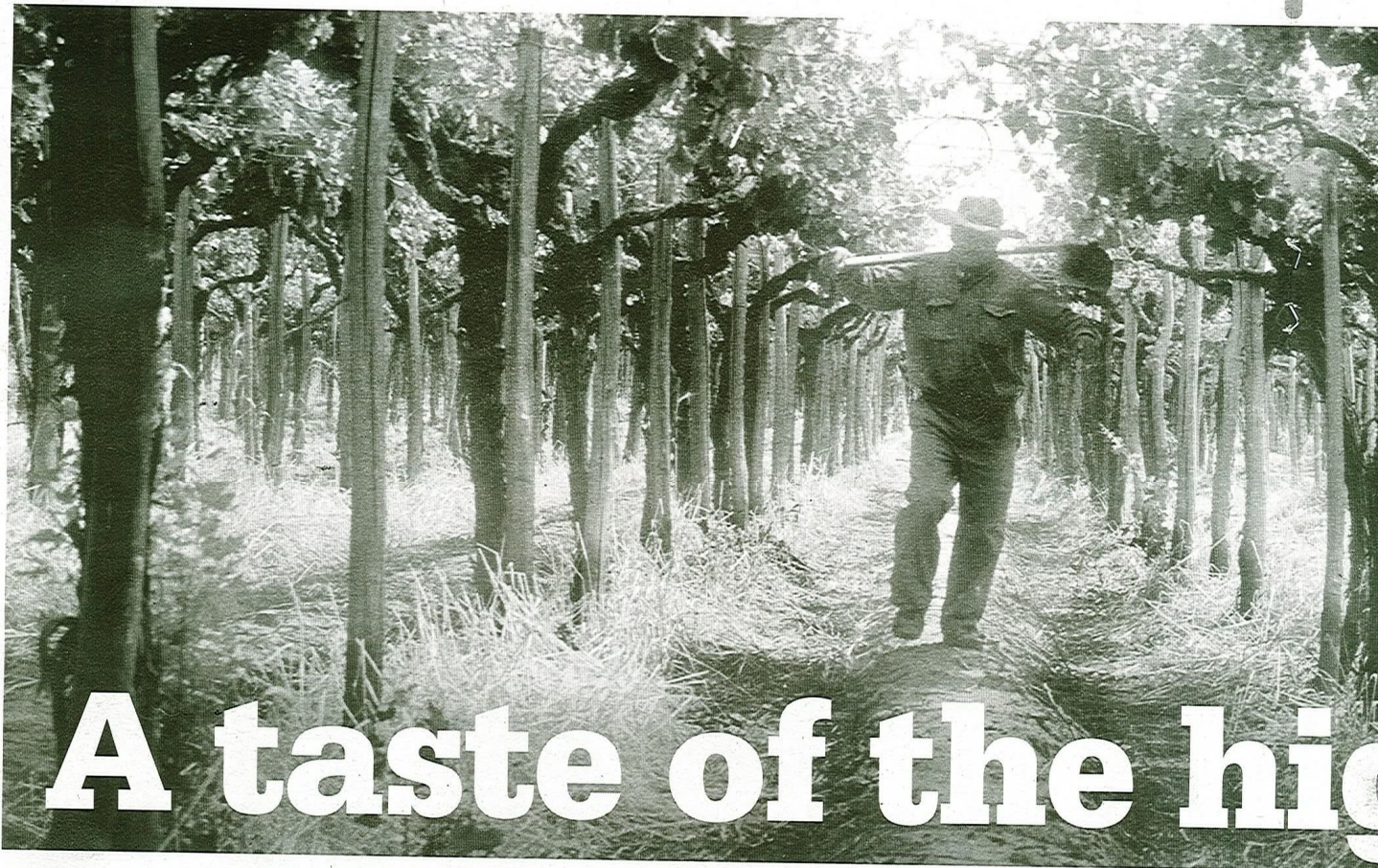


## 14 INDEPENDENT EXPLORER

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# A taste of the high

**F**or the past few days, the only exercise I've had, between sawing up slabs of steak, has been lifting goblets of mighty malbec. The red wines, often weighing in with a 14 per cent alcohol content, are made with punch-packing grapes that are ripened slowly at the foot of the Andes. Heavy with tannins, they are laced with the scent of cinnamon, violets, liquorice, plums and cherries.

After a weekend in Mendoza, wine-tasting and spitting before lunch, and swallowing during meals, I feel as though I have undergone a complete transfusion. If you were to cut me, I would gush purple malbec, made with a grape from St-Emilion in south-west France, introduced to Argentina in 1850. Dark red, muscular and more than a match for meat, it's the grape that characterises Argentinian wine. Who knows which came first, the grape or the steak, but it's impossible to imagine one without the other.

Argentina is the world's fifth-largest wine-producing country, and three-quarters of its wine is made in Mendoza. There are around 500 wineries in the region. As soon as you step off the plane (probably from Buenos Aires, as Mendoza's is not an international airport) the vines begin.

Last month the annual Fiesta de la Vendimia took place. This culminates in a riotously kitsch stage extravaganza at which the harvest queen, chosen from beauties representing each of the outlying districts, including Maipu, Lujan de Cuyo

and San Rafael, is crowned. We were so busy in the bodegas of Lujan de Cuyo itself that we barely registered the largest wine festival in South America. A million tourists, one for each resident, visit Mendoza every year, many of them for the autumn harvest festivities. But the serious drinking is done in the wineries and restaurants, rather than in the festive town.

In the vineyards, at different altitudes for different grapes, the harvesters start early in the morning, snipping the perfectly formed bunches of malbec for what will become **Terrazas Afincado 2006**. Edged with palms, silver birches and quince trees laden with fat, furry yellow fruit on one side, and with the Andes forming the backdrop on the other, the vineyards must be one of the most beautiful workplaces in the world. Some bodegas offer the chance to play at leisurely grape-picking. For those who earn their living from it, speed is everything and there is no time for bacchanalian revelry.

There are several ways to immerse yourself in wine. I chose to have a malbec-grape scrub. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see my upper arms being kneaded with gritty black grape seeds. In a room off the hammam-like courtyard at the Cavas

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Wine Lodge and Spa, the windows were open and the vines so close I could almost reach out and touch them. The sun was setting on the Andes and the rooftop-barbecue chimneys of the adobe apartments, which appear to grow out of the vineyards, formed cow-like silhouettes against the mountains. As dusk turned into the starriest of nights, lights came on among the vines to guide guests to their beds. I, meanwhile, had had the seeds rinsed off and was now in a bath of red wine – or rather, hot water enriched with red wine extracts and organic essential oils to stimulate the circulatory system.

Another form of immersion: sleeping in Syrah. If you stay in the **Terrazas wine lodge**, each room is named after a grape. Used mainly by trade visitors to the winery, spare rooms in the luxurious ranch home can also be booked by tourists. Across the courtyard, grapes are unloaded from lorries at all hours during the harvest, men in white wellies hose down the forecourt and there is the heady but agricultural smell of fermenting grapes. It's thrilling to be so close to the creation of a vintage.

This winery – stainless-steel fermentation tanks in a late-19th-century building – produced the first **Terrazas vintage** in 1996.

Wines such as the **Afincado**, made with malbec grapes from a single vineyard planted in 1929, and which sells in the UK for £25, are aged for 18 months in French oak barrels. Even more exclusive, **Cheval des Andes**, a blend of cabernet sauvignon, malbec and petit verdot grapes made the Bordeaux way, costs 260 Argentinian pesos (£48) for the 2002 vintage. Three-quarters of Terrazas' wines are exported.

Conversely, you'll probably only ever drink Chandon in South America; very little is sold elsewhere. The word is that it was so popular when it was available in the US that it was in danger of undermining sales of the French original, Moët & Chandon. These sparkling wines, made by Terrazas' older sister company in Argentina, have been around since 1959, predating much of the current wave of wine activity by about 40 years, and are so successful that they account for 70 per cent of the country's sparkling wine. You can live high on the hog in Argentina, popping bottles of Baron B at about 40 Argentinian pesos (£7) a go, the blingiest of Chandon's various styles.

Chandon's bodega is one of the most accessible, and popular, for tours. With little hedges and lawns as neat as those of