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Argentina's Visionary Vintner

Nicolás Catena earns 2012 Wine Spectator Distinguished Service Award



Argentina's wine history dates back more than four centuries, yet as recently as three decades ago the country's wineries were producing large quantities of rustic, typically oxidized wines intended primarily for local consumption. Nicolás Catena changed all that.

In the early 1980s, Catena, a third-generation winemaker, visited California and returned home inspired to produce wines that could compete in the global market. Within a decade, aided by an all-star cast of imported consulting winemakers, he produced the first Argentine wine to earn an outstanding score (90 to 94 points on Wine Spectator's 100-point scale). He also crystallized Malbec's status as the country's iconic grape and sparked an industry-wide transformation, elevating Argentina to a position as one of the world's most modern wine-producing regions.

Consumers caught on. Imports of Argentine wines in the United States have skyrocketed in the past decade, with Catena's Bodega Catena Zapata, Alamos and Tilia brands becoming cornerstones of quality and value. And along the way, Catena, now 72, has shared his success with his family, employees and local communities through investments, research, scholarships, and land and charitable donations.

For his achievements in transforming Argentina's wine industry, and his philanthropic spirit, Nicolás Catena receives Wine Spectator's 2012 Distinguished Service Award.

Catena's grandfather immigrated to Argentina from the Marche region of Italy in 1898. In 1902, he planted his first Malbec vines in the western Mendoza region, which sits at the

base of the Andes mountains and is today the heart of the country's wine industry. Nicolás joined his family's wine business in 1963 after studying for a Ph.D. in economics. Despite Argentina's declining economic and political climate, he was able to expand his family's business by supplying the large domestic market, then consuming cheap, rustic wine at rates of up to 120 bottles per person a year.

By 1979, according to Ian Mount's *The Vineyard at the End of the World*, Catena owned the country's largest winery, producing nearly 300 million bottles annually. That year, at the height of Argentina's infamous Dirty War, Catena sold the winery, but as the country's economy and its wine industry began to collapse, the buyer defaulted on the final payments. In the end, Catena recouped his winery, as well as much of the cash from the sale.

In 1982, with wine consumption in Argentina declining and inflation rising, Catena accepted a three-year visiting scholar position at the University of California at Berkeley's department of agricultural economics. From his post near Napa Valley, he observed how the state's winemakers successfully adopted the quality-oriented winemaking techniques used in France. "When I arrived at Napa Valley, my first visit was to Robert Mondavi winery as a tourist," Catena says. "I discovered that they could not only produce a wine similar to the best French wines, but better."

That experience, Catena recalls, shifted his perception of quality wines and provided him with a model he could adopt at his own winery. "My reasoning was, if they can do this, why should I not try to do the same in Argentina?" he says.

He returned to Mendoza with the goal of producing a Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay fit to compete in the global market. To do so, however, Catena realized he needed expertise in modern winemaking methods and hired a series of talented consulting winemakers, including California-based Paul Hobbs, Bordeaux-based Jacques Lurton and Italian Attilio Pagli. They advised Catena and his staff on vineyard management and the finer techniques of producing quality wine, and along the way helped him realize the potential of Malbec, a grape that Catena

had until then written off as a lowly blender.

By the end of the decade, Catena was making modern wines and had introduced the now-popular Alamos brand to the U.S. market. But his big breakthrough arrived a few years later with the Malbec Mendoza Catena Alta Lunlunta 1996, bottled under the Bodegas Esmeralda label.



The Catena family in Berkeley, Calif. 1982. From left: Adrianna, Nicolás, Elena, Ernesto and Laura.



Laura (left) acts as Bodega Catena Zapata's managing director, while Ernesto (right) serves as president for Bodegas Escorihuela.

The wine, made with the assistance of Pagli, was massive, modern and concentrated; oaky, yet polished and balanced. It earned 92 points from *Wine Spectator* in 1999, and became the first Argentine wine to receive an outstanding score in a *Wine Spectator* blind tasting. "In 1996," says Catena, "when I tasted that wine, even as it was very young, I said, 'This is something different. This will change the perception of red wine in the world.'"

And it did. Since 2002, exports of Argentine wines to the United States have grown more than fivefold, from 1.3 million cases to more than 7 million cases last year, according to *Caucasia Wine Thinking*, an Argentina-based export-data company.

While Alamos and Tilia represent some of Argentina's best values, with scores in the 83- to 88-point range and prices between \$10 and \$13 a bottle, Catena Zapata sets the country's benchmark for quality. Its Malbec Mendoza and Malbec Mendoza Alta, which typically score 90 or more points and today retail for \$24 and \$55, respectively, have been featured in *Wine Spectator's* annual Top 100

wines a combined six times since 2002, a record for an Argentine winery. Bodega Catena Zapata also produces three ultra-premium, high-altitude bottlings-Adrianna Vineyard, Nicasia Vineyard and Argentino, a blend from Adrianna and Nicasia-that have recent track records of scoring between 93 and 96 points, with the current release 2008s fetching \$115 to \$150 a bottle. To date, Bodega Catena Zapata is one of only five Argentine wineries to earn a classic score.

If asked to pick one bottle of wine that he's most proud of producing, however, Catena would choose the 1997 Nicolás Catena Zapata Mendoza, the premier vintage of the winery's flagship Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec blend that gives a nod to his original goal of competing with the likes of Napa Valley and Bordeaux. "We were producing wines according to what we had been doing, and suddenly we discovered that some wines in the barrels were exceptional," Catena recalls. "We decided to develop a new brand."

Sourced from the best lots of the winery's high-altitude vineyards and aged for 24 months in 100 percent new French oak, the cuvée has earned outstanding marks in every vintage it's been produced, with the current 2008 release priced at \$135 a bottle. But of that original 1997 bottling, Catena says, "That's the one that I remember as the best."

Catena is both a traditional family man and a father figure to many in the Argentine wine industry, where bloodlines and business often overlap. Some call him the father of Argentina's viticultural renaissance, and there is no denying that the Catenas are at the center of the movement's family tree.

At Bodega Catena Zapata, he has turned over daily operations to his daughter Laura, who serves as the winery's managing director as well as the export director of Alamos and Tilia. In addition, she bottles her own label, Luca, and produces the La Posta del Viñatero brand in partnership with the U.S. importer Vine Connections.

Catena's eldest child, Ernesto, serves as president of Bodegas Escorihuela-Nicolás Catena's partnership with the Benegas family—which makes the popular Malbec Mendoza Don Miguel Gascón bottlings. Ernesto also produces a range of his own labels, including Tikal and Bodegas Tahuán. Adrianna, the youngest sibling, has partnered with Alejandro Vigil, Bodega Catena Zapata's current winemaker, to make a Cabernet Franc-based wine and a Malbec under the El Enemigo label.

Catena's other business partnerships include Familia Rutini and Bodegas Caro, a collaboration with Domaines Barons de Rothschild, the parent company of Château Lafite Rothschild and other notable wine properties. Catena has also provided seed money and offered his facilities to colleagues and

employees to start their own wineries, including Paul Hobb's Viña Cobos.

Catena and his staff have extensively studied Malbec and high-altitude viticulture, a prized and highly profitable combination. "In my interpretation of Mendoza terroir, the most important characteristic is the altitude of the vineyards," says Catena. The higher you go, he adds, the better the Malbec. Vineyards in the country's main wine-producing region are mostly planted between 2,500 and 5,000 feet above sea level.



Bodega Catena Zapata, Catena's flagship winery at the foot of the Andes.



The Catenas' charitable donations include food, land and scholarships.

Catena has partnered with Facultad de Ciencias Agrarias, the Instituto Nacional de Agricultura and the University of California, Davis, to research topics such as the characteristics of Malbec clones, the effects of high-altitude sunlight on wine quality and the genetic evaluation of phylloxera in Mendoza. In addition, Catena's own viticultural research and development team has implemented a sustainability program, modeled after a program in California, with the goal of creating a formal certification process in Argentina.

He and his family also invest in the winery's staff, their families and local communities. On a fundamental level, the winery donates housing, transportation, food baskets, blankets and powdered milk, and operates a harvesttime summer school. The Catena family has also provided funds and donated land for schools, clinics, chapels and recreational and community facilities.

Ever the academic, Catena is a proponent of education and has sponsored dozens of scholarships. In Buenos Aires, his family has gifted 20 college scholarships to the University of CEMA, a non-profit organization that Catena helped establish that offers courses in economics, business and public policy. His family has also funded the college studies of 18 children of employees and provided financial assistance for other employees' educational pursuits, including postgraduate and postdoctoral studies.

"You should never think that you have reached the maximum," says Catena. "There is always something different or new that you could do that could improve what you have been doing up to that moment." It's a statement equally true of Catena's actions and his wines.