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The Spoils of War

Argentina's Bariloche has a past, and present, like no other ski town.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MARTY MCLENNAN

Erich Priebke, el carnicero de Bariloche, didn't make kosher sausage. Not a big deal to most, for he was good at what he did, specializing in carving up quality Argentine cuts: bife de chorizo, flank steak sausage and, of course, his classic blutwurst—a chunky intestine filled with coagulated pork blood, coated with big chunks of lard—that was said to bring you back to the old country. Besides there were few Jews living in his neighbourhood.

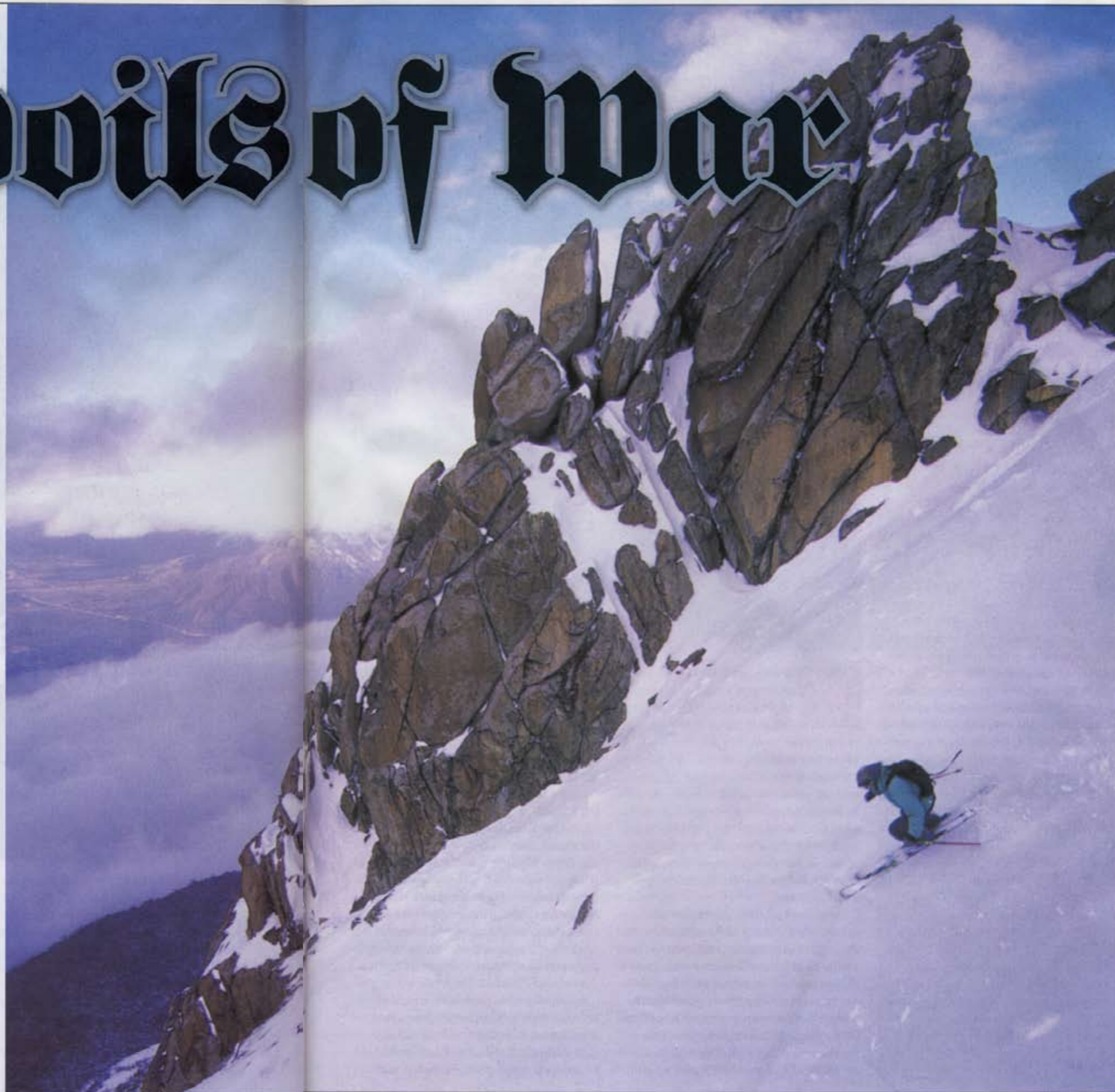
Like many of the wave of colonists to Argentinean Patagonia in the late 1940s, Priebke was of Teutonic stock. And likewise, the outpost of Bariloche, located on the 41st parallel south, just kilometres from the Chilean border, began taking the form of an alpine town—soon to be labeled as Argentina's Switzerland. The designation was apt, for the snowy Andean community soon began producing chocolate, the locals drank lots of beer and wine, and the townsite was ringed with lovely lakes and snow-capped peaks that were perfect for skiing. Furthermore, just about everyone spoke German.

This was according to plan. For Argentina's President, General Perón, after declaring war on the Axis at the end of WWII was also quick to make an agreement with its leaders. He would open the doors wide for Nazi immigration. The deal suited both parties just fine. Helped by heavyweights like Franco and the Vatican, the high-ranking SS officials, with pockets full of ill-gotten booty, could escape their war-ravished economy and the conditions sprung upon them at Casablanca and Yalta, not to mention those

that followed in Nuremberg.

Conversely, the immigrants would be useful to solve a couple of Perón's dilemmas. More than gaining millions of dollars' worth of much-needed gold and currency to kick-start his national industries, the General was desperate for some technical know-how, and in the 1940s nobody knew like the Germans. Besides, Argentina had its own enemies just across the Andes, where it shares a 4,000-km-long, hotly disputed border with Chile. So Bariloche, set smack centre in the conflict zone, was the perfect first line of defence for Perón and lost enough from the world's eyes for the Nazis. The only cost to the South American dictator was getting rid of a local Indian population which, to be frightfully honest, he didn't care for anyway.

So the Nazis came as they could: on cargo ships, in U-boats and even in commercial flights. In total, the Argentinean dictator traded thousands of passports for piles of German war booty. Mind you, it wasn't any old Nazi who could afford the escape. Turns out that only those with the highest rank and degree of infamy would make the transatlantic adventure: death doctor Joseph Mengele; SS-Ober-



sturmbannführer Karl Adolf Eichmann, head of the Department for Jewish Affairs in the Gestapo; Wilhelm Mohnke, Chief of Hitler's personal guard; and, if we accept the research of local historian and author Abel Basti, even a facially remodelled Adolf Hitler and his mistress Eva Braun (it's a widely accepted historical fact that their remains were never found after their suicide).

On arrival, the newcomers were quick to make their surroundings feel like home. A-frame Tyrolean constructions shot up alongside Deutscher Klubs and German schools. The government pitched in with the construction of a lovely town centre, built in national-park style, and the first stretch of paved road in all of Patagonia. The ever-working Aryans even began replacing the local coihues and cypresses with old-world trees. And since the town had its share of able hunters and outdoorsmen, and arms were available in no small quantity, they also introduced wild game for sport into these imported Bavarian forests and prize trout into the glacier-fed lakes.

The development of the Club Andino Bariloche brought new activity to the community. Founded by mountaineer, spy and leader of Argentina's Hitler's Youth program Otto Meiling, the alpinists were aided by high-ranking Nazi officials like Frederick Lantschner, ex-governor of Nazi Tyrol, and the highly decorated pilot Hans Ulrich Rudel, creating mountain refuges and a network of trails throughout the vigorous mountain passes. The labyrinth of paths and shelters subsequently provided excellent hunting grounds and retreats, not to mention idyllic locations for escape, hiding and even the odd political murder.

Little Bariloche, with its bustling population of 10,000, became even more utopian in the late 1940s when under the eye of Swiss ski champion Hans Nöbl, the first lift sprang up on the northeastern flanks of the 2,388-metre Cerro Catedral on the slopes of what would become South America's finest ski area. Here, far from the world's view, the community was able to rebuild and enjoy all the comforts of home in a stunning setting for decades.

But when the Policía Federal Argentina knocked on Erich Priebke's door in 1994 with deportation orders, it was brought to the world's attention that there are some places and pasts that are never far or long enough away. For the quiet Barilochean butcher had not always been an ordinary strive-thrive-and-be-home-by-five meat-carving immigrant. Some 50 years earlier the SS-Captain was better known as a member of the Gestapo, an official translator between the Führer and Mussolini, and responsible for a massacre of 335 Italians in a cave just outside Rome.



U nlike the former Nazis, who were looking for escape, Les Manley chose Bariloche for its skiing. A seasoned Canadian pro-mountain guide and jibber, he's been following the winter season like the Grateful Dead, yo-yoing south from Whistler whenever the snow gets too granulated, and back again when the Andean sun melts the South American winter. When I had asked him what drove him to the southern tip of the Americas every Canadian spring, he just shrugged his shoulders and smiled in his characteristically understated way. "You'll see."

He picked Bariloche since its Cathedral Mountain had just tripled its terrain to more than 600 skiable hectares—the most in the southern hemisphere. Combined with one of the most consistent snowpacks in Argentinean Patagonia—some three to six metres annually—the ski area now tops almost all lists. Over a couple of Quilmes, a national beer that the ex-pats affectionately mispronounce as "Kill-Me's" in a local pub, I meet up with

old-hats at the Southern Cone experience, Les and ski tour operator Mark Lasseter, for a crash course on Argentinean ski culture.

The first thing that strikes me is the town's complete cosmopolitanism. While akin to Banff in ambience, on a quick view the city offers much, much more. For starters, it's 15 times the size and hundreds of times more tropical with its hordes of funky looking Latinos banging their drums and dancing in the streets. Every winter Bariloche's local population triples in size with hedonistic skiing and shopping fanatics looking for fresh turns and somewhere to spend their money. And there is—chocolate and homemade ice-cream shops, pubs, spas, wonderful restaurants, youth hostels and mini bistros serving micro brews and imports for après ski line the avenue.

Our window table overlooks the pedestrian action on Moreno Street, which proves more catwalk than sidewalk. Packed with scantily clad, six-foot-tall Argentinean and Brazilian beauties and their hip and handsome male

counterparts all strutting their stuff, the fashion zooms by at breakneck speed. The scene makes obvious that the town's Nazi past ended long ago, and what remains is one of South America's favourite mountain resort areas. Here, near the end of the world, the menu of the day offers nothing but epicurean delights.

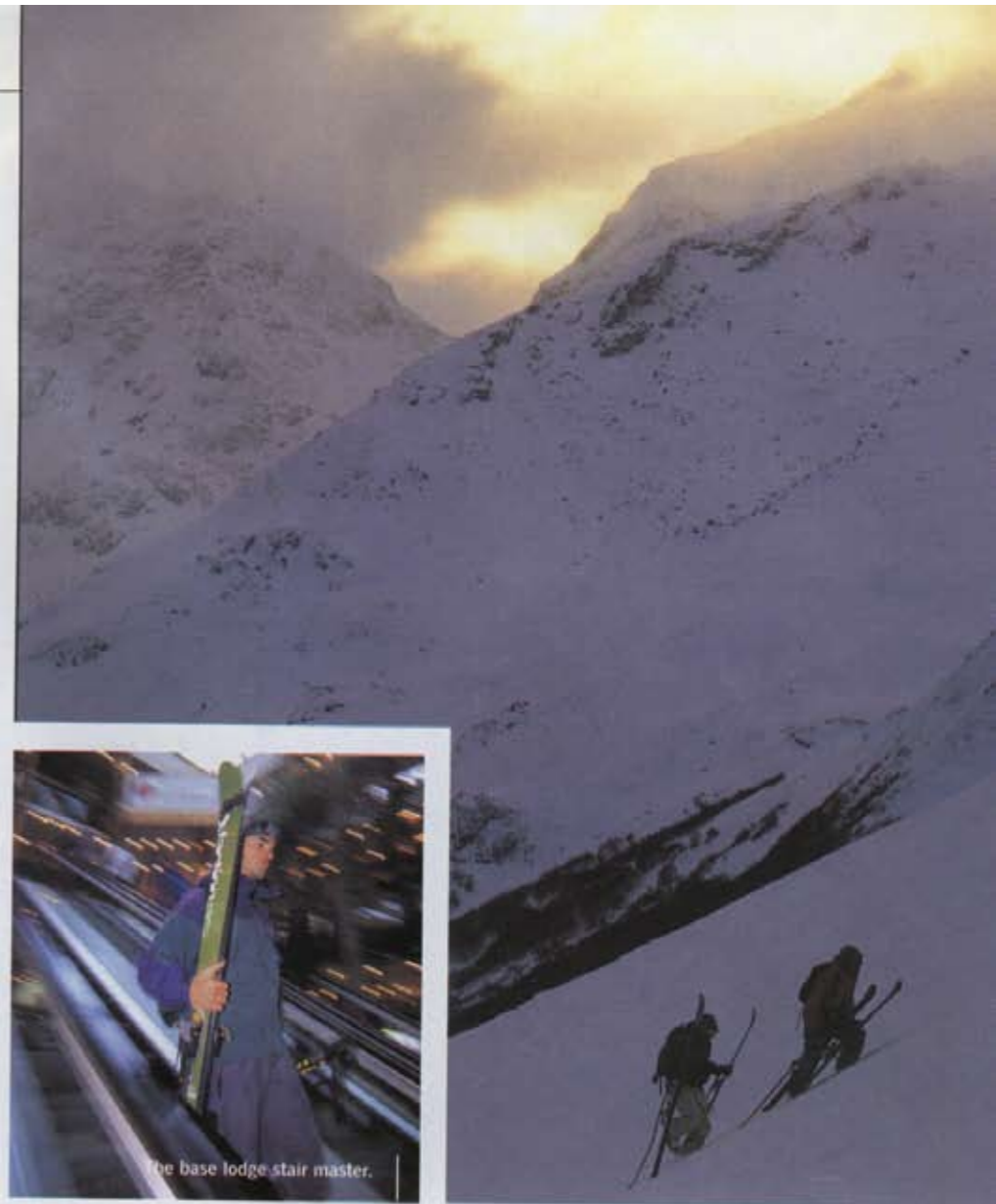
And the reason is simple. Since Argentina suffered its corralito (economic crisis) in late 2001, Southern Cone skiing has been the best deal on the planet. With the peso's 300 per cent devaluation, Argentina happens to be the best of all—good bottles of wine and champagne at anywhere from Cdn\$3-5, gourmet meals for two with all the trimmings at less than 20 bucks, plus affordable accommodation. And if you're into the party scene, some very tropical nights that are, shall we say, priceless.

But before we head for the Argentinean nightlife, we've got some skiing to do. So we file into the packed half-hour ski bus ride from Bariloche that winds by the impressive Lake Nahuel Huapi to the ski area. Right away you can sense the radicalization of the ski experience. While innumerable ski schools, a dozen competing rental shops (many with some of the most up-to-date equipment available) and a wide choice of restaurants cover the base area as expected, the mother of all differences is the main chalet.

Complete with plastic palm trees, live band and a billion places to buy everything from the latest gear to Bariloche's finest chocolates, the main chalet is essentially a multi-floored shopping mall plunked smack centre of the ski area. Indeed, the first lift we take up is a flashy escalator through the faux-jungle of last-minute buys that takes us to the main lift of the area—the high-speed six-pack.

The first lesson of the day is that South Americans have a different sense about waiting for the ride up. Forget the pleasantries; lift lines turn into a bloody battle where only the strong survive. And as we rise out of the fog to the midstation, the slopes, likewise, give us northerners a taste of something new. Wide-open, European-style carving is Cathedral's specialty. From the midstation up, a series of giant undulating bowls punctuate the scene with nothing but the pinnacle pricks overhead pointing skyward and stunning views of the lakes below.

While the streets of Bariloche are all party, here on the slopes of Cathedral it's easy to see the vestiges of Argentina's lasting feud with its Andean neighbours. Legions of fatigue-clad soldiers go marching up and snowplowing down the beginner slopes in formation. Obvious to everyone, but them, is that the



worst possible thing for all would be the breakout of war. For if they can barely ski down a perfectly groomed trail, imagine them fighting it out in the backcountry! With similar style, there are also armies of school kids from all over Argentina learning to ski on their graduation year school trips. But rather than their serious-faced military counterparts, the young are, as at home, brightly coloured, giggling, screaming and skiing recklessly.

After a couple of runs, we decide to get away from the madhouse and head to the peaks near Punta Princesa. Cathedral's newest and least-touched terrain. Here, with Patagonia stretched out in all directions, we stand atop a multitude of fall lines complete with weeks of snow stashed in all directions. Alone and far from the multitudes, Les smiles as we dive into a forgotten couloir. The 20-hour plane ride (albeit, one with only an hour time zone change) starts to make sense, and it's not difficult to understand what really moves those like Les Manley to ski the Southern Cone. With all

the snow in the world, the best wines and chocolates, succulent 12-ounce steaks for dirt cheap and an unforgettable party scene going on 24/7, what more could you want from a summer-to-winter holiday? ■

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