio Rodriguez

"El Anillo del Capitán Beto" by Invisible (Luis Alberto Spinetta)

"Los Dinosaurios" by Charly Garcia

"Yo Vengo A Ofrecer Mi Corazón" by Fito Paez

"Viernes 3 a.m." by Seru Girán

"Te Llevo Para Que Me Llevés" by Gustavo Cerati

"Sin Documentos" by Los Rodriguez

"Metador" by Los Fabulos Cadillacs

"Bohemian Rhapsody" by Queen

"Planeador" by Soda Stereo

"A Cada Hombre A Cada Mujer" by Pedro Aznar

"Ayer" by Daniel Melingo

"Gaucho" by Gustavo Santaolalla

"Vuelvo Al Sur" by Astor Piazzola with Roberto Goyeneche

# AUTHOR RECOMMENDS:

(AFTER YOU READ ON A NIGHT OF A THOUSAND STARS)

## MOVIES

The Official Story  
The Secret in their Eyes  
Night of the Pencils

## BOOKS

Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number by **Jacobo Timmerman**  
The Little School by **Alicia Portnoy**  
Searching for Life by **Rita Arditti**



# ON A NIGHT OF A THOUSAND STARS

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## TOUR GUIDE

### BUENOS AIRES

#### Café Tortoni

Historic literary café where Professor Torres invites Paloma for a coffee.  
Avenida de Mayo 825

Facultad de Derecho UBA (The Universidad de Buenos Aires Law School)  
Avenida Figueroa Alcorta 2263

\*Café de las Artes is fictionalized but students do go to nearby cafés to study.

#### Plaza de Mayo

The oldest public square is located in the city's microcentro. The square is surrounded by the Casa Rosada (Presidential Palace), the Cabildo (Historic town Hall), and the Metropolitan Cathedral. The Madres and Abuelas march around the monument, pirámide de Mayo on Thursdays.

#### Casa Rosada

The Presidential Palace where Santiago's ambassadorial appointment ceremony takes place.  
Balcarce 50

#### San Telmo (neighborhood)

It's the oldest barrio in the city. Franco and Paloma watch the soccer match at a café/bar and then go to a tango joint. The places are fictionalized but these are fun to check out:

Bar Britanico: Avenida Brasil 399

Bar Sur: Estados Unidos 299

#### Pizzeria Guerrin

Pizza restaurant where Franco takes Paloma after their visit with Soledad.  
Avenida Corrientes 1368

#### Art Gallery

Santiago and Paloma visit one of the various art galleries on Calle Arroyo before his press conference.  
Calle Arroyo (neighborhood of Plaza San Martin)

#### Hotel Plaza

Hotel where Santiago's press conference takes place.  
Florida 1005

# ON A NIGHT OF A THOUSAND STARS

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## TOUR GUIDE CONTINUED

### Cafe La Paz (closed)

Valentina takes Santiago to this café on the night they first meet. It's closed now but walk by to see the windows where people could lean out and talk to passers-by.

Avenida Corrientes 1593

### Sheraton Hotel

Hotel where Valentina and Maximo witness a student protest.

Avenida San Martin 1225

### La Biela

This café in the chic neighborhood of Recoleta is where Santiago proposes to Lila and, later, in the 1990s, where Paloma and her parents have breakfast. The Café is near the Larreas' apartment.

Avenida Quintana 596

### Florida Garden Café

Santiago sits at the counter and listens to the news on the morning of the coup.

Florida 899

### Happening Restaurant

The setting where Santiago runs into Grace and, later, Pedro is inspired by this fashionable restaurant of the 1970s.

Avenida Costanera Rafael Obligado 7030

### ESMA

The former naval academy housed the most notorious clandestine detention center in the country. It is now a museum, Espacio Memoria y Derechos Humanos.

Avenida del Libertador 8159

### Confiteria Richmond (closed)

Known as La Richmond, it was a literary café and tearoom where Pedro and Santiago have a coffee the morning after running into each other at the riverside restaurant.

Calle Florida 468

## LOCATIONS OUTSIDE OF BUENOS AIRES

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### Cordoba City

Valentina's hometown. The Cosquín folk music festival, featured in the book, is held near the city.

# ON A NIGHT OF A THOUSAND STARS

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## TOUR GUIDE CONTINUED

### San Martin de los Andes

This city in northwest Patagonia is where Paloma and Franco travel to in search of answers. They drive along El Camino de los Siete Lagos.

### San Antonio de Areco

This quaint colonial town near Buenos Aires is worth a visit for a taste of the campo and gaucho life.

### Cariló

I loosely base Santiago and Valentina's getaway weekend on this beach town area along the Atlantic Coast.

### Punta del Este, Uruguay

An international beach destination. The Larrea family has a summer home in La Barra.

## NEW YORK

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### El Gauchito

This Argentine restaurant and shop in Corona, Queens is where Santiago would have taken Paloma to buy empanadas, steaks and other meats as well as imported Argentine goods like yerba mate, dulce de leche and alfajores.

Buenos Aires Bakery  
Jackson Heights, Queens

## NEW JERSEY

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### Dulce De Leche Bakery

This bakery also offers empanadas and other Argentine foods.  
376 Central Avenue., Jersey City, NJ (several locations in NJ)

### Argentina Bakery

The bakery includes a shop where you can buy gourd and straws for mate tea.  
1611 Bergentine Ave., Union City, NJ

## MIAMI

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Buenos Aires Bakery and Café  
7134 Collins Ave., Miami Beach