



OWNING A PIECE OF THE VINEYARD

Two years ago, a colleague bragged that he and two friends had bought three acres of vineyards in Argentina's Uco Valley for \$210,000, including the first two years of farming fees. Each harvest season since, he and his partner-pals have gone down to the fast-growing wine region to pick and crush their grapes, then blend them into premium wines under the guidance of Santiago Achával, one of Argentina's most revered winemakers (his Malbecs can sell for more than \$100 a bottle—several times the typical price) ... Starting this year, they'll have some 12,000 bottles of wine annually to label and drink as they choose, at a cost of \$3,000 per acre in farming fees.

You may not get rich off a few acres at Argentina's Vines of Mendoza, but who can put a price tag on stomping, mixing and bottling your own vintage?

One hundred twenty to a row.

That's what the disarmingly attractive Argentine farmer tells me as he hands me a stack of American root-stock grafted with fruit-forward Torrontés grape vines. Two pairs of gloves and a shovel follow. Down the string my friend and I trace, digging six-inch-deep holes, aligning the grafting scar on the baby vine with a pinprick in the irrigation line, then setting the vine in the pebbly earth and burying its hairy roots. A pro could plant 100 an hour; in five minutes, we've given life to five.

"Don't worry if you're slow or the plants aren't fully upright," our tutor, Francisco Evangelista, says. "We usually replant them, anyway."

Only a handful of the 97 owners at the Vines of Mendoza, a 1,000-some-acre co-op vineyard in western Argentina, will not need their handiwork replaced by professional agronomists like Mr. Evangelista. No matter: It's the process that's so inviting. As we dig, place and fill, our hands cramp in the chill, our boots cake over with mud. Far beyond the stripes of Malbec, Cabernet Franc, Tempranillo and 11 other varietals, the land abruptly erupts into the silver-capped pre-Andes. Above them is nothing but blue sky, which glows even without the benefit of polarized sunglasses.

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A glass is placed in my hand even before I can brush the ferrous dirt from my jeans. Needless to say, I became slightly obsessed with the venture. Eventually, I reached out to founder Michael Evans, a reformed dot-commer who ran business development for iNetNow, a Web-based concierge service, in 2004, then quit to go on the Democratic campaign trail. He came to Argentina to detox afterward; he never went back. And after many false starts, I finally made my way to Mendoza.

A 12-hour flight from New York, followed by a two-hour puddle-hop from Buenos Aires, and still we're not deep in the heart of Mendoza. That requires off-roading 60 miles from the airport, traversing a muddy road that's become a Class V rapid in the rain, then trotting on horseback through the Uco Valley basin. Everywhere you look, it's vineyard after vineyard, each more modern and gravity-defying than the next. (Rioja has nothing on this place.) A leathery gaucho named Walter Martinez leads me and my friend on a trail ride through a landscape that could have been Photoshopped from my home state of Arizona. There are even saguaro cacti. He points out where homesites will be (owners with three or more acres are granted building permits), where the lake for the 22-casita poured-concrete resort and spa is being dug, where he takes guests on camping trips up into the Andes.

It is late October, spring in Argentina, and as the season dawns all around us, a few older vines—originally planted in 2007—are beginning to twist their greenery around the wooden stakes. One galloping stretch that leaves my heart in my shoes brings us to the big reveal: the winery. Appearing more like an angular performing arts center than a home for aging wines, the building is cold in every sense of the term. I love it. "This is where the magic happens," Mr. Evans tells me as he greets my dismounting party with a party of his own.

A glass is placed in my hand even before I can brush the ferrous dirt from my jeans. And then we are inside the austere, echoing, sparkling palace of fermentation, and my breath is stolen from me.



Cooperative vineyards are not a new idea—farmers have been organizing them on a small scale in Alsace, France, since 1895. The Napa Valley Reserve in California and L'And Vineyards in Portugal's Alentejo region are just two other recent incarnations. No matter how you slice it, though, in the Northern Hemisphere it's cheaper to be a wine enthusiast than a hobby farmer. (The old joke goes, "How do you make a small fortune from a vineyard? Start with a large fortune.") But in Mendoza, where the climate is harsh enough to torture vines into producing stellar grapes, land is plentiful and inexpensive. Construction costs only about \$100 a square foot. Erecting an ancestral home in the Uco Valley isn't a pipe dream. It's within the realm of reality.

With annual costs included, a typical owner will generally spend around \$12 per bottle on creating his or her own super premium wine at the Vines of Mendoza; at retail, it would sell for around \$50 a bottle, according to winemaker Santiago Achával. You probably won't get rich off a few acres in Argentina, but who can put a price tag on stomping, mixing and bottling your own vintage, then slapping on a label with your (made-up) family crest?

The modernist winery is the opposite of quaint. Huge metal tanks await next harvest. Rows of oak barrels fill darkened rooms. A whisper becomes a shout, what with all the bare surfaces to bounce off of. Another gorgeous member of the Vines team, winemaker Mariana Onofri, walks me through the life of a grape, from planting and pruning to hydraulic presses and the Oxoline system of barrel fermentation. A winery of this size—producing 180,000 bottles a year—would typically make 10 fermentations (types of wines), she tells me. Because there are effectively 97 winemakers/owners here, however, the Vines of Mendoza created 161 smaller fermentations in 2011 alone. A team of winemakers dips into the barrels every two weeks to assure quality and flavor.

And then we sit down to drink. Five glasses stand at each of the two-dozen seats at the communal table, which becomes a hive of servers and roasted pork and barbecued sausage and crisp Sauvignon Blancs that were bottled on Friday. Staff from the winery, some owners down from Buenos Aires and a couple of gauchos join in. We taste a Merlot from 2010 that has a nose of chocolate and will be bottled in January. A Malbec in its bitter youth is passed; it will be 17 months before it's ready to hit shelves. A smooth, dry blend of Malbec, Merlot and Cabernet Franc is served before dessert; this won't see a liquor store until 2013.

By the end of this typical Wednesday at the cooperative, we're all a little tipsy and giving away more than a few secrets. Someone reveals that a bold-faced chef has recently purchased some acreage. There's a running joke that the staff is publishing a fireman-style calendar, and glasses clink as we all agree to buy one. We're eventually packed off to town with sacks of recently bottled Tempranillos. My friend and I hatch a plan to create a joint venture and buy one of the remaining plots, jesting that our grandchildren will someday drink those crooked Torrontes we planted earlier in the day. "You'll be back," says Mr. Evans, who reminds me that he came on a lark after John Kerry's presidential campaign tanked, and never left. In my oaky, fruity, spicy haze, I know that I just might.



The Lowdown: Mendoza, Argentina

How to Join: Three-acre plots at the Vines of Mendoza start at \$73,000 per acre, including the first two years of farming and planting costs; the annual farming fees are \$3,000 per acre starting in the third year (vinesofmendoza.com).

Getting There: Fly from Buenos Aires or Santiago to Mendoza's El Plumerillo airport (request a window seat for Andes views). Alternatively, Mendoza is a six-hour-plus drive over the mountains from Santiago—a beautiful trip, though one that requires hiring a driver licensed to take you over the border (contact a local tour company).

Staying There: If you're not staying in the cabins at the Vines of Mendoza (the 22-room hotel will open in late 2012), the Cavas Wine Lodge is 40 miles down the road (from \$605 per night, cavaswinelodge.com) and has a spa that specializes in vinotherapy. The Park Hyatt Mendoza (doubles from \$222 per night, mendoza.park.hyatt.com) is downtown, in a converted 1920s colonial retreat.

Where to Eat: For amazing food presented in a lovely courtyard under the stars, book a table at Francis Mallmann's 1884 (1884restaurant.com.ar), right outside of Mendoza. For more local cuisine, Siete Cocinas serves dishes from seven culinary regions of Argentina (sietecocinas.com.ar). Don Mario has arguably the best—and undoubtedly the biggest—steaks in the area (donmario.com.ar). A wine-pairing lunch at a vineyard is a must-do. Two to pre-book: the French-château-style Andeluna Cellars (andeluna.com) and La Bourgogne (labourgogne-mendoza.com.ar), which updates its French menu seasonally.