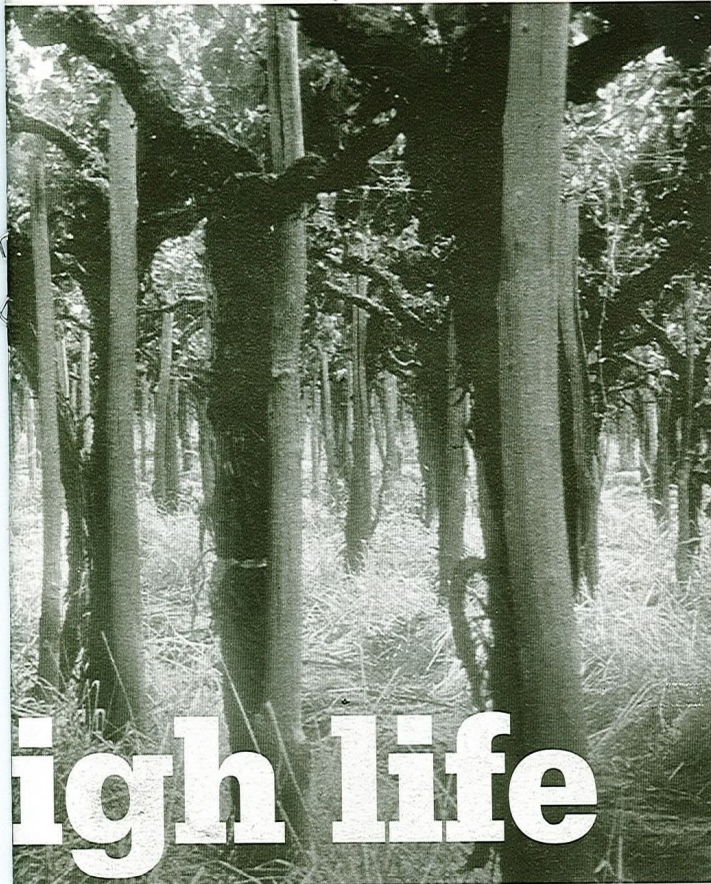




THE INDEPENDENT
22 APRIL 2006

INDEPENDENT EXPLORER 15



High life

any Surrey country club surrounding the pavilions, and with the Andes on the horizon, it offers a taste of the high life to anyone passing. Visitors holding half-full flutes wander around looking underdressed in anything other than wedding clothes.

If you visit the second-generation family-run Bodega Familia Zuccardi, you can taste a tempranillo (it's £9.99 in Tesco). The family were the first in Argentina to grow the vignier grape, and have planted Italian varieties, including the tempranillo and sangiovese. It's yet another example, contrary to the expectations of the first-time visitor to Argentina, of how much more influence the Italian immigrants to Mendoza had on wine and food than the Spanish.

The palette of ingredients and flavours is reassuringly familiar at the Francis Mallmann 1884 restaurant. Named after its owner, the top Argentine chef (whose other two restaurants are in Uruguay and the US), the "1884" refers to the year that the former winery was built - coincidentally, also the year that the British-built railway arrived in Mendoza. In 1861, most of the then 300-year-old city was destroyed by an earthquake, so late 19th century, a time of hectic immigration, is as old as anything in Mendoza ever is. At Mallmann's you can eat really well, and drink from one of the best wine lists in the country, in a high-ceilinged, informally baronial setting or in the outdoor courtyard, for less than UK gastropub prices. In the kitchen, visible through a large window, handsome chefs - nothing unusual there, everyone in Argentina is out-

geously good looking - cook appetising tapas such as courgette and cheese bruschetta and fava beans with chilli; classic risotto and pasta; and an exquisite lemon tart. Huge main courses of sweetbreads, veal kidneys, even goat emerge on trenchers from the wood-fired oven.

Relatives of the Zuccardi family run one of the most charming and also distinctly Italian places to eat in the region. Based in a 100-year-old farmhouse at Almacen del Sur, they grow more or less organic vegetables, including, unusually for Argentina, piquillo peppers, and bottle most of them, preserving those southern-hemisphere flavours. (Harrods will sell their products for an Argentina promotion in May.) They also make inspired use of their produce in the kind of cafe you'd give your eyeteeth to have at the end of your road. They may advertise a "Guided Tour & Fancy Lunch", but what makes it so good is that it isn't fancy, just deliciously simple. Chicken-liver pate is matched with rose-petal chutney and balsamic-onion dressing; a breadcrumb-fritter of tuna is partnered with piquillo pepper; and the inevitable, but still welcome, beef is followed by pear puree, malbec jelly and panna cotta ice cream.

But it isn't all beef and malbec in Mendoza. Forty-five minutes up into the Andes, there's white-water rafting. And 25km further west is Vallejos, a 3,000m-altitude skiing resort. Keep going towards Chile and you'll reach a peak double that height, Cerro Aconcagua. But that's a long way from a sybarite's wine holiday.

TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

GETTING THERE

Mendoza is closer to Santiago in Chile than to Buenos Aires, but most travellers go via the Argentinian capital. British Airways (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com) flies to Buenos Aires from Heathrow, stopping at São Paulo, Brazil. Aerolineas Argentinas (020-7290 7887; www.aerolineas.com.ar)

flies from Gatwick to Buenos Aires with a change of plane in Madrid. If you prefer to travel via Santiago, Madrid is the hub for Iberia (0870 609 0500; www.iberia.com) and Lan (0800 977 6100; www.lan.com); also check low-cost airline Air Madrid (00 34 91 201 6046; www.airmadrid.com). Air France (0870 142 4343; www.airfrance.co.uk) flies from various UK airports to Santiago via Paris (with a touchdown at Buenos Aires). To reduce the impact on the environment, you can buy an "offset" from Climate Care (01865 207 000; www.climatecare.org). The environmental cost of a return flight from London to Santiago in economy class is £24.45.



STAYING THERE

Cavas Wine Lodge and Spa, Costaflores s/n, Alto Agrelo, Mendoza (00 54 261 410 6927; www.cavaswinelodge.com). Bed and breakfast from US\$375 (£221).

VISITING THERE

Terrazas de los Andes, Thames y Cochoyamba, Perdiel, Lujan de Cuyo, Mendoza (00 54 261 488 0058; www.terrazasdelosandes.com) Bodega Chandon Agrelo, Lujan de Cuyo, Mendoza (00 54 261 490 9968) Familia Zuccardi winery, Maipu, Mendoza (00 54 261 441 0000; www.familiazuccardi.com) Almacen del Sur delicatessen, Zanichelli 709, Maipu, Mendoza

(00 54 261 497 5802; www.almacendelsur.com) Francis Mallmann 1884, Belgrano 1188, Godoy Cruz, Mendoza (00 54 261 424 2698; www.escorihuela.com.ar) Argentina Rafting, Parque de Aventura, Ruta Perilago, Potrerillos, Lujan de Cuyo, Mendoza (00 54 2624 482 037; www.argentinarafting.com)

FURTHER INFORMATION

Mendoza Tourism: 00 54 261 429 2013; www.turismo.mendoza.gov.ar Argentina Tourism: 020-7318 1300 (the Argentinian Embassy); www.turismo.gov.ar The Latin-American Travel Association: 020-8715 2913; www.lata.org

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