



THE RISE OF ARGENTINIAN WINE

A few years ago a visiting American, Michael Evans, decided that what was needed was one place in town where you could tour all the bodegas, as it were, by glassfuls.

by Brian Byrnes

Foreigners are wading into Argentina's wine industry. MENDOZA, Argentina – Frank Ansel knows good wine when he tastes it.

As a food and beverage executive with Hyatt International, Ansel spent 35 years crisscrossing the globe sampling the world's finest culinary delights. When it came time to retire last year, he decided to leave Chicago and settle overseas. One country in particular stood out.

"I always thought that I would live in Europe, perhaps in France," he said. However, "with the euro/dollar exchange today, that didn't make sense anymore. But in Argentina, your dollar can go a long way."

Ansel is one of a small but growing number of foreigners who were originally drawn to Argentina because of its affordability, and who are now getting involved in the country's burgeoning wine industry.

Ansel purchased land in Mendoza, which sits 650 miles west of Buenos Aires and serves as the epicenter of Argentina's wine country. He paid \$15,000 for two acres of terroir in the sunny Uco Valley and plans to begin planting his grapes with the help of an Argentine partner in September.

"The wine business in Argentina is fascinating," he said. "And Malbec is the grape to plant."

Argentina is the world's fifth-largest wine producer, and the popularity of its wines has soared in recent years, thanks largely to increased exports of Malbec. The rich, earthy red has become Argentina's signature grape, and most experts agree that the best Malbecs in the world are produced here, below the towering white-tipped peaks of the Andes Mountains, where the soil is ripe, the water is clean and the sun is strong.

"Argentina really found its identity with the Malbec," said Andreas Larsson, who in 2007 won the title of Best Sommelier in the World. "The last 10 years has been quite a revolution in regards to better quality wine. Argentina's challenge now is to find a personality, and evoke the elegance and layers of its wines," he said.

While some, like Ansel, are taking a do-it-yourself approach to boutique winemaking, there is also a growing number of companies in Argentina that offer hands-on help to wannabe winemakers.

In 2006, Michael Evans, a former tech executive from Washington D.C., and his Argentine business partner, Pablo Gimenez Riili, purchased 650 acres of land in the Uco Valley. They've since sold small parcels to more than 50 owners from around the globe, including celebrity chef Wolfgang Puck, who plans to sell his Argentine wine at his restaurants in the United States.

Their project, which they call the Private Vineyard Estates, is run under the direction of renowned Argentine winemaker Santiago Achaval, whose Achaval Ferrer wines are among the most highly decorated of all Argentine wines.

"We provide all the services, from clearing and planting, to the actual winemaking, including barrel aging, bottling and shipping," Gimenez Riili said. "So it's a turnkey operation." Meanwhile, other entrepreneurs are promoting "wine lifestyle retreats" and selling private homes in communities tucked within the vineyards.

"Mendoza is Jackson Hole with vineyards, but better than Napa Valley and Bordeaux, and with the weather of Palm Springs," said Stephen Vletas, a Wyoming native who founded the Southern Cross Land Company in 2003. Vletas has sold property in Mendoza to customers from the United States, Canada, Russia, China and South Africa, and expects he'll continue to attract foreign investment in Mendoza for years to come.

"You can live here for a quarter or a third of the cost of other wine regions. And you're living up against the Andes Mountains. There's any kind of outdoor activity you want. It's not just the vineyards," Vletas said.

Indeed, Mendoza is increasingly popular among foodies who are coming to dine in the new restaurants and hotels that continue to pop up in leafy neighborhoods like Maipu, Chacras de Coria and Lujan de Cuyo.

"Argentines used to produce wine just for ourselves, but now we are exporting it, and we are very happy with the results," said Cecilia Diaz Chuit, owner of the Cavas Wine Lodge, a luxury hotel that offers alfresco dining under the stars and unique spa treatments like the Crushed Malbec Body Scrub or the Bonarda Bath. "That is what is causing this buzz, and causing people to come to Mendoza to see for themselves."

A recent gathering – called the "Masters of Food & Wine South America" – brought some of the world's top chefs and sommeliers together in Mendoza for a weekend of gastronomic gluttony. Modeled after a similar event held in Carmel, Calif., for more than 20 years, the Masters featured meals prepared by Michelin-starred chefs from France, Spain and Ireland, as well as other renowned Argentine, Brazilian, Peruvian, Japanese and American chefs, including Benjamin Ford, owner of Ford's Filling Station in Los Angeles and son of actor Harrison Ford.

"We don't really get a chance to drink that much Argentine wine in the United States," Ford said. "The quality of the wine here is something that I haven't experienced before...and I was very pleasantly surprised."

It's a sentiment often repeated about Argentine wines, especially when it comes to cost. Like most industries right now, winemaking around the world is affected by the global economic crisis. Many say the high quality and low cost of Argentina's wines are an advantage.

"People in the U.S. who used to drink a \$150 Napa Cabernet are now drinking a \$50 Malbec from Argentina," said Jose Manuel Ortega of O. Fournier Vineyards. "That leaves them \$100 in their pocket, or two more bottles in their cellar. That's not bad."

Frank Ansel agreed. For now, he views his Argentina winemaking project as a hobby, but doesn't rule out someday trying to turn a profit.

"If it turns into a business, great. Either way, I don't know anywhere else in the wine world where you can get this kind of value, and be able to play like I'm going to play!"