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The Accidental Winemakers, and a Faraway Vineyard

In Argentine wine country, friends invest in a vision, creating their vintages in a place now as familiar as home.

By MICHAEL CLINTON

On a hot summer afternoon in the Uco Valley, south of Mendoza, Argentina, last December, six of us gathered for a wine blending of malbec, cabernet franc and syrah grapes that had been harvested nine months earlier. Our task: to decide what to do with the juice that had been fermenting in oak barrels for several months.

As Mariana, our winemaker, guided us through the tastes and smells of the 2014 harvest, we stopped to take in the view of the majestic Andes Mountains in the distance.

Agritourism may be big in these parts but we were taking it one step further than most: The wine we were blending was from our own vineyard. Enthralled by the region nine years ago, New York family members and friends with no experience in winemaking banded together to find an excuse to revisit it year after year. The price was \$100,000, but not enough for the two other principal buyers and me to buy a house. This year, we will produce our fourth vintage, enabling us to share our wine and our tales of owning a vineyard in a faraway part of the world.

How had we become accidental winemakers in the booming Argentine wine country? The first step was falling in love with Mendoza. It isn't hard to do. Mendoza is a leafy city founded in 1561 by Spanish settlers. The combination of lovely squares and wide boulevards adds to the colonial feel, as does an intricate web of canals running through the city. The place is alive with adventure travelers and oenophiles.

The adventurers arrive to hike the Andes or climb Aconcagua, the tallest mountain in South America, and the wine lovers descend on the city to experience the fabled wine country, particularly the Uco Valley, which runs 40 miles long and 25 miles wide. There are more than 75 wineries in the region, growing from only three in the early 1990s, propelling Argentina to its place as the fifth largest wine producer in the world.

I first visited the region in 2006 with two friends, Tom and Cap. During our stay at the Cavas Wine Lodge, a Relais & Châteaux hotel 30 minutes from the city, we visited a dozen vineyards. We also fit in some hiking and horseback riding in the foothills of the Andes, then dined under the vines at Cavas.

Our group went on to Santiago for a wedding, but my heart stayed in the Mendoza region. Anytime I heard that someone was heading there, I would ask them to come back with suggestions on how I might invest in the area. A friend, Martha, hit on the intriguing idea of opening our own winery.

She had met Michael Evans, an American who traveled there for vacation in 2004, but decided to stay. He joined forces with a local Argentine, Pablo Gimenez Rilli, and the winemaker Santiago Achával to establish a new business model for winemaking.

Vines of Mendoza would be a 1,000-acre operation that would produce its own wine, and sell land to commercial producers, including restaurateurs who could create their own exclusive wines. And they would make three-to-10-acre parcels available to private investors. The concept was that you could contract with the main company in a land purchase, select the grapes you wanted to plant and then piggyback onto all of the master vineyard's winemaking services for planting, harvesting and bottling your own wine. Today the "going-in" cost (\$85,000 an acre) covers everything up to the first bottling of the first harvest.

While there are other private ownership communities throughout the region, such as Casa de Uco and Dragonback Estate, creating an easy way for investors to become a part of the scene, Vines had a big vision for itself.

A day with Mr. Evans exploring the property on horseback, followed by an authentic Argentine asado (barbecue), is all it took to convince me that I could create my own wine. While he explained how the private ownership terms worked, I thought of the line from the lyricist and novelist Paulo Coelho, "life was always a matter of waiting for the right moment to act!"

Fortunately, I have a lot of friends who love wine, particularly Jack and Jay, each of whom has his own wine cellar. When I returned home, I lobbied hard, talking them into investing in a vineyard.

"Let me get this right," Jack said. "You want me to make an investment thousands of miles away in a place that I've never been to with people who I have never met?"

"But Jack, you love wine," I said. "Imagine your own wine label. What better time than now?"

Ultimately, he and Jay agreed that the idea was irresistible. Martha wanted in on it, too, and within weeks, JMJ (Jack, Michael, Martha, Jay) Vines LLC was born. We bought three acres to plant right away and another 10 acres that would remain fallow until we got our winemaking feet wet.

We didn't rush down and make our first pilgrimage to our vineyard together. But within the first year of our venture, all of the partners had taken trips to explore the land and mull over what we had done. I remember standing on the barren land wondering if we had done the right thing. When I looked at the stunning scenery, I knew that this would become an adventure of a lifetime. During this trip, it was my job to work with the winemakers to decide what type of grapes we'd plant, and to communicate the choices back home. Sitting with a glass of malbec to make the final decision was what I called "just another day at the vineyard."

We settled on growing malbec, Argentina's signature grape. (Over 70 percent of the world's malbec is grown there.) The grape was introduced to Argentina in the 1860s and has blossomed thanks to the terroir there, a combination of sun, heat, soil, altitude and temperature that ensures ripeness and acidity, important to the rich, velvety full-flavored wine that it is known for.

Grown over a 2,000-mile stretch from Salta in the north to Patagonia in the south, the Argentine malbec has seduced the palate of wine drinkers everywhere.

We would plant an acre each of malbec, cabernet franc and syrah, although in hindsight, we should have planted all malbec, since owners can buy other grapes grown at Vines for blending to produce other types of wines.

In 2008, I went back to Mendoza with a few friends to lead the ceremonial planting of the baby vines. It would take three years before we could blend our first wine. We would be able to produce 80 cases an acre from that first harvest. Once the vines matured in Years 5 and 6, production would swell to several hundred cases an acre. Since then, we have gone to the area at least once a year. We plan our visits around the harvest or blending season. Or we pick a holiday that we celebrate there. The 11-hour overnight flight from New York to Santiago with the 30-minute hop to Mendoza has also allowed us to do an occasional five-day weekend.

Learning how to plant the vines, which could thrive for more than 75 years, we spent a few hours on our hands and knees, placing them in the earth, as farmers have done for centuries.



FABLED COUNTRY Top, the acreages of the Vines of Mendoza in the Uco Valley. Left, from top, sampling the density and temperature of the wine; another view of the vineyard area; view from the restaurant of the Vines hotel; and an aerial view of the city of Mendoza.

At home, we tasted dozens of malbecs from the region, hoping that someday we would capture some of the great fruits of blackberry, plum and black cherry with a hint of floral notes that create the perfect wine.

In spring of 2011, as our first harvest approached, eight of us assembled to attend winemaking camp and participate in the harvest. We clipped and piled our plump grapes into large plastic bins.

Jack and his wife, Amy, joined in, as did Martha, the proud birth mother of the idea, along with Tom. While Jay couldn't join us, we sent him videos of our group at work.

After several hours of picking, we carted our harvest in a pickup truck to the winery. There, we learned how to test the level of sugar in our grapes. Andy, Haideh and Mary, friends, led the charge sorting out the leaves and twigs, as we placed the grapes on a conveyor belt, before they moved into the maceration process.

Next, the grapes were soaked in their skin, to coax out the tannins. The juice is fermented in the skins in stainless steel tanks; the sugar turns to alcohol, and carbon dioxide is released as the skins separate. This is a two-month process, followed by aging the juice in oak barrels for six to nine months.

During that visit, we also had to decide what to name our wine.

Driving back and forth from Cavas each day, we would watch for the local sand owls, no larger than a foot tall, standing on the posts of the dozens of vineyards. These owls are considered good luck, so we adopted "Lechuza," Spanish for owl, as the name on our label.

Our day of winemaking had bonded us in a way that none of us had anticipated, with shared moments that we talk about every time we see one another.

Nine months later, most of our group headed back to Mendoza for the official blending of the grapes. Additional friends joined to partake in the winemaker's experience. Today, there are over 150 private vineyard owners at Vines, creating a global community, who communicate regularly. We've cheered one another on at marathons, celebrated weddings and births, and made toasts with our wines. We have learned that each year, the blending produces a different wine, as it depends on the weather conditions of the growing season.

For 2014, Mariana predicted it would be a great year for malbec. We liked the taste of our grapes so much that we will produce four barrels (or 100 cases) of malbec, one barrel of syrah and our own blend of those two with cabernet franc that we named Founder's Reserve. To help finance the production, we sold 70 percent of our grapes on the Vines exchange. That helps us almost break even on our annual wine production. With the good luck from our Lechuza, our experience has been both fun and affordable.

We expect that our wine will arrive in New York in September of this year, in time for family gatherings and the holidays. Lechuza is now my holiday gift to colleagues, clients and friends. We have all decided to keep our wine for our own use.

A group of us will be in Argentina at least once a year for harvest or blending. Our investment has become a lot more than just owning a vineyard. It has enriched friendships, created new ones and established a place that we now call home.