



THE TOAST OF ARGENTINA

I have over 1,200 wineries to choose from and only four days in which to see them... Vines of Mendoza, a tasting room just off Plaza Independencia that pour over 90 local wines and organizes vineyard tours for flummoxed visitor like me.

The last person I expected to sit next to on the plane is a rancher from Idaho. But here he is, with his 1970s-style handlebar moustache and cowboy boots. Intrigued, I ask what brings him to Mendoza, a wine region on the eastern flank of the Andes that's almost as big as his northwestern home state. "It's the land, darling," he says. "Very cheap land." After years spent herding cattle to greener pastures, his retirement game plan is to find a vast tract of earth where, from his house to the horizon, he won't be able to see a soul—and where he can dabble in the dream of bottling his own wine. The fact that he knows little about viticulture doesn't deter him for a second.

He's not alone. In the past 10 years, third-generation Argentine winemakers and expats from Europe and the U.S. have been snatching up farms throughout Mendoza and converting them into wineries that are small in size but big on experimentation. Thanks to the region's diverse terrain, altitude, and terroir (or flavor of the soil), these vintners are now producing the same high-quality varietals—sauvignon blancs, viogniers, Syrahs, and pinot noirs—found in Napa Valley and Sonoma, but at a fraction of the cost. This entrepreneurial spirit, coupled with the chance to hike in the Andes, is what's brought an oenophile like me here for a visit. There's also the Latin allure: I'll travel hundreds of miles for a good glass of vino—my last venture was to the remote wine country of Tasmania—but I especially love a place where they take the time to pronounce Laura with three long syllables.

After the rancher and I wish each other success, I head to the colonial capital, Mendoza City, a town with about 130,000 residents and a rich history. Before the Spaniards arrived in 1561, the Huarpes Indians built the city's network of stone gutters, which still irrigate the town with runoff from the Andes. In 1813, Argentine general José de San Martín holed up in Mendoza City with his army—and went on to liberate neighboring Chile and Peru from the Spaniards. My home base is the slick 26-room Villaggio Hotel Boutique near the central Plaza Independencia and several of the city's liveliest restaurants and bars.

Over lunch at Azafrán, a classic Argentine restaurant with a 500-bottle wine menu, I tuck into a trio of meat empanadas and a tender pork loin drizzled with blueberry sauce. The sommelier keeps pace, serving me a different wine with each dish, as I watch locals stroll the cobblestoned streets arm in arm. Some carry tango shoes in cloth bags—a sign that they're en route to a milonga, a tango hall where musicians play live guitar music into the early morning hours.

Part of the charm of Mendoza City is its proximity to several of the region's main wine areas—Luján de Cuyo, Valle de Uco, and Chacras de Coria are within day-trip distance. There's just one problem: I have over 1,200 wineries to choose from and only four days in which to see them. Michael Evans, a former political consultant from Washington, D.C., faced the same conundrum when he arrived on vacation nearly five years ago. He never left, and today he co-owns Vines of Mendoza, a tasting room just off Plaza Independencia that pours over 90 local wines and organizes vineyard tours for flummoxed visitors like me.

"This isn't like Napa Valley, where you can jump on a bus and go from winery to winery," Evans says, pouring me a Bordeaux-style Carmelo Patti Gran Assemblage from a vineyard in Luján de Cuyo. Mendoza's wineries are spaced far apart on unmarked dirt roads, and few let you stroll in without an appointment. Evans explains that I should either hire a driver or sign up for a group tour. "Regardless, it's a more intimate experience here," he says. "Most often, the guy who opens the door will be the vintner himself."

ROOTS OF THE REGION:

Luján de Cuyo

The following morning, I decide to hire a remis (taxi) to drive me to the heart of the wine country. Luján de Cuyo is where the first grapes were planted by the Spaniards in the 16th century—and where some of the most beautiful wineries are, including Bodega Benegas. Constructed in 1901, the adobe building is one of the oldest in the region, with antique gaucho ponchos framed and displayed on the walls. True to Evans's word, I'm greeted by owner Federico J. Benegas Lynch, whose great-grandfather introduced French grapevines to Argentina in 1883. In the whitewashed tasting room, Benegas pours a Syrah with violet and blackberry notes, and after taking three sips, he gives me a wink when I notice him spitting out the wine. "I think Perón had a saying about dividing the day into two mornings because you work best early in the day," he says. "If I want to have a productive second morning, I need to watch myself!"

Unlike Benegas, I wasn't spitting, but I'm ready for more. Bodega Elvira Calle, a few miles down the road, is in a refurbished Spanish colonial house owned by Kirk Ermisch, whose story is something like Evans's. In 1999, while working for Kendall Jackson, Ermisch came to Mendoza to help the company set up shop—and ended up opening his own winery. "At the time, Argentines were known for making cheap wine that they drank like soda pop," he says. "But what I saw were upstarts producing exciting appellations, using old-vine vineyards and inexpensive methods of farming." To prove his point, he offers me a glass of bonarda, an inky red that costs \$15 but tastes like it could go for three times as much.

After giving me a tour of his soaring concrete rooms, Ermisch suggests visiting a fellow winemaker who is a bit of a legend in Luján de Cuyo. It turns out to be Carmelo Patti, whose wine I tried at Vines of Mendoza. Compared to the chic Bodega Elvira Calle, El Lagar Carmelo Patti looks like a big garage with stacks of boxes strewn about. Despite the chaos, it's known for producing some of the best wines in Mendoza. The secret: Patti controls quality by running the operation single-handedly, and he ages each wine for at least three years. He gives us direct-from-the-barrel samples of a 2004 and a 2006 malbec so we can compare the two, and instructs me to look for the tart cherry and black olive notes. As I puzzle over the flavors, Patti takes a sip of each. "The wine talks, and we understand," he says. "Things should be this simple."

A TASTE OF WHAT'S NEXT:

Valle de Uco

If Luján de Cuyo speaks of Mendoza's past, Valle de Uco is its future. An hour outside Mendoza City, this cool valley is home to sprawling wineries that are close to 4,000 feet above sea level—ideal conditions for producing one of my favorite wines, tempranillo. This time, I've joined a group outing led by Ampora Wine Tours. Along for the ride are four men from Texas who are all scouting property. Two of them have already purchased fincas in the area and have plans to open the first luxury resort in Valle de Uco. The other two—a fertility doctor and an Oxford-educated entrepreneur—are hoping to launch their own wineries. "It's a land grab," says the doctor, gesturing at vast fields that stretch clear into the surrounding mountainsides. "Of course, prices have gone up. A few years ago, they were practically giving this away."

Against this epic backdrop, Valle de Uco's wineries are spectacular, many of them designed by some of South America's top architects. Our first stop is Bodegas Salentein, a cross-shaped building planted in a nearly 5,000-acre vineyard that abuts the eastern slope of the Andes. Designed by Bormida & Yanzon—a Mendoza-based firm with a long résumé of winery buildings in the region—each wing of the cross is devoted to creating a different product, from chardonnays to malbec-cabernet blends. But the winery's most surprising feature is the temple-like Killka Gallery, which houses the owners' contemporary art collection, including giant canvases by Argentinean painters Antonio Seguí and Miguel Ocampo.

Before returning to Mendoza City, we drive about 15 miles deeper into the valley to O. Fournier, a winery the Texans affectionately dub "the Bat Cave." The building looks like a giant gray spaceship poking out of a field of grapes. We're ushered into a cavernous stone tasting room decorated with paintings of Madonnas and queens. Sipping the winery's signature tempranillo, the men debate the best places to buy land. "Valle de Uco has the finest terroir in the country, hands down," says one of the aspiring hoteliers. His business partner turns to our driver and says, "I saw a FOR SALE sign on the way. Do you think we could double back?"

That night, I eat a delicious smoked salmon soufflé over tabbouleh at La Sal, an Argentine, Asian, and Italian fusion restaurant. I have one last stop to make before I leave for a weekend in the countryside: Everyone has told me not to miss Winery, a bar with a series of rooms, each devoted to a different varietal. (Malbec, the region's best-known varietal, gets the largest space.) Just after I arrive, my waitress pulls me into a game of bocce taking place outside on Winery's full-size clay court. I play several fierce rounds as an elderly patron shouts strategic advice: "If you shoot from the left, you'll smack her ball away!"

NO TIME LIKE RIGHT NOW:

Chacras de Coria

After hanging out with serious investors, entrepreneurs, and vintners, I'm delighted to meet a hotelier who understands how I like to drink wine—on a comfy sofa, with a cheese and olive plate in front of me. This is Finca Adalgisa, a century-old manor-house inn and winery in Chacras de Coria, just 20 minutes outside Mendoza City, that's belonged to Gabriela Furlotti's family for three generations.

Once I've settled in, she plops down next to me on the couch and tells me about her grandparents, who bought the vineyard in 1936. The couple used the sandy soil to their advantage, growing some of the best malbec grapes in the area. To keep the Furlotti legacy going, Gabriela bottled the family's first estate wine, Finca Adalgisa Malbec, in 2004 and built the hotel and a private eight-room guest cottage.

Chacras de Coria still has plenty of farmland to snap up—at least for now. Furlotti's latest project is Soluna, a fair-trade winery she hopes will jump-start a trend in Mendoza. With a partner, she's been traveling from finca to finca, negotiating with vegetable farmers to join her collective and harvest grapes. "Our natural resources shouldn't just benefit foreign investors," she says. "I want to make sure the children of these farmers have a future on this land."

At dusk, Furlotti encourages me to stroll into the village—and to bring my dancing shoes. Sure enough, there's a group tangoing in the tiny plaza to accordion music playing from a boom box. An older man offers me his hand. "Muy bien," he says politely as we whirl. A couple pantomimes raising wineglasses for me. That's when I realize that even though I came for the superb wine, I would come back for the people.

LODGING

Villaggio Hotel Boutique

25 de Mayo 1010, Mendoza City, 011-54/261-524-5200, hotelvillaggio.com.ar, from \$130

Finca Adalgisa

Pueyrredón 2222, Chacras de Coria, 011-54/261-496-0713, fincaadalgisa.com.ar, from \$235

FOOD

Azafrán

Sarmiento 765, Mendoza City, 011-54/261-429-4200, entrées from \$10

La Sal

Belgrano 1069, Mendoza City, 011-54/261-420-4322, lasalrestaurante.com, entrées from \$6

ACTIVITIES

Vines of Mendoza

Espejo 567, Mendoza City, 011-54/261-438-1031, vinesofmendoza.com, tastings from \$3

Ampora Wine Tours

Sarmiento 647, Mendoza City, 011-54/261-429-2931, mendozawinetours.com

WINERIES

Bodega Benegas

Cruz de Piedra, Luján de Cuyo, 011-54/261-496-0794, bodegabenegas.com

Bodega Elvira Calle

Alberti 154, Luján de Cuyo, 541/388-5223

El Lagar Carmelo Patti

San Martín 2614, Luján de Cuyo, 011-54/261-498-1379

Bodegas Salentein

Ruta 89 s/n, Tunuyán, Valle de Uco, 011-54/262-242-9000, bodegasalentein.com

O. Fournier

5567 La Consulta, Valle de Uco, 011-54/9-261-467-1021, ofournier.com

NIGHTLIFE

Winery, Bar de Vinos

Chile 898, Mendoza City, 011-54/261-425-1716, winery.com.ar