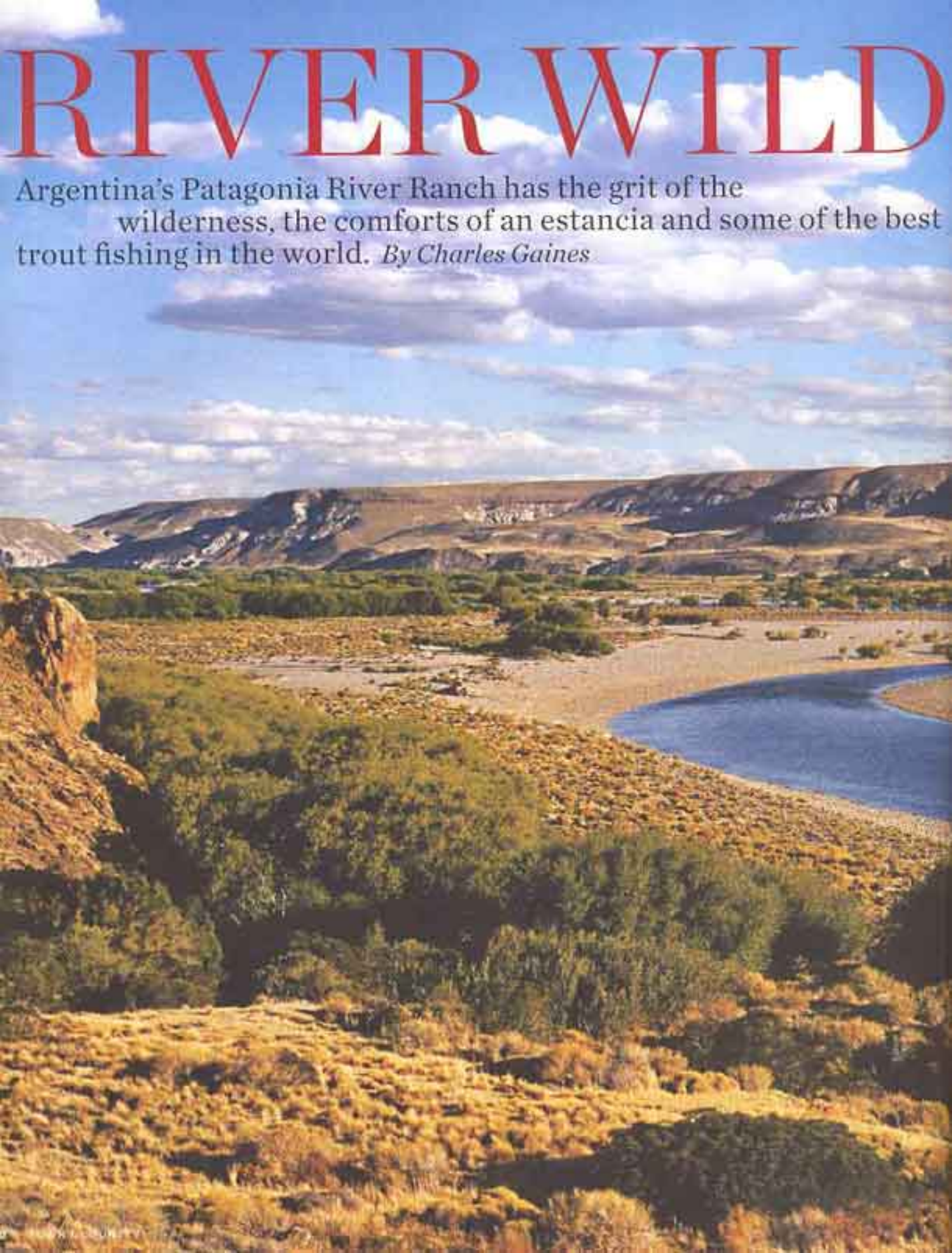
RIVER WILD

Argentina's Patagonia River Ranch has the grit of the wilderness, the comforts of an estancia and some of the best trout fishing in the world. *By Charles Gaines*



Situated on five hundred acres, the ranch boasts a mile of riverfront.

Photographs by *Matthew Hranek*

IN 1993, on her first trip to the northern Patagonia region of Argentina, Edie Gangwer ate a few berries from a yellow-flowered *calafate* bush. A fishing guide had given them to her and told her that, according to Mapuche Indian legend, if she ate them she would be unable to forget Patagonia and would return again and again. For three years she and her husband, Ken, did just that, taking extended trout-fishing expeditions throughout the area. In 1996 Edie fished for a week with Carlos Trisciuzzi, a well-known Patagonian guide and outfitter. At the time, she had burned out on selling real estate back in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and was looking for something new to do with her life, something that would more fully involve her passions for trout fishing and hospitality. She told Carlos she was thinking about buying land in Argentina or Chile and opening . . . well, a fishing lodge.

Edie and Ken had barely arrived back in Wyoming when Carlos called. The perfect piece of land on the Chimehuin, the grandfather of Argentine trout rivers, was up for sale, but someone else was interested in it. Could they come back right away? A few days later, after walking the land with Carlos, Edie and Ken wandered down to the river to talk things over. Their walk led them to one of a number of ravishingly fishy-looking trout pools included in the mile of riverfront that went with the five-hundred-acre property. The conversation was brief. Edie said, "Let's do it." Ken's answer, "Okeydokey," is now the name of that trout pool at Patagonia River Ranch, the gem of a fishing lodge that Edie opened for business in 1999, proving, if nothing else, the longevity of Mapuche legend.

Lying close to the Andes, some eight hundred miles southwest of Buenos Aires, northern Patagonia is a profoundly seductive country of rugged mountains, beech and cypress forests,

plains and pristine lakes and rivers. Vast, empty and dramatic, it is Montana but more so and seventy-five years ago, with a bit of Switzerland thrown in. Its two principal population centers are San Martin de los Andes, a beautiful lake and mountain town reminiscent of Chamonix, France; and Junin de los Andes, which is small, dusty and without airs. For more than fifty years, Junin has been the hub of South American trout fishing, with ready access to as many world-class rivers as any town on earth.

A two-hour flight from Buenos Aires delivers you to Chapelco Airport, located between San Martin and Junin. With its airy, blond-log construction and its crowds of tanned and merry sporting people dressed in gaucho boots, silver belt buckles, berets and scarves, it is my favorite airport in the world. Arriving there with me on a pluperfect early-March day were my wife, Patricia; our six-month-pregnant daughter, Greta; our friend Virginia Scruggs; and her daughter, Lizzie. Charlie's Angels, as they had named themselves, in my honor. A high-spirited, substantially luggaged group,

Clockwise from bottom right: From the antler chandeliers in the dining room to the stone fireplace in the great room, the atmosphere at the ranch is rustic yet refined. Owner Edie Gangwer displays an impressive catch. Opposite: The lodge is an oasis in the wilderness.

"The rivers were wide and saucy, with deep pools where the air-clear water went from jade to cobalt."

they were prepared to enjoy anything Patagonia had to offer.

Edie met us at the baggage-claim area with Carlos Trisciuzzi, who was then the manager and head guide at Patagonia River Ranch. Divorced from Ken, Edie is pretty, petite, natty and direct—a walking advertisement for the health and beauty benefits of the stylish sporting life. On the twenty-five-minute drive to the ranch—into the soaring tan-and-olive hill country south of Junin, with its gliding eagles and flocks of Magellan geese, its gauchos herding horses and veins of Blue Ribbon-trout water—she filled us in on what it was like to be an American woman owning and operating a fishing lodge in Argentina. Though it had not been done without difficulty, she said, she believed she had created what she had set out to create: a restorative retreat of peace and pleasure. This, the Angels and I discovered over the next four days, was a considerable understatement.

It is often said by people who don't know any better, including my younger self, that any fishing lodge where the fish are hungry and you're not is a good one. These days I'm pickier than that. At the least, I also want a beautiful location, interesting things to do for non-fishers (since I am married to one) and a few creature comforts, such as good beds and showers. Other amenities, like those found in abundance at Patagonia River Ranch, are extras—but they are the extras that define the difference between lodges where you can simply fish comfortably and marvelous places where there is also good fishing.

Designed by a San Martin architect and built of native logs and stone, the ranch's six-year-old lodge, barn, horse stable, garage and guide cabin don't so much occupy the landscape as marry with it, achieving an eye-pleasing and comforting intimacy with each other. To help bring about that marriage, Carlos supervised planting the cattle-grazed property with two hundred acres of wild native pampas grass and more than fifty thousand poplars, willows and birch. Along with broad expanses of lawn and Edie's beds of roses, daisies and lavender, those plantings have turned the grounds around the ranch into an oasis of bright bloom and fragrant shade.

The handsome lodge building sleeps up to eight guests in four well-appointed bedrooms, each with a tile-and-marble bath featuring oversized towels and bathrobes. The big stone

Below: On your never-ending quest for trout, you might choose to take a daylong float on one of the nearby rivers. Opposite: A casting lesson from one of the intrepid, experienced guides at the ranch.

"Vast, empty and dramatic, Patagonia is Montana but more so and seventy-five years ago."

There are numerous opportunities for adventure at the ranch, including long rides through the surrounding hills.

PATAGONIA ESSENTIALS

WHEN TO GO: Patagonia River Ranch is open from the second weekend in November through the end of April, when the climate is comparable to that of the Northern Hemisphere from May through October. My favorite month is March, for the dependably good weather and low water.

GETTING THERE: Fly to Buenos Aires, then catch one of the daily two-hour flights on Aerolineas Argentinas to Chapelco Airport near San Martin de los Andes. The ranch staff will pick you up at the airport.

WHAT TO BRING: Gore-Tex breathable waders, wading shoes, rain gear and polarized sunglasses. The ranch provides a good list of suggested flies and other fishing equipment. The sun can be intense, so pack a hat and sunscreen. Dress at the ranch is casual, and temperatures during the season are similar to those in the Rocky Mountains.

WHAT TO DO: The ranch is an ideal place to learn to fly-fish for trout. But if you are determined not to fish, there is still plenty to keep you occupied, including horseback riding, hiking, and shopping in the lovely village of San Martin. C.G.

fireplace, mounted stag head and leather armchairs in the great room, the tile floors, antique rugs and sheepskins, the fly-tying bench and framed photos of anglers and trout, strike a balance in ambience between unfussy comfort and Ralph Lauren chic that many high-end sporting lodges aim at but few hit.

Our days began in the big, light-filled dining room at eight o'clock over fresh-squeezed juice and coffee, cereals and fruit, and scrambled eggs and ham cooked by the talented Claudio Abraham. Breakfast was followed by as pleasant a range of options, to my taste, as can be imagined in this Vale of Tears: half-day or shorter horseback rides at the ranch on Edie's excellent horses or full-day rides—with a gaucho-prepared barbecue, called an *asado*, for lunch—on a close-by 22,000-acre estancia; hiking jaunts with picnics to two magnificent national parks; trips to the crafts, leather and chocolate shops in San Martin; or simply loafing and reading in one of a number of rope hammocks hung around the grounds while you wait to see what delightful dishes Claudio whips up for lunch.

Did I mention trout fishing? At Patagonia River Ranch you can wade the property's mile of Chimehuin or the nearby Malleo, arguably the world's finest dry-fly river; take a daylong float on the Chimehuin, the Collón Cura, the Caleufu, the Alumine; or even take a deluxe one- or two-night camping float trip on one of those rivers.

In fly-fishing aptitude, the Angels ranged from expert (Greta) to beginner (Virginia and Lizzie), but all of them equally loved our eight-hour float trips on the Chimehuin and Collón Cura—even Patricia, who has contentedly sketched and bird-watched her way down hundreds of rivers with me during forty years of marriage without once wetting a line.

And what was not to love? The days were brilliantly clear, warm and windless; our guides, Hugo and Sebastian, were skillful, charming and endlessly patient with flies caught in willows. The rafts they rowed were fitted at bow and stern with ›136

Exploring the unspoiled landscape by boat. Opposite: An enticing *asado*, or barbecue.

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comfortable seats and standing braces, and carried plenty of drinks and snacks as well as the components for shore lunches—wine, salads, sausages and cheeses, stuffed-chicken-breast roulade and veal Milanese. These were served on carved wooden plates and eaten in folding chairs beneath the bankside willows. The rivers were wide and saucy, providing us with an invigorating mix of long, smooth glides, plunges, rapids and deep pools whose air-clear water went from jade to cobalt. They ran through gorgeous country where red deer, geese, hawks, eagles and condors were our only company. And trout, of course (up to twenty or thirty a day for Greta, who is fond of numbers and has the angling skills to produce them): hard-fighting rainbows and browns averaging sixteen to eighteen inches, with a few each day topping twenty, caught on a satisfying combination of dry flies, nymphs and streamers. Fishing, in short, that dreams and memories are made of.

Or partially made of, I should say, because good as it is (and in very few places in the world is it any better) the trout fishing at northern Patagonia's great angling estancias is only a part of their magical appeal. From twenty years of frequenting them, I remember, as vividly as any day's fishing, a daylong ride into the mountains for close-up views of condors, a pickup game of polo, a hike to a field of wildflowers; and it is as much those things I dream of—along with the good Malbecs and the food and the beauty of the landscape—when I think of those places.

At Patagonia River Ranch there were the early-morning walks I took, flushing coveys of quail and flocks of spectacled ducks off the pond. There was the grazing red stag; the golden retriever puppy, Tango, lounging in a flower bed; and Edie's palomino mare on the lawn, nursing her day-old colt. There was the *asado* one night with a whole butterflied lamb grilling on a vertical spit in front of a banked fire; the best empanadas I've ever eaten; and the Angels, Edie, Carlos and a visiting estancia owner all dressed in gaucho finery. And, on the other nights, there were Claudio's superb renditions of venison tenderloin and homemade ravioli with morels, eaten in the dining room with flowers floating in vases centered on white linen tablecloths and, in the air, the unmistakable hum of very happy campers.

Those will be some of the *calafate*-berry recollections that reel me back to that place as strongly as the twenty-six-inch brown I caught while wading one of the ranch's home pools with Hugo, and sharing a boat with my radiantly pregnant daughter (who's also my favorite fishing buddy) as she whooped her way down the upper Chimehuin, hauling in one big rainbow after another, well under the spell of the Mapuche legend herself.