



# THE GODFATHER

PAULINO ARIAS HAS BEEN PREACHING SUSTAINABLE FLY-FISHING IN ARGENTINE PATAGONIA SINCE THE LAST TROUT HE CAUGHT FOR FOOD NEARLY SIX DECADES AGO  
BY JUSTIN C. WITT

MATT JONES PHOTO



Paulino Arias taught himself how to tie by taking apart flies he procured and reassembling them.

**W**hen Paulino Arias started school in the tiny ranching town of Rio Pico, Argentina, fewer than half the kids in attendance owned a pair of shoes. Granted, that was in 1940, but the town hasn't changed much since. Even today, more residents own horses than cars.

One thing that has changed is that people now travel from all corners of the Earth to chase Rio Pico's fish, and the money that comes with them has paid for a lot of shoes and waders, and has turned a generation of Patagonian kids into guides and conservationists. It was a transition that took some time and owes much to Paulino, who at 87 is a local legend and a strong advocate for conservation and sustainable fly-fishing in the region. I think of him as a godfather for his dedication to and care for the fishery.

**PAULINO'S STORY BEGAN WHEN HE WAS 10**, and his Uncle Narciso introduced him to hook-and-line fishing. Back then, that's all they had. The hooks were made of wire, the lines of braided horse tail. In autumn, the two would ride up into the network of lakes and rivers that surround the town, camping and fishing for days. The brook trout they caught were descendants of a single stocking by the ministry of agriculture in 1912 with roe from the United States. Rainbows and browns were introduced later. These fish slipped into a perfectly vacant niche in the region's ecosystem, and the burlap sacks full of trout that Paulino and his uncle tied across their horses and handed out to their hungry neighbors back in town would have left any American who saw them gawking. But in those days, there were no Americans on the rivers to gape.

The methods and tools evolved with the appearance of monofilament

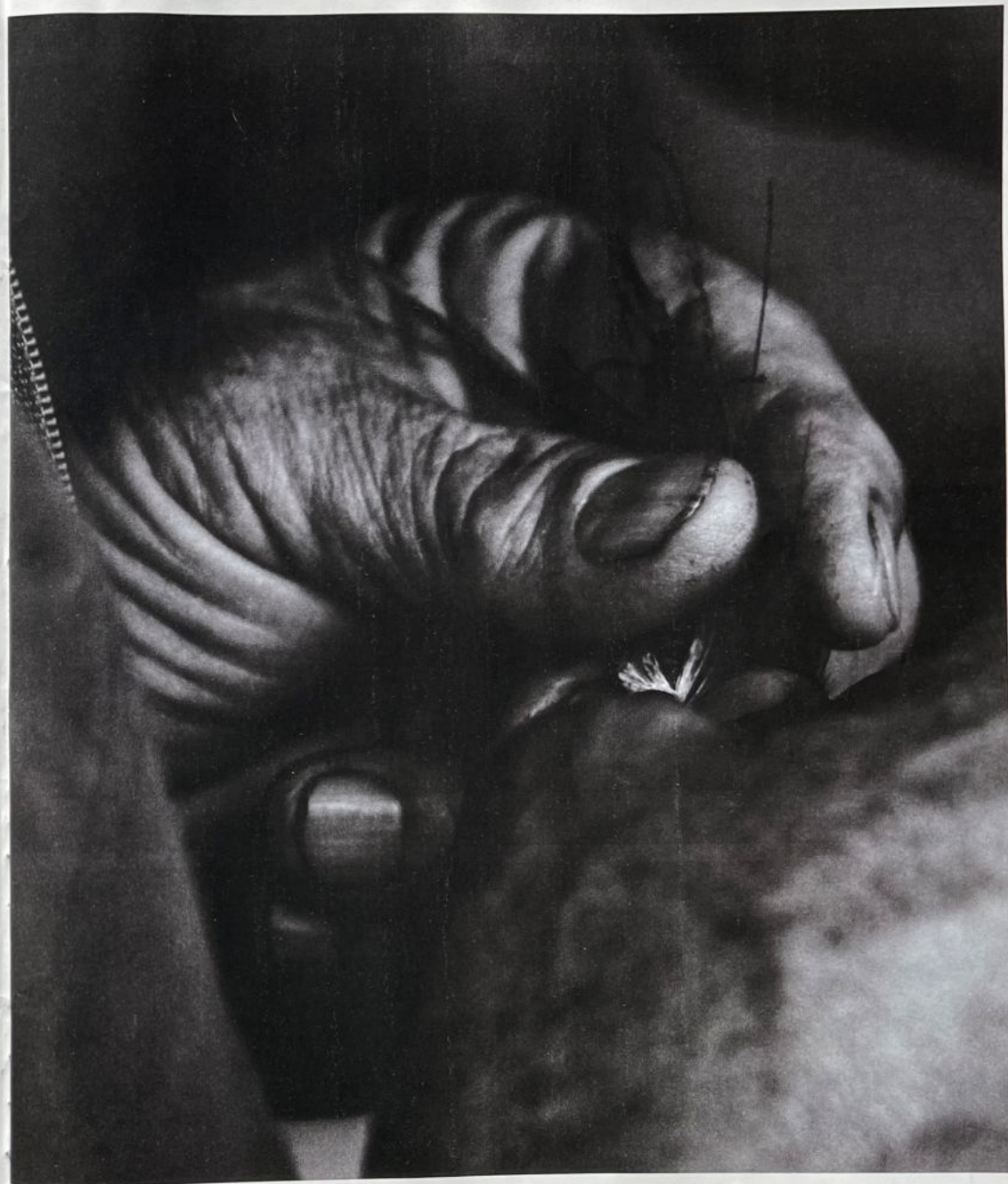
and spinning tackle, but the practice of harvest did not change. Paulino says that while he passionately enjoyed fishing, its value was directly tied to the acquisition of food. "We killed every fish we caught," he says, "all of them. It never even occurred to us that there might be some other way."

One day almost 60 years ago, Paulino watched as a stranger fished the river in a manner that changed his life. At the time, the young Argentinian was working with a fence crew running wire around *estancias* (cattle ranches) all over Chubut province, and his economic circumstances had improved enough to provide him a roof of his own and make the question of where his next meal would come from a memory. He still spent most of his free time on the water. And having procured his own spinning rod and having learned to make his own spoons, he was more successful than ever in the pursuit.

Arriving at the mouth of the Rio Corcovado that morning in 1963, he saw an outsider standing in the river waving an odd-looking fishing rod and casting in a strange way. He sat down to watch. "It was the first time I had ever seen a foreigner, and I thought he must be crazy," Paulino says.

The man's rod resembled the willow branches Paulino had fished with as a child, but the line looked like spaghetti and did not seem to have a lure on the end of it. The reel also looked strange, and the man never collected the line back onto it. Rather, he flung the rig back and forth a few times between each swing to lay the line out across the river again. Then he suddenly lifted the rod, which was deeply bent, and a large rainbow leapt from the river, somehow connected to the end of the line. Paulino sat transfixed until the man finally landed the fish. Nothing could have prepared him for what happened next.

The stranger unhooked the fish, admired it for a moment and let it go. Then he resumed casting. It's believed that the interloper was the



DAMIANO LUBRO (RIGHT)



"Fishing makes friendship easy," says Paulino (left). Sharing a big meal in a seasonal camp beneath a bridge also helps.

peripatetic fly-fishing innovator Joe Brooks, scouting locations for an early episode of *American Sportsman*.

Paulino rode home and could not stop thinking about what he had witnessed. He also contemplated how the fishing had changed since he was a boy. There were fewer and smaller fish than there once were. It occurred to him that snaring rainbows from their spawning beds in the spring and brook trout during fall, as his neighbors did, was like killing cows before they'd calved. He continued to fish with spinning gear even though he stopped targeting spawning fish. But it took more time to come around to the idea of returning the fish to the water. "It took a long time for me to process, but I couldn't just let it go," Paulino says.

Paulino hitched a ride to Esquel to see if anyone there knew about the rig the stranger used and where he might acquire one. He was referred to a shop in Buenos Aires, some 1,200 miles away, too far for a journey, so he wrote a letter to the shop. After some slow back-and-forth communication, he finally managed to have a package sent. Inside the box that arrived midwinter was a rod, reel and line, which seemed strange enough. But what he found inside the fly box rendered him speechless. The shop owner had included a selection of streamers and three or four dries. Paulino says he never could have imagined such things existing before he saw them. The flies sealed the deal. He stowed his spinning rod and spoons in the rafters of his barn and committed himself to learning the new technique come spring.

**AS IT IS FOR MOST FLY-FISHING NEWCOMERS,** Paulino says his early attempts were a disaster. With no teacher, he would stand on the river in typical Patagonian wind, line wrapped around his feet, line wrapped around his neck, flies smacking him in the back of the head on every other cast. He nearly gave up. "I wouldn't even try it in front of friends," says Paulino, who built fences and worked as a police officer. "It was embarrassing."

Around midsummer something clicked, and the line began to unfold in front of him with relative regularity. The fly swung across the current

more or less the way he had seen the stranger's swing, and one day the inevitable occurred: The line came tight, and the rod bowed under a fish. It was a *Salvelinus fontinalis*, a male brook trout of about 4½ pounds, and Paulino remembers the moment as if it were yesterday.

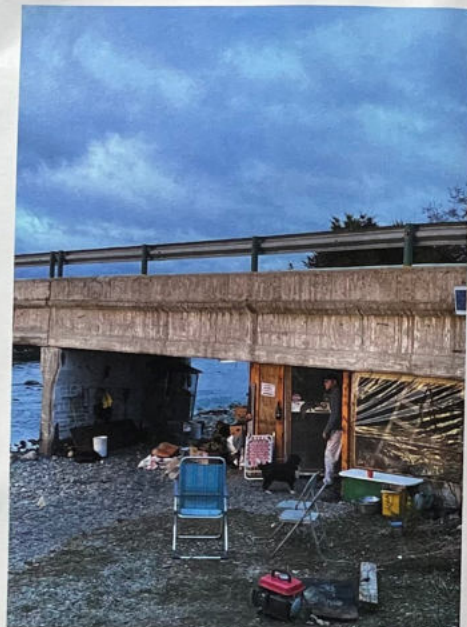
For the first time in his life, he didn't drag the fish up onto the bank and kill it with a rock. Instead, he held it in the current, watching its gills open and close, studying the lines on its back as the fish regained its equilibrium and slowly recovered. He slipped the hook from its jaw and allowed the fish to slide into the current. *Why have I not been doing this all along?* Paulino asked himself. *This is beautiful.* That moment changed something inside him. He has not killed a single trout since.

Today, Paulino's practice of catch and release is striking even to those who grew up in the age of conservation. He brings 30-inch fish to hand and never touches them, much less lifts them from the water. His hand slides down the tippet to the eye of his barbless hook, makes a quick turn, and the monster swims away. The rest of us crowd around and crane our necks to get a glimpse of the trophy before it disappears.

By the time our slack jaws reset, Paulino is midswing into his next cast. He says the secret is not just to be ready, but to expect a fish at every moment the fly is in the water. Those who've watched him insist his average is nine-to-one over every other rod on the river. The only difference most of us can discern is that he changes flies a lot, sometimes every few casts.

He calls the big brook trout *mimosas* (after the tree) and the big rainbows *barracos* (wild boar). "The fish are moody," says Paulino, who has a son and daughter and numerous grandchildren. "Sometimes you have to tease them and tease them until they get mad."

The winter after his introduction to fly-fishing, Paulino took apart most of his flies and retied them, teaching himself the process mostly using tools of his own making. With hooks he procured in Esquel and the necks of his own roosters; the skins of puma, skunks and hares his uncle killed; and whatever else he could find, he began to create his own designs. Anglers now bring him materials from all over the world, and without so much as a sign on his door, Paulino probably sells



Each season, Paulino and his fellow trout devotees build the "boca camp" under a bridge that crosses the Rio Corcovado, with bunks, tables and a wood stove.

more flies than every other shop in Argentina combined. And not one of them leaves his vice with the barb intact.

Guides from the area's lodges bring their clients to Paulino's place for *asados*. An *asado* is a kind of Argentinian barbecue generally consisting of a lamb slow-roasted on a metal cross next to a fire, with sausages and various cuts of beef, pork and sometimes intestines and organs on the grill. After the meal, gallon-size Tupperware containers appear at the request of visitors anxious to see Paulino's stock of flies, which are spread on the table. They come in a rainbow of colors and a variety of styles so striking that most guests buy far more flies than they could ever fish.


And Paulino pretty much never ties the same fly twice. Each pattern is its own invention, its own product of a moment's inspiration. He ties all winter. Guests bring him pictures of the display cases they've built for the flies that hang in their living rooms, and Paulino smiles and laughs.

THESE DAYS, PAULINO SPENDS MOST OF THE SEASON on the same stretch of water where he caught his first brook trout on the fly. The *boca* (mouth) of the Rio Corcovado has become a Mecca for fly anglers, and the *Madrugon* (dawn riser) is a semipermanent encampment under the bridge that spans the river. Each year in November, Paulino and his friends load a truck with numbered boards, plastic sheeting, furniture, cook kits, a wood stove and everything required to set up the camp and drive to the boca to move in for the season. This is where the nearly 2,000-foot-deep Lago General Vintter (Vintter Lake) pours into the river and heads east on its long U-shaped journey, which eventually cuts back through the spine of the Andes and empties into the Pacific.

In the spring, rainbows descended from California's McCloud River steelhead stock make their way back upstream to the lake post-spawn; in the fall brook trout head downstream into the river below for their own procreation dance under newly orange leaves. These fish have to pass through the bottleneck at the boca, and Paulino is there at dawn every day, swinging flies across the current. "The mimosas are still my favorites," he says of his beloved brook trout.

Named after Paulino's cabin in town, the boca camp evolved into its current form over many years. It runs like a well-oiled machine. The bridge serves as the roof and back wall. Two of the other walls are constructed of plywood, and the third is transparent plastic. Bunks are built into the rafters beneath the bridge, accessed with a ladder, and most nights there are plenty of tents set up outside, as well. A big table next to the wood stove inside is surrounded by chairs for card games and food.

There are a few regulars who spend the season with Paulino, but mostly anglers come and go. The place is in the middle of nowhere, with the camp mostly invisible from road-height. The odd stranger making the drive across the bridge is sometimes startled by the smoke pouring out of the chimney below the guard rail.

An estancia owner built a house just downstream for the game wardens to use, although this is hardly necessary. Paulino keeps things pretty well under control. "Fishing makes friendship easy," he says. And Paulino knows the seven miles of spawning water downstream from the river mouth like no one else — the current seams, the rocks, every glide at various water levels that occur throughout the year. It is a joy and a privilege just to follow him and watch. 

JUSTIN C. WITT



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