



## ARGENTINIAN RED WINES

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Recently I stated that Chile is the most exciting wineproducing country in the New World. I'm happy to stand by this opinion, for hardly a year goes by without a new valley being discovered and new vineyards planted to make interesting wines. But my first visit to Argentina has left me convinced that in the New World, certainly in South America, this country has no rivals for the ripe flavours, reliability and value for money of its reds and possibly none when it comes to dramatic improvements in the future.

My recent visit was centred around a tasting of 50 reds that had been set up for this article, followed by more vineyard appointments than expected and many more wines to be tasted. Overall quality I was looking at wines starting at £10 in the UK market was high and value for money, on the whole, was exceptional. The country is coming from behind in terms of exports, although sales are booming in the US, and Canada is set to overtake the UK next year, but the genuine optimism of the producers is plain to see. Michel Rolland, the driving force behind Clos de los Siete, an 850ha (hectare) property just 50ha short of the whole of Pomerol that he and other Bordeaux producers own in the Valley de Uco, sums it up: 'Argentina's potential is astonishing; the diversity of its future breathtaking. 'Perhaps this potential is better appreciated by those of us who are escaping the conservative production regimes of the traditional European wine countries. If there's one place where all the optimum conditions to develop a new and formidable wine industry climate, soil, costs, human resources and minimal bureaucratic regulation exist together, that place is Argentina.'

Government production regulations aim to prevent over-supply that would depress prices and lower quality. The number of hectares planted in Argentina only moved from 210,000ha in 1990 to 223,000ha in 2006, yet the last three years have shown an increase of 5,000ha a year, a trend which seems likely to continue. With the first vineyards being planted in 1532, Argentinians have a great tradition of wine consumption; at the end of the 19th century they were drinking 90 litres per head each year. This has fallen to a still healthy 30 litres, but exports have only just begun to make an impact on production, rising from 0.28% of total exports in 2000 to 2.8% today, with a very ambitious target of 10% by 2020. The government makes an assumption of annual wine sales and production over the assumed volume is sent to be turned into grape concentrate. Thus Argentina has never known a wine lake and is not likely to. For years the high-yielding Bonarda, Semillon and Tempranillo varieties were considered of lower quality, and sales in bottle were discouraged, so planting declined. But all it took was a few growers to lower yields to European levels for the natural quality to show through, allowing these grapes to join the Bordeaux varieties, as well as Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc,

Syrah even Sangiovese in quality-oriented vineyards. There are no regulations governing what may be planted where, which makes the discovery of new vineyards encouragingly inevitable. Of the 223,000ha currently planted, 70% are in Mendoza, providing 75% of production and more than 90% of exports.

While fine wines are made high up in Salta in the north, and in Patagonia in the south, Argentina's strong cards remain Mendoza and Malbec. The country can claim, without hesitation, to make the best Malbec in the world. But the stronger card, in my view, is Mendoza. Under this umbrella are all the European grape varieties one could wish for, alongside the local Bonarda and Torrontes. Mendoza is the Toyota of wine regions: whatever model you buy works perfectly and gives better than expected value. And since the locals live with wine the way the British used to live with beer, any increase in price has to be justified by an even larger jump in quality. With nine good vintages out of 10, thanks to 350 sunny days a year (too hot for many insects to survive), no rot and the only risk being hail near vintage time, it's clear that 'Mendoza is on the right side of the Andes', as Buenos Aires' top sommelier, Marcelo Rebole, told me.

## Stars on Show

Before my visit, my general impression of Argentinian wines was positive but not passionate. The trip was planned as a holiday (our 40th wedding anniversary fell on the day we arrived) and while I was looking forward to the tasting, I didn't expect unbounded enthusiasm and admiration. The 50 wineries invited to participate were asked to enter one wine (not necessarily their most expensive) that showed the personality, vineyard and varietal characteristics best expressing the winery's philosophy (see below). Tasting with me was Sophie Jump of JumpStart wine consultancy, and Fabricio Portelli, wine critic and publisher of Simposium wine magazine. I'm happy to say we agreed more than we disagreed, even on two over-sweet 2005 Malbec blockbusters both in heavyweight bottles with 15.5% alcohol that received only two stars from me. My comment that 'If this style influences Argentine winemakers, it will be a disaster' went unopposed. With all the natural fruit and energy coming from Mendoza vineyards, I cannot see the point of such exaggeration. Portelli summed up the vintages thus: 2002 very good; 2003 perhaps too hot; 2004 and 2005 good, less overworked; 2006 superb. He also pointed out that the learning curve both in the vineyards and cellar has been so steep that 2005 will actually turn out better than 2002, even though climatically it is a less good vintage. His other pertinent comments were: 'The Argentine palate likes young wines for drinking with food, so it's okay if the oak is a bit raw'; 'Wineries believe in good grapes rather than good vineyards we don't yet have the concept of terroir'; 'The consumer in Argentina is learning at the same time as the wineries are'; and 'When we really discover the vineyards, we will make great wine'.

This last comment was echoed by Matt Hobbs who, with partners Michael Evans, Dave Garrett and Pablo Gimenez, owns The Vines of Mendoza, an impressive wine bar around the corner from the Grand Hyatt. He put on a tasting of 10 wines for me that, for him, represented the country's most exciting new styles. Catena Angelica Zapata Chardonnay 2003 from the Tupungato region at 1,200m near the Andes foothills was the best white of my trip, and the Achaval Ferrer Finca Bella Vista Malbec 2004 was equal to the five-star wines of the major tasting. Hobbs' list offers 97 wines by the 170ml glass and if this wasn't enough to guarantee return visits, the partners have created Private Vineyard Estates, a 200ha property in the Uco Valley overseen by Santiago Achaval, which they are selling in plots to investors wanting their own wine made for them. There's huge demand for this project, especially from Californians who have seen the success of a similar, but far more expensive, venture at Bill Harlan's Napa Valley Reserve. For investors wanting to stay in the so-far hotelless Uco Valley, the partners will soon open a hotel and spa.

## Pride & Progress

Equally advanced is Jose-Manuel Ortega, a leading light in the Uco Valley through the O Fournier label (see Decanter, May 2007). Along with three estates covering 286ha, of which 94ha are planted, as well as grape contracts from 24 growers, Ortega has a new eco-friendly winery where, in addition to art exhibitions in the barrel hall, he and his wife have opened a modern restaurant serving local produce, and have plans for a 40-room hotel. A few days after we were there, Ortega, who said his dream was to become 'a mini Robert Mondavi', was expecting a visit from Bill Harlan of Napa's Harlan Estate. Uco Valley will soon need its own landing strip. Although this was not supposed to be a wine trip, the producers' enthusiasm made it impossible to refuse invitations. Manuel and Antonio Mas had an asado (barbecue) on their Finca La Anita estate, inviting many of the growers. The Mas brothers sell much of their wine in bulk, bottling only 150,000 bottles (tiny for Argentina) of wines they like to drink themselves. Their modestly priced Semillon and Petit Verdot were the stars for me. Carlos Pulenta exports 90% of his production, though admits he could probably sell it more easily and more profitably in Buenos Aires. Under his Tomero label, the wines are single varietals from the high vineyards of Tupugnato, while the Vistalba label are some of the country's most elegant blends. A tasting at Catena's Inca-inspired winery with head winemaker Alejandro Vigil and Estela Ines Perinetti, responsible for Caro, the joint venture with Lafite's Eric de Rothschild, confirmed that if there is a leader in the country (for my palate at least), it is Nicolas Catena. Finally, an afternoon with Carlos Tizio, in charge of the 850ha and soon to be six wineries of Clos de los Siete, and Marcelo Pelleriti, group winemaker under Michel Rolland's supervision, showed me that, while the Bordelais influence is strong, it is the vineyards that increasingly dominate the wines. Ortega told me that the best wine he had ever drunk was a 1944 Norton Tannat and presented me with a recently recorked bottle. When I open it, I will reflect on the history of Argentine wine and remember the vigour of its vineyards and genuineness and generosity of the producers, who have set the country on a path to such a great future.