

The Mendoza Provence of Argentina

The Finest Place to Start a Vineyard in the New World

BY JON GENDERSON

I have made a very bold statement but a recent trip to this beautiful wine producing region has me convinced it is true. The province of Mendoza lies due west of Buenos Aires and borders the Andes Mountains that separate Argentina from Chile. The mountains are snow-capped most of the year and can be seen from almost everywhere in the city of Mendoza and from the surrounding vineyards. It is an hour and half flight from Buenos Aires and is well worth the trip.

The city of Mendoza is located in the north of the province and most wineries are located within an hour and half drive south of the city. The wineries around the town of San Rafael are a three-hour drive.

An Exceptional Venue For Wine

Aside from the gorgeous mountains, what makes Mendoza so special?

First, the region is a desert with almost unlimited water. The soil of the Mendoza wine region is primarily alluvial composed of loose sand over clay. It rarely rains; the province has 330 days a year of sunshine. The water is snowmelt from the Andes and five rivers including the Mendoza flow strongly all year. A system of irrigation channels and canals (some dating to the 16th century) help distribute the water in this semi-arid desert region. Systems of large underground aquifers provide water for the newer plantings that are not in proximity to a river. Vines are thus irrigated in controlled amounts when the vintner desires it, not at nature's whim.

The climate is very warm during the day and far cooler at night. This diurnal temperature variation is a key factor in producing high quality wines. The grapes gain sugars during the day and the cool nighttime temperatures preserve the acidity that gives a wine its balance and complexity.

The elevation of the vineyards allows the viticulturist to find the perfect spot for each grape variety. Most vineyards in Mendoza are planted at elevations of 2500-4500 feet (and some even higher) resulting in intense sunshine but cooler air temperatures. This results in physiologically ripe grapes in almost every vintage without elevated sugars and high alcohol levels.

There is no Phylloxera (a grape louse that eats the vines roots) so most vines are planted on their own rootstocks. This phenomenon is true only in South America. The dryness and altitude preclude

many of the other maladies that affect vines in other parts of the world, making it much easier to farm organically.

Price! The Argentine Peso is currently valued at 26 cents. Good land in Mendoza can be purchased for \$3000 an acre. Dinner for four in a very fine restaurant with two bottles of very good wine can cost only \$100-\$150. Dinner in a good but casual restaurant with wine can run around \$10 a person. This is definitely a place worthy of a visit, or an investment, especially during these economic times.

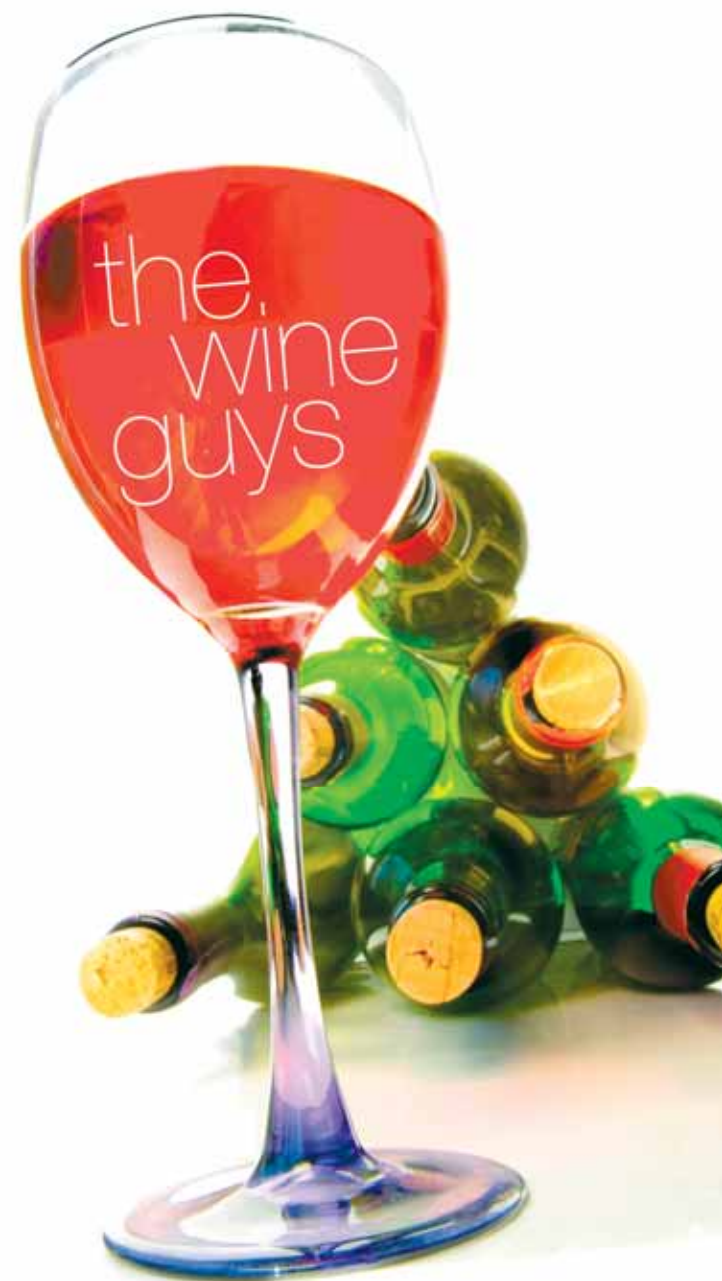
A Wine-Lovers Paradise

I have been to wineries around the world and have long believed that winemakers and viticulturists are the finest of hosts. Culture in different countries plays a major in how guests are treated but we have been treated extremely well at wineries everywhere. Certainly Italy and Spain have ranked at the top of my list with personal tours and tastings followed by meals that seemed to go on forever. Argentina now joins my personal list at the top. We were picked up at our hotel in Mendoza by winemakers who took us on a tour of their vineyards and winery; led us through lavish tastings and fed us until we were ready to explode. It was a pace that allowed for only one winery per day and I found that very relaxing; especially compared to tastings in California and France where I would see five to ten wineries a day. A visit to the wines country in Argentina should be on your list of places to go.

Our first visit was to the spectacular Valley de Uco, about an hour and a half from Mendoza City with altitudes ranging from 2700 feet to 4500 feet. The elevation and proximity to the Andes makes this one of the coolest climates in Mendoza. It is here that the finest cool climate grapes thrive including Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Our visit this day was to Bodegas Atamisque, a brand new winery whose first vintage was the 2007.

The winemaker, Philippe Caraguel, took us on a tour of the huge property, through the vineyards and orchards, and then to the winery where we tasted some incredible wines. Philippe worked for three years at Joseph Drouhin in Burgundy and produces

very Burgundian Chardonnay and Pinot Noir that I thoroughly enjoyed. I nearly fell off my chair when I learned that they will sell in the states for well under \$20 a bottle. The Chardonnay was medium bodied and refined with toasty oak and vanilla, yeasty apple and topical fruit flavors leading to a long finish. Its cool climate acidity made it a perfect accompaniment to the trout raised on the Estate and served for lunch. The Pinot Noir is bright ruby in color with black raspberry and strawberry fruit, great structure and a really fine mouthfeel. Both wines are marketed under Atamisque's second label, Catalpa. The top of the line Atamisque



label will be available in the States early next year. The line will include a lovely 80-year-old vine Malbec (\$25) with black fruit aromas and flavors, great balance and structure and lovely concentration. The top of the line Assemblage (\$35), a blend of 50% Malbec, 25% Cabernet Sauvignon and 25% Merlot, has absolutely gorgeous fruit, blackberry and raspberry flavors, complexity and a long, long finish. It is a truly excellent wine.

Our next visit was back to the Uco Valley with winemaker Ramon Hinojosa who took us to his family's winery, Bodegas Hinojosa, located in the town of Tunuyán. Hinojosa pro-

rant where they were cut and placed on the indoor grill before waiters would offer the meat to the diners. It was another incredible meal.

Our last full day in Mendoza took us to the famous Lujan de Cuyo region only forty minutes from Mendoza City. We visited another new winery, Belasco de Baquedano. This huge, modern winery makes only Malbec from vines as old as 100 years. The spectacular winery features great views of the Andes, a truly outstanding restaurant and marvelous wines. The top of the line, Swinto (\$36), produced from the oldest vines, is a tour de force. It can compete with the finest and most



"Baleaco de Baquedano Malbec Vineyards at the foot of the Andes"

duces Barricas Malbec (\$8) a delicious value wine with soft blackberry and black cherry flavors and a touch of oak. Their eponymous wine is a Malbec Roble (Reserva) and a Tempranillo Roble (\$10) that offer oak aging and simply incredible value. We tasted their wines at a partners butcher shop where he produces Argentine Jamon Crudo, or what we would call prosciutto. The cold mountain air is perfect for aging of the Jamon, and it was a wonderful accompaniment to the wines. We then enjoyed a three hour lunch in the only restaurant in Tunuyán. Large sides of beef and lamb were splayed over an open fire outside the restau-

expensive Mendoza Malbecs, at a third the price. The value prices Llama (\$14) may just be the best value Malbec I have tasted.

We did visit a few more wineries but space prevents me from raving about them all. I highly recommend that you pay a visit to this delightful wine region and discover more gems for yourself.

Jon Genderson, co-owner of Schneider's on Capitol Hill, writes the monthly "Wine Guys" column for the Hill Rag. He can be reached at 202-543-9300. Schneider's is located at 300 Massachusetts Ave. NE, or visit the store online at www.cellar.com. ★

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