

# WINE NEWS

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## Argentina

Text & Photographs by MARGUERITE THOMAS

postcards from the land of buen vino



An alfresco lunch accompanied by just enough good wine to rouse the soul is often the perfect remedy for the traveler who has endured a red-eye flight. Arriving in Buenos Aires, Argentina's gateway city, I am soon poolside at the recently opened Faena Hotel, slathering on sunblock and perusing the menu. This modish, modern property (a former warehouse built in 1902) in the chic Puerto Madero district of Buenos Aires attracts international celebrities, but I am more interested in the deliciously tantalizing cooking aromas wafting through the air.

Following my nose to a nearby patio, I make my selections from a traditional Argentine *asado* — an enticing variety of meats sizzling on a grill. Choosing from the extensive wine list (3,500 mostly Argentine bottles, comprising 350 different labels) requires more thought. I opt for a bottle of Alta Vista 2002 Torrontes, in anticipation of my journey north later this afternoon to the province of Salta.

The heart of torrontes viticulture lies in Salta, although it certainly is produced in other regions of Argentina as well. Originally a Spanish variety, torrontes virtually died out in its native land and is now thoroughly identified with Argentina. In recent years, Salta has shifted more emphatically toward malbec, cabernet, tannat and other red varieties, but 45 percent of the region's total wine production (and 95 percent of its white wine) is still made from torrontes. Ideally, Torrontes has a seductive aroma with some of the same notes of honeysuckle that one finds in classic Viognier. In the mouth it can be moderately full bodied, and it is notably crisp on the finish. If there is a downside, it is that Torrontes is prone to a slightly bitter aftertaste (which some may not find appealing), and it often lacks the complexity of truly great wine.

But these niggling complaints don't interfere with my complete enjoyment of this refreshing, food-friendly wine. What is more, Torrontes is also ridiculously inexpensive, with retail prices in the United States generally hovering around \$10.

A large province in the northwestern section of Argentina, Salta, which is allegedly the highest altitude winegrowing region in the world, is situated at the edge of the Andes Mountains bordering six Argentine provinces and three countries (Chile, Bolivia and Peru). Its capital of the same name (Salta is taken from "Sagta," an indigenous word that translates suitably as "the pretty one") is a large (600,000 inhabitants) and classic Colonial town with a lively market and a central plaza dominated by a Baroque cathedral. Cobble streets, outdoor cafés and a handful of museums make it an alluring city for tourists. Before the Colonial era (1500-1810), Salta was part of the Incan Empire. Ties to the Incas and other native peoples are evident in the region's geographic names — the Calchaquíes Valley, for example, where most of the vineyards are located, is named after a Northern Argentine tribe that offered vigorous resistance to the first Spanish colonists (*wikipedia*) arriving from Chile — as well as in modern graphic designs adorning everything from wine labels, to llama wool shawls, to hand-woven rugs.

The Incan cross — patterned on the beautiful Southern Cross constellation — turns up on the labels of Bodega El Porvenir de los Andes, a boutique winery and one of the finest of Salta's 19 producers. In the tasting room, a stylish melding of early Colonial architecture and simple Moorish design, I sample some of the



**Above:** The recently opened Faena Hotel features a traditional Argentine *asado*.

**Opposite page, clockwise from top:** Empanadas are so much a part of everyday life, they are even baked in adobe ovens set in the midst of vineyards; travelers are drawn to Cafayate, one of the three Salta villages where most vineyards are located, for wine as well as arts and crafts; O. Fournier's fruity Urban label is intended for casual consumption, while A Crux and B Crux, named for two stars in the Southern Cross constellation, are for more serious imbibing.

distinctive and extremely impressive wines crafted by Luis Asmed (along with Spanish consultant Isabel Mijares Garcia Pelayo). I am charmed by the gewürztraminer-like aromas and unusually long finish of the 2005 Laborum Torrontes, and by the way the '03 Malbec floods the palate with luscious, sweet fruit. I am also dazzled by the mighty 2003 Laborum Malbec/Cabernet (of which only 5,259 bottles were made); it is as elegant as it is powerful. The '03 Syrah brims with fruit and sweet spices.

Less than an hour after leaving El Porvenir, I am seated in the welcoming shade of the colonnaded portico at Finca el Recreo, biting into a piping-hot empanada. The aroma alone is enough to quicken the appetite, but the crust crackles under my teeth, releasing a torrent of onion-spiked meat juices. These hand-held pies are a daily staple throughout Latin America, where millions are consumed every day. Today they are particularly delicious with the Quara wines I am sampling, including Torrontes, Chardonnay, Malbec, Merlot and Tannat. Attractively priced around \$9, all the wines are easy on the palate with their bold flavors and keen expressions of varietal character.

UC-Davis-trained Quara winemaker Francisco "Pancho" Lavaque notes, "Like the grapes, the tomatoes and other vegetables from the Calchaquíes Valley are also unusually deeply flavored. It may be our diurnal variations [extreme variation between night and day temperatures] that is the reason there is so much varietal

flavor in both grapes and vegetables," he suggests, "or perhaps it is the altitude." Pancho is the fifth generation of winemaking Lavaques (whose origins are French); the family owns the winery. He collaborates on the Quara wines with co-winemaker Jose Luis Mounier, whose background includes a stint at Bordeaux's illustrious Château Le Bon Pasteur.

Three other tiers of wine are produced by the Lavaques, who also have holdings in the Mendoza region. The Conquista line of remarkably good and affordable mass-market wines (widely available at Sam's Club for about \$6) includes bright, citrusy Chardonnays and simple, honest Malbecs. The Finca de Altura label features robust Merlots, ripe, fruity Malbecs, and restrained yet flavorful Pinots (prices range from \$12 to \$20). The top-level Felix Lavaque selections, named for the company's founder, are more complex and sophisticated.

With its expanse of whitewashed Colonial buildings, ancient stone cellars and vineyards rolling up against the Quilmes Mountains in the foothills of the Andes, Finca El Recreo is a magnificent estate. Because of the high altitude and the pure air, the light washing across this landscape is remarkably crystalline. At noon the next day, I am awed again by the luminescence that sets every detail of the landscape in sharp relief against pristine blue skies. Bathed in this radiant light, the

sculptural dark-skinned trunks of ancient torrentes vines form a poetic contrast to the delicate web of lime green leaves draped above them.

"We use a modified pergola system, which we think is the best way to protect the old vines in this hot place," notes Andres Höy, the vineyard manager at Michel Torino. Other than the challenges of a desert climate, the Calchaquies Valley provides a near-perfect environment for viticulture. "We have no frost, no hail and virtually no diseases or pests. The sandy soils are like beaches: poor in nitrogen, but full of micro-nutrients," he explains. As in most of Argentina's wine regions, vines are irrigated by snow-melt flowing down from the Andes through a complex network of channels. These benign conditions seem ripe for organic viticulture, and last year Michel Torino began producing its first organically certified wines.

Michel Torino is one of the country's oldest wineries, founded in 1892 by French immigrant David Michel, and his Italian wife, Gabriela Torino. The storied winery is now considered the boutique property in the holdings of Peñaflor, an international investment firm that controls a handful of other Argentine wineries. On this historic estate, a luxury hotel, a spa and a restaurant geared toward gourmet tastes have recently opened. The 30-room hotel (operated by Starwood) reflects Colonial design with period furnishings and carpets hand-woven by local artisans. The spa touts its winery connection with creams, shampoos and other products based on grape seeds. Before heading off for lunch, I relax there in a hot tub filled with water dosed with Cabernet. "It helps the body absorb healthful polyphenols," the spa therapist assures me.

In the restaurant, a series of intimate, interconnecting and beautifully landscaped patios have given the entire complex its name: Patio de Cafayate. I am sheltered under an umbrella in the sunny *Patio de las Barricas* enjoying a crêpe made from quinoa (an Andean grain), filled with goat cheese and napped with a creamy, wine-based sauce. I also order the grilled llama meat, which is surprisingly lean and flavorful. The delicious breads are baked in the hotel's wood-burning adobe oven.

The flowery fragrance of Michel Torino's 2005 Torrontes (\$10) has set the stage for the meal. Winemaker Alessandro Daniel Pepa's Don David Reserve Malbec 2004 is nicely concentrated and redolent of chocolate and spice, while the Don David Shiraz '04 is a powerful amalgam of black pepper and raspberry (each about \$14). Both wines are a savory foil to the richly sauced quinoa crêpe. As I savor the big, brawny 2003 Altimus (a red blend), I'm hoping my body is busily absorbing polyphenols after its soak in the hot tub.

Another of the Salta region's noteworthy wineries is Bodega Colomé, which, at almost 8,000 feet above sea level, is likely the world's highest vineyard. In 2001, wine impresario Donald Hess (the Swiss-born proprietor of The Hess Collection in Napa Valley), bought an historic property in Molinos and began

adding new plantings to the existing vineyards, some of which date back to the mid-19th century. This high-altitude project is already on its way to becoming one of the country's premier wine estates. The wines — Torrontes, Sauvignon Blanc and a handful of Malbec-based reds — are intense and powerful. In addition to sustainable viticulture, grains, fruit, dairy products and herbs are being biodynamically raised here to help supply the estate's small restaurant. The property also features nine luxurious guest rooms decorated with colorful handcrafted tiles and modern art.

The Calchaquies Valley stretches about 125 miles beyond the city of Salta, but most vineyards are spread out among the small villages of Molinos, Chañar and Cafayate. On a visit to Cafayate one evening, I stroll around the central plaza laid out in typical Colonial style in front of the cathedral. With a population of only 13,000, the pace is wonderfully relaxed. While there is only a smattering of modest boutiques, some offer engaging local arts and crafts. I am particularly enchanted by the colorful woven tapestries executed by Miguel Nanni, a Cafayate artist with an international following.

As most of the winemakers here tend to do, I depart from the Salta region the same way I arrived from Buenos Aires a couple of days earlier: via private plane. The small Cessna taxis down a rugged runway laid out in the middle of the valley floor, then lifts up to soar above the magnificent mountains much like a giant hawk catching an updraft. In less than 90 minutes, we touch down in San Rafael. Located 150 miles south of Mendoza City, San Rafael is one of Argentina's most important wine regions, accounting for approximately 15 percent of the nation's total production.

Three generations of the Valentin Bianchi family have been producing wine here for 80 years. The original winery is located in downtown San Rafael, with a newer estate about seven miles west of the city and about 865 acres of vineyard holdings. The winemaking philosophy is influenced by input from California's Robert Peppi. Value bottlings run the gamut from Champaña Bianchi, a bone-dry *brut* sparkler (\$10) to Elsa Bianchi's reasonably priced (about \$8), tasty and unimposing wines such as Chardonnay/Sémillon, Barbera, Malbec and Syrah. The mid-range Familia line (about \$18), offers juicy Malbecs and plush Cabs, while the top-end, Cabernet-centric Enzo Bianchi internationally-styled wines (about \$49) are ripe, dark and velvety.

Like Valentin Bianchi, Bodegas Graffigna was founded by an Italian immigrant, Santiago Graffigna, who arrived in Argentina in 1876. In that era, water was divided up on different days between the region's wine producers. According to local lore, Don Santiago was so dedicated to his winery that on his wedding day — which coincided with his assigned irrigation day — he left the reception to go water his vineyard. Today Graffigna is watered via a sophisticated system that includes drip irrigation. Located north of San Rafael in San Juan, Graffigna

produces excellent-value wines including aromatic and full-bodied Chardonnays, fruity Pinot Grigios, rich Malbecs and concentrated Cabernets (prices range from \$9 to \$18). Of all the wines he crafts, however, Syrah appears to be the one winemaker Gerardo Daniz is most excited about. "Syrah seems to adapt better to the San Juan climate than other varieties," he says. (Graffigna Syrah is \$18.)

Leaving San Rafael the next morning, I drive through scrubby desert land, moving toward the Uco Valley. The Andes rise up flat and purple like a supersized filmy curtain drawn across the horizon. A couple of hours into the trip, I am startled by the sight of what appears to be a space ship parked on the desert floor. It's not a mirage, but rather a Space Age-style winery called Bodegas O. Fournier. The company's president, Federico Cassone, welcomes me to the property founded by Spanish vintner Ortega José Fournier. José Spisso, the winemaker, is absent today because he is in Spain overseeing a Northern Hemisphere harvest at O. Fournier's Ribera del Duero estate.

The futuristic facility, designed by the Mendoza architectural firm of Bormida & Yanzon, was inspired by the Southern Cross, with four columns supporting a series of buildings connected by soaring catwalks. With no central column to support the principal room, the airy space, with its vertical planes, looks positively surreal. But while it may seem isolated in this empty, parched landscape, O. Fournier is actually an entirely hospitable place, complete with a visitor center and tasting room. Work on an elite hotel is under way, but meanwhile visitors can stay overnight in nearby guest houses on the estate.

O. Fournier wines are by no means overshadowed by the dramatic architecture. The fresh and fruity everyday Urban selections (\$9 and up) are as contemporary as their sleek labels. More serious in nature are the A Crux and B Crux lines, named for two of the most important stars in the Southern Cross constellation. The B Crux (about \$15) includes intense and complex Sauvignon Blanc, elegant Malbec, substantial Tempranillo, plus a red blend that shows remarkable finesse and complexity. The top-tier A Crux (\$35) features a gorgeous cherry and chocolate Malbec and a captivating tempranillo-based red blend characterized by stunning chocolate, fruit and spice notes.

In the Uco Valley due south of O. Fournier lies Clos de Los Siete. To describe the vinescape here as "spectacular" is an understatement. Uco Valley vineyards are the only ones in the Mendoza region that grow directly beneath the Andes range rather than in the foothills, and the sight of rows of vines marching straight up to those astonishing mountains is a compelling image that will surely be etched forever in my memory. Clos de Los Siete refers to the "Club of Seven," a group of preeminent investors from Bordeaux who founded this property. One of them, the redoubtable Michel Rolland — international wine consultant and owner of Château Le Bon Pasteur in Pomerol — escorts me through the

vineyard and the handsome winery, the latter designed by Paris architect Bruno Legrand.

"Our soils are very shallow here," Rolland notes. "The first meter is about 70 percent soil and 30 percent rock, and below that it's rock, rock, rock!"

"We want the vines to have to work," chimes in vineyard manager Carlos Tizio.

The impressive result is a range of internationally styled wines — hardly a surprise given the Rolland input. The flagship Clos de Los Siete, with its seven-pointed gold star on the label, is a blend of malbec, cabernet, merlot and syrah that tends to be deeply colored, richly perfumed, and infused with ripe fruit flavors backed by smooth tannins (\$15). Linda Flor Chardonnay (soon to be released in the U.S. market) hits the palate with a burst of concentrated fresh fruit tapering off to a finish marked by minerality. The deep, complex Monteviejo, a blend of malbec, cabernet sauvignon, merlot and syrah, is characterized by red fruit and silky tannins (\$50).

While Clos de Los Siete is sited in the Tunuyán section of the Uco Valley, Bodegas Salentein lies farther north, in the Tupungato sub-region, a couple of hours by car away from Mendoza City. Founded in 1996 by Dutch investors, the spacious, beautifully designed winery includes an art gallery, restaurant and wine bar. A gracious eight-room *posada* (inn) on the estate welcomes wine travelers who can enjoy the swimming pool, or go horseback riding, fishing and hiking in between tasting adventures. Salentein

produces an array of labels. El Portillo (made at an adjacent facility) specializes in ripe, jammy Cabernet and plummy Merlot; within the Salentein line itself is a spicy, peppery Shiraz; and the top-tier Primus features big, tropical Chardonnay and creamy Pinot Noir (from \$9 to \$17).

Finca Sopenia nestles into the Andean landscape at 4,000 feet above sea level in Los Arboles, a section of Tupungato wine country that is booming with new projects. Among the international and Argentine names recently established or on the horizon here are Chandon, Montes, Concha y Toro and Sheraton. Roberto Luka was one of the early investors in 1997 when he founded Finca Sopenia, which produces two ranges of wine: Altosur and Finca Sopenia. The first (about \$10), features varietally true Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot, Malbec and Cabernet, as well as a zingy Malbec Rosé. The more intense Finca Sopenia-labeled wines are also an excellent buy (\$16), and the *ultimo* Sopenia Synthesis (about \$36), is a savory fusion of merlot, cabernet and malbec.

Heading now toward the city of Mendoza, which I last visited in 2003, I stop in again at one of Argentina's most admired wineries, Catena Zapata. This unique estate and its remarkable wines helped propel the country into the international wine spotlight in the late 1990s (the first Catena Malbec was released in '96). The winery is a striking structure that looms like a Mayan temple amid the

vines. Owned by the Catena family, the winery turns out consistently excellent wines, produced today by winemaker Alejandro Sejanovich. I find the entire range appealing — from the rich, multifaceted Chardonnay to the company's crown jewel, Nicolás Catena Zapata, a compelling blend of cabernet and malbec made only in outstanding vintages (1997, '99, 2000, '01 and '02, thus far).

Were I able to time-travel a few months into the future, I would make a detour at this point to the Cavas Wine Lodge in Alto Agrelo. Set in a private valley about 20 miles south of Mendoza, this luxury hotel will have 14 rooms, each with its own private outdoor terrace, plunge pool and alfresco shower. But because this alluring getaway is not yet open, I venture on instead to the last three winery visits.

Terrazas de los Andes is the quality still wine producer of Moët & Chandon's Argentina enterprise. At this estate, the emphasis is on altitude. "The Andes block the moist ocean air, so proximity to the ocean can't influence our vineyards here. It's the height above sea level that determines the character and intensity of the wine," winemaker Pablo Rodriguez explains. Guided by this philosophy, Terrazas planted different varieties on terraces (*terrazas*) at various levels in the Andes: malbec at 3,500 feet, chardonnay at 3,936 feet, and so on. The basic Alto wines (Chardonnay, Cabernet, Malbec, each \$10) are straightforward and fruity, while the Reserva line (\$15) is more concentrated and complex. The top range Gran Terrazas includes rich and powerful reds whose fruit is sourced from designated blocks within the best vineyard sites.

Norton, owned by the Swarovski family of Austrian crystal fame, lays claim to exporting more wine than any other single Argentine producer. The beautiful estate, a favorite destination for wine country travelers, receives some 20,000 visitors annually. Winemaker Jimena Lopez and her mentor, Jorge Riccitelli, craft a splendid assortment of wines, from the easy-drinking Lo Tengo line (\$8) to the well structured, intense and expressive Reserve Malbecs, Cabernet Sauvignons and Syrahs (\$15).

Trapiche, a subsidiary of the aforementioned Peñaflor, is one of Argentina's largest producers, turning out five million bottles annually. Founded in 1883, the firm is historically important for having introduced European grape varieties, French oak barrels and French winemaking techniques to Argentina. Trapiche now owns almost 2,500 acres of vineyards across the Mendoza region, as well as a gravity-fed winery in Central Mendoza. Its Astica label (about \$6) offers a range of value wines, including Chardonnay, Tempranillo and red blends; the Broquel line (\$15) is characteristically perfumed and fresh; at \$50, Iscay, a merlot/malbec blend, may be expensive, but it is full, rich and spicy. A trio of Single Vineyard Merlots (\$35 to \$40) is produced each year as a tribute to exceptional growers whose names are noted on each label. "I bear my vineyard in my soul," says Pedro Gonzalez, a recently

## If You Go

### Wineries

#### Catena Zapata

Calle Cobos 5519, Agrelo, Luján de Cuyo  
Phone: 54 261 490214 / 0215  
www.catenawines.com

#### Clos de Los Siete

Tunuyán, Mendoza  
Phone: 54 262 2422054  
www.monteviejo.com

#### El Porvenir de los Andes

Córdoba 32, Cafayate Valley, Salta  
Phone: 54 366 8422007

#### El Recreo / Lavaque Wines

Ruta 40 Km 104 C, Cafayate, Salta  
Phone: 54 386 842179  
www.lavaque.com

#### Finca Sopenia

Ruta 89 Km. 12.5 Camino A, Los Arboles, Tupungato, Mendoza  
Phone: 54 114 7819840  
www.sopenia.com.ar

#### Graffigna

Colón Norte 1342, Desamparados, San Juan  
Phone: 54 264 4214227

#### Michel Torino /

#### Bodega El Esteco de Cafayate

Ruta 68 y 40, Cafayate, Salta  
Phone: 54 3868 42 1139/283

#### Bodegas Norton Visitors Center

Ruta provincial 15, Km 23.5, Perdriel, Luján de Cuyo, Mendoza Province  
Phone: ++ 54 261 490 9700  
E-mail: turismo@norton.com.ar

#### Bodegas O. Fournier

557 La Consulta, Mendoza  
Phone: 54 262 2451579  
www.bodegasfournier.com

#### Bodegas Salentein

Ruta 89, Los Arboles, Tunuyán, Mendoza  
Phone: 54 262 2429000  
www.bodegasalentein.com

#### Terrazas

Thames Y Cochabamba Perdriel, Luján de Cuyo, Mendoza  
Phone: 54 261 490 9900  
www.terrazasdelosandes.com

#### Trapiche

Mitre S/No 5513, Coquimbito, Maipú, Mendoza  
Phone: 54 261 5207221  
www.trapiche.com.ar

#### Valentin Bianchi

RN 143 and Calle Bianchi, San Rafael  
Phone: 54 627 22046  
www.vbianchi.com

### Restaurants & Lodging

#### Bodega Colomé Inn & Restaurant

Cavas Wine Lodge  
Costaflores S/N, Alto Agrelo, Mendoza  
Phone: 54 2614 106927  
www.cavaswinelodge.com

#### Faena Hotel

Martha Salotti 445, Buenos Aires  
Phone: 54 11 4010 9000  
www.faenahotelanduniverse.com

#### Patios de Cafayate Hotel & Spa

Ruta 40 y 68, Cafayate, Salta  
Phone: 54 3868.421747

#### Gallery Miguel Nanni

Guemes 60, Cafayate  
Phone: 54 038 68421530

### Private Plane Rentals

#### Royal Class

Phone: 54 (11) 4776 1139

#### Macair

Phone: 54 (911) 4447-2472  
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