



MENDOZA, ARGENTINA'S WINE COUNTRY Despite Recession, Dollar Still Goes Far in This Region

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With the economic problems the United States is facing, many Americans are modifying their lifestyles, including the The U.S. dollar still goes far in Argentina, and Mendoza wine country, set against the foothills of the Andean mountains, can be both rugged and luxurious, at times all at once.

Fortunately for people who love viticulture and trips abroad, the U.S. dollar still goes far in Argentina's Mendoza wine country.

Set against the foothills of the Andes mountains, the location can be both rugged and luxurious.

GETTING SITUATED

It's best to first orient yourself in the city of Mendoza. The town gathering place is Plaza Independencia, where craft vendors sell everything from gourds to the herbal drink yerba mate to silver jewelry.

Street performers stage shows, and young couples can be seen whispering and kissing on the benches. The elegant Park Hyatt Mendoza flanks one side of the square, and on the other is the main street, Sarmiento, where the smell of meat grilling wafts over the people gathered at outdoor tables drinking shots of strong café cortado. Along this road are the outfitters for river rafting and mountaineering guides for the nearby towering peak, Aconcagua.

Start your introduction to Argentinean wines at the centrally located Vines of Mendoza Tasting Room. The owners have selected the best wines from the region and offer flights from the 120 varieties.

"Argentina, and Mendoza in particular, is the most exciting and dynamic wine region in the world today. In many respects, it's a lot like the Napa Valley was 30 years ago," said San Francisco Bay-area transplant Matt Hobbs, the vice president of marketing and sales at Vines of Mendoza, "Thanks to a wine-making renaissance over the last 15 years, Argentina now crafts wines of tremendous quality and value across an entire spectrum of prices."

MORE ABOUT MENDOZA

Mendoza is known for the Malbec, a grape originally brought to Argentina from France, where it was used mostly to blend with other reds.

In this climate, the grape thrived. The mountains protect the vines from the Pacific Ocean moisture, and this desert region gets more than 300 days of sun each year. Many of the vines are planted at high altitudes, so the grapes are robust and have thick skins, which makes for a deep colors and rich flavors.

When sampling red wines, you often hear the word "backbone" in regards to Malbec, which means it's a full-bodied wine. This is due in part to tannins.

Tannic wines are generally paired with fattier cuts of meat, so go ahead and order the ojo de bife, or ribeye, at Grill Q Parrilla at the Park Hyatt Mendoza. But don't forget to have it with an Argentinean Malbec.

Argentina faced an economic crisis in 2001 when the peso devalued, causing a run on the banks and a subsequent boom for the local win industry. Prior to the crisis, the country pegged its peso one-to-one to the U.S. dollar, which resulted in affluence in the 1980s and '90s. Money was invested in vineyards and state of the art equipment was purchased. Then, during the financial crisis, investors and wine lovers from around the world arrived in Mendoza to invest in the wineries at a bargain rate.

WINES BY BUS, BIKE OR CAR

There are several options for venturing out into the wine regions. You could negotiate the city buses, rent a bicycle, drive yourself or custom design your tour with companies like Uncorking Argentina that can also schedule a polo match or golfing excursion. Almost all of the wineries require reservations for tours and tastings and are a short trip from Mendoza.

In area of Lujan De Cuyo, the winery Achaval Ferrer is the standard setter. The winery is are known for single vineyard Malbecs. Achaval Ferrer's high-scoring wine is credited in part to grapes it selects but also to its gravity-fed cement tanks. The winery's operators believe the temperature enabled by this system allows open fermentation, which encourages the personality of the wine.

Another favorite vineyard here is Tapiz, where a tour of the vines covers everything from the shape of leaves to the characteristics of the different grapes. The walk-through includes a barrel sampling of the wine to understand the fermenting process.

THE RESTAURANTS OF MAIPU

Maipu is known for its restaurants, and a great place to go for lunch is Almacen del Sur. Here they grow specialty produce for their line of food products like olive oil, sundried tomatoes and roasted eggplant. It started as a winery in the 1800s and has been converted into a restaurant that serves five-course lunches.

For dinner, the restaurant 1884 Francis Mallman has won national awards. Their Patagonian lamb and empanadas are grilled over outdoor fires and for dessert they roast sugar glazed seasonal fruits in their wood-burning oven.

Maipu is home to Trapiche winery, a large producer that offers several different types of tastings, ranging from a basic flight to desert wines, to a premium that includes cheese pairings. Trapiche offers a popular dry, sparkling rose, and a crisp, white Torrontes, another signature Argentinean wine, though the grapes aren't usually grown in Mendoza. Though these two are popular, according to the Trapiche sommelier, Gaston Re, Malbec is still the signature wine.

The Bodega Familia Zuccardi winery is known for its unique and experimental blends, such as Malbec from France and Tempranillo from Spain.

"Argentina is a country of immigrants who have blended together for great results. Why wouldn't this work for wine as well?" said winery director Jose Alberto Zuccardi.

Since the devaluation of the peso in 2001, many of the wines in Argentina are being produced for export, and are a very good deal.

Aldo Sohm, wine director at New York's Le Bernardin restaurant and named World's Best Sommelier 2008, predicts that Argentinean wines fit in the perfect price range that Americans are attracted to because many of them retail from around \$15 to \$20. He predicts that Malbecs will become better known and more popular in the United States.

Events: The wine harvest festival, Vendimia, runs through March and into April in Mendoza. There's lots of folk dancing, wine tasting and blessing of the grapes.

Serious Foodies should attend the Masters of Food and Wine sponsored by the Park Hyatt Hotels in Buenos Aires and Mendoza. The packages include five days of tasting menus prepared by Michelin Star chefs from around the world and the top sommeliers, along with cocktail parties and winery visits and tours. For more information visit www.mfandw.com.ar.