



ARGENTINA'S NAPA VALLEY

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THE sunlight sliced through the clear glass of the gazebo-like restaurant at Familia Zuccardi, one of dozens of wineries located in the small town of Maipú, just outside the city of Mendoza, Argentina. The purple-red malbec and torrontés grapevines glistened in the early afternoon sun. Inside, a waitress poured us chardonnay as bread sticks and an appetizer of ham ravioli arrived. She brought a different chardonnay for the cannelloni filled with sweetbread. Then a hearty malbec, Argentina's signature wine, accompanied the main course of baby goat rolls filled with sun-dried tomatoes and aubergine.

For the apple with cardamom soup, oak ice cream and goat cheese – the "pre-dessert" on this tasting menu – a sweet white wine cleared the palate. Then one more malbec appeared for the dessert of yerba mate foam with grapefruit and orange caviar.

After getting up from the table, more than a little lightheaded, we passed through a courtyard where visitors had put their feet up and were sipping tea while reading books amid the chirping birds and warm sun peeking through the trees. No one seemed in any rush to leave.

Such is winery-hopping in Mendoza – Latin America's largest winemaking region. Situated some 600 miles west of Buenos Aires, the province is home to more than 800 wineries, about 100 of which actively receive tourists. And as Argentine wine exports continue to grow by 25 percent a year, this 57,000-square-mile area is drawing not only more tourists, but also vintners, who see in Mendoza the same charm and potential that propelled more established wine regions decades ago.

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But while money is pouring in, charming hotels are popping up, and wineries are going all-out architecturally, Mendoza remains very much an old-world experience. In the course of two visits over the past two years (the most recent in May), I found that days can easily turn into a week driving along dusty roads, knocking on winery doors and indulging in lunches that never seem to end.

Mendoza and wine have been intricately intertwined since the 1550s when Spanish settlers brought vineyard cuttings from Chile's Central Valley to what are now the provinces of Mendoza and San Juan. More than 300 years later a provincial governor, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, instructed a French agronomist to bring grapevine cuttings from France. Argentina can thank him for its original malbecs, the robust red wines that are such perfect accompaniments to the country's beef-heavy diet and which have become synonymous with its wine exports in the past decade.

New winemaking expertise arrived in the 1800s with the first wave of European immigrants, many escaping a phylloxera epidemic that had ravaged vineyards in their homelands.

After an earthquake in 1861 that killed at least 5,000 people, the city of Mendoza was rebuilt with large squares and wider streets and sidewalks to help resist future earthquake damage. Today those refinements, especially the sprawling plaza with its colorful fountain, lend the place a grand and stately feel.

In the decades that followed the quake, Mendoza developed into a center for winemaking and olive oil production, with its wine gaining fame in the early 1900s when winemakers began exporting it during the country's economic boom. But when the country fell on harder economic times, foreign investment dried up and so did the quality of Argentine wine.

Things began to turn around in the 1990s, when the winemaker Nicolás Catena, scion of the Catena Zapata winery, pioneered the modern malbec. After a stint as an economics professor at the University of California, Berkeley, he returned to Argentina in the early 1980s and began planting vines at different altitudes, up to almost 5,000 feet above sea level, and took advantage of microclimates that allow for more varied blends. More recently, millions of dollars in foreign capital have been flowing in from around the globe, with investors attracted by the relatively cheap land and a healthier Argentine economy. They are both buying vineyards outright and pumping life into traditional family operations. Kendall Jackson and Moët & Chandon have facilities there.

But still, while its wineries are fortified with state-of-the-art technology and its visitor centers rival any in Napa Valley, it remains a region where the slow pace and rustic backdrop recall an earlier age.

First-time visitors to Mendoza hoping to sample lots of wines are often disappointed to learn how far apart the wineries are and how limited their hours can be. Visiting four or five wineries in a weekend is an ambitious agenda, which is why I strongly urge staying longer.

There are several ways to approach the visit. My girlfriend and I stayed in the city of Mendoza. With a population of 110,000, it has wonderful restaurants along with places to stay that range from boutique hotels to chains like the Park Hyatt and the Sheraton. Outside the city, many wineries also have inns on the premises, offering everything from simple rooms to luxurious hideaways with access to horses and golf.

If you stay in Mendoza, however, you will need a car to visit the wineries. You can rent one or do what we did, which is to hire a taxi for multiple day trips at about \$100 a day. We found that our driver, with a cellphone full of winery numbers, was invaluable in making the most of our time there.

Most of the better wineries are located 30 minutes to two hours from downtown Mendoza, so planning is critical. (Also, some of the larger wineries require reservations.)

If time is tight, choose a handful of the wineries recommended by local sommeliers and wander at leisure at each for half a day. Or stay in one of the smaller rural towns like Maipú, Godoy Cruz or Luján de Cuyo, with quaint inns and spectacular mountain views, and concentrate on wineries clustered nearby.

While driving is still the easiest option, a 7.75-mile light rail connecting some of the nearby towns to Mendoza, including Godoy Cruz and Maipú, is scheduled to begin operation in the first half of 2011. And tour companies are expanding their range of services. You can organize a bicycle tour with companies like DuVine Adventures to visit four or five small wineries in a day. As the day progresses, however, safety does become an issue. "Everyone says it's fun in the beginning but it becomes complicated at the end when the bike starts to sway from one side to the other," said Fernando Szczurowski, a sommelier at Azafrán, a restaurant in downtown Mendoza.

We set out with a driver one morning armed with the names of a few wineries suggested by the hotel. The sun was blindingly bright. Mendoza is arid, with northern Arizona-like days of temperatures that can reach 90 degrees in the summer and plummet to 50 at night.

Our first stop was at Belasco de Baquedano, in Luján de Cuyo, about a 25-minute drive from the city. We passed through the stately gates and drove down a long dirt driveway stretching between the vineyards that ended at the massive front door of a modern, five-story Mayan-style building. The 222-acre vineyard, whose malbec vines turned 100 years old this year, is an example of those that have benefited from the foreign dollars pouring in over the last decade — in particular, the Belasco family of Spain, which owns four wineries there and expanded to Mendoza to make Argentine malbec. The winery boasts modern conveniences like mechanical steam barrel washers and gravity-driven grape delivery from sorting table to tank. The visitor center opened in January of 2008.

A young Argentine woman greeted us at the entrance and led us and another small group on a detailed tour, free of charge, of the modern facility, with its red lacquered concrete floors and shiny stainless steel tanks. The highlight was an “aroma room” where we were able to sample 46 fragrances — everything from mint to mushroom to geranium.

We ended our visit at a tasting lounge with a wood bar framed by large paintings of Argentine landscapes. Later we made our way to Familia Zuccardi for our spectacular lunch. It was so good, in fact, that we returned at day's end to experience their tasting room, where a pleasant sommelier from Britain with dreams of becoming a winemaker awed us with his knowledge of Argentine malbecs. We ended up buying a few bottles, along with some house olive oil.

One of the vineyards we most wanted to visit was that of Catena Zapata, as it produced some of the wines we had grown to love at home in Brazil.

Getting a tour, however, proved difficult. On our first trip, a long weekend, we learned that it was closed on Sundays, when many Mendocinos spend the day barbecuing with their families.

On our second trip, a driver called on a Friday afternoon and was told that the tours were all full. Ultimately we decided to drive over and try our luck. After explaining that I was a journalist working on an article, we were allowed in. We drove along the broad road leading up to the winery's main building, designed like a yellow Mayan temple and finished in 2001. The snow-capped Andes loomed in the background.

Inside, we joined a group of about eight on a tour that included a movie — with English subtitles — telling the story of Mr. Catena's forefather Nicola Catena, who sailed to Argentina from Italy in 1898.

We were also able to peek down into the steel vats containing the wine, and at one point one of the winemakers politely stopped to answer a few of the visitors' questions. Tours are free and include a glass of wine. Tastings are 40 to 60 pesos (\$10 to \$15.50, at 3.88 pesos to the dollar). We tasted two or three wines for about 40 pesos, the most expensive tasting we encountered on our two trips. I bought a bottle of Angelica Zapata malbec 2006 for 180 pesos, about 25 percent less than what it costs in Brazil, which has high import taxes on wine. (Duty-free is still a better deal than the winery.)

The next day, with many wineries shut down for a holiday, we decided to take a break from our wine travels. We climbed in a hotel cab and drove about two hours out of the city and into the Andes to the sprawling Termas Cacheuta, a hotel and spa that features outdoor thermal pools of differing temperatures. Tourists can visit for a day or stay overnight at the inn and partake of massages and a diverse buffet that includes mouthwatering warm bread and cheeses. It's a great way to detox. We stayed for the day and returned to Mendoza that afternoon.

That night we dressed up a bit and headed out to Godoy Cruz, a small winemaking town about a half-hour from Mendoza, to visit 1884, a restaurant owned by the Argentine chef and grilling expert Francis Mallmann. A collaboration between Mr. Mallmann and Mr. Catena, 1884 is set inside the Escorihuela winery, where diners can eat – weather permitting – in a charming candle-lit courtyard. We were not overly impressed with our pasta dishes – mine was a fairly pedestrian fettuccine with shrimp – but we were amazed by the wine cellar filled with 600 different Argentine labels.

On Sunday, the third day of our second trip, we took another suggestion from our hotel and headed to Salentein winery in the Uco Valley, about an hour away from Mendoza. With hulking doors and clean, modern European lines, it reminded me of the Tate Modern in London. It even has an airy art gallery inside the winery featuring Dutch and Argentine painters (it is owned by Dutch investors) and sculptors like Jorge Gamarra. A glass elevator takes visitors from the ground floor to a lower level filled with stainless steel and oak barrels, which locals have dubbed “the Bat Cave.”

We ate an unmemorable lunch while enjoying memorable views in the winery’s large restaurant, and bought a malbec and two bottles of a pinot noir we liked from our tasting. Our driver shuttled us just down the road from the winery’s main building to show us the peaceful, 16-room Salentein inn set amid manicured lawns and malbec vines.

That night we went back to one of our favorite restaurants in Mendoza. On our first trip we had become enchanted with Azafrán, a few blocks off the main square, which specializes in local cuisine with an international twist. The thick wood tables, vintage checkered floors and wall lined with spices gave us the sense that we were in a French countryside bistro. Before selecting our main course, Mr. Szczurowski, the sommelier, accompanied us to the extensive cellar and wine store, which features some 450 labels, and discussed our tastes, encouraging us to match the wine to our food. We selected a malbec and started with the house specialty, a platter of smoked cheeses and meats. I ordered a young lamb cooked with caramelized onions. The restaurant is best known for its red tuna.

On the last night of our trip we stopped by again, this time to have a light dinner of just the cheese and meat platter, a salad and a glass of chardonnay. Then we walked a few blocks to the Hyatt, where to our surprise we discovered one of Mendoza’s best wine bars near the pool.

In a project indicative of the money and innovation currently flooding the area, Mr. Evans, the American campaign strategist, and Pablo Giménez Riili, a Mendoza winemaker, started an Argentine-American company called Vines of Mendoza in an effort to broaden the possibilities of wine tourism in the region. Vines of Mendoza selects 100 of the best wines from the region and brings them to the tasting room and vinoteca it has created at the Hyatt so that visitors, especially tourists, can sample a large number of Argentine wines in one place without having to go to each and every winery.

Another initiative is creating a sort of winery co-op, in which 85 international investors will share in the expenses (and profits) of a vineyard. The partners also plan to open a small boutique resort later this year very near the vineyards, where guests will be able to ride horses and crush grapes during the harvest.

In a comparison suggesting that the languid pace of Mendoza might not always be the only way to experience the region, Mr. Evans had one final comment: “The vision is to create an experience that is a little closer to what you might experience in Napa, but with an Argentine flair.”