

BEYOND

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Catena Zapata, Pioneer of Malbec Wine

Argentina wasn't exactly a hotbed of winemaking in the past. But after Nicolás Catena Zapata, the world turns its attention to the South American Nation. Meet Catena Zapata, the pioneering winery of Malbec.

By Bang Jin-sik, "Beyond Magazine", Korean Air.

In September 2001, a wine tasting was held at the Dorchester hotel in London. The panel of 23 experts included Jancis Robinson, a leading British wine critic. Five wines were offered: Château Latour and Château Haut-Brion, the Premier Cru wines from Bordeaux; Opus One and Caymus Special Selection from California; and Nicolás Catena Zapata, an unfamiliar wine from Argentina. They were from the 1997 vintage, and it was a blind tasting. The results were surprising – Nicolás Catena Zapata topped them all. This was the first vintage to blend Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec. Opus One, the pride of Californian wines, was second. Robinson quickly discerned Nicolás Catena's drive to produce world-class wines. "Nicolás Catena is justly credited with putting Argentinian wine on the world map by the best expedient of focusing entirely on quality", Robinson said. "It's great to know he has started a wine dynasty, too".

The wine business in the Catena family started with Nicolas' grandfather. He moved from Marche, Italy, to Argentina in 1898 at age 18. After settling in Mendoza, the senior Catena cultivated a vineyard and made wines. Starting in 1936, his son, Domingo Catena, took over the family business. When his father and Domingo's wife were killed in a car accident in 1962, son Nicolás proved to be a pillar of strength. Thought he had been attending graduate school in Chicago, Nicolás put his studies on hold to help his father. Using his training in economics, Nicolás suggested that they review their outdated retailing process and list the winery in each bottle. It was a marketing strategy that would build consumer trust in the quality of their wines. The winery's name was changed to Bodega Catena Zapata (Zapata being the maiden name of Nicolás' late mother).

Nicolás, splitting his time between company management and academics, completed his Pd.D. in economics and studied mathematical economics at Columbia University in New York in 1969. One day, the Argentinian consulate asked for Nicolás' help to sell wines from Argentina. At a luncheon at the consulate, he tasted Château Latour and Château Margaux, top-notch French wines, for the first time. Captivated by their rich and complex flavors, Nicolás was disappointed that his homeland didn't craft such vintages. Upon returning home, he sold his cheap winemaking facilities and focused solely on producing only high-quality wines.

By accident, the novice vintner stumbled upon an opportunity to improve his wine business. In 1982, he was offered a position as a visiting agricultural economics professor at UC Berkeley in Northern California. He visited Napa Valley and saw for himself how relentlessly the wineries there labored to match the quality of French wine. He was particularly impressed with Robert Mondavi's philosophy of developing

world-class wines. Nicolás asked himself, "Why not try to do the same in Mendoza?"

Taking cues from the success in California, Nicolás set out to make world-class wines himself and, starting in 1983, he focused on growing Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay – Malbec hadn't yet entered his mind. But Domingo, lamenting his son's business plan, stressed the importance of that neglected grape: "Nicolás, I have always told you that our Malbec can compete with the best wines of the world."

Malbec is the leading grape of Argentina, the world's sixth-largest producer of wine. These grapes trace their roots to southwestern France. In 1853, Mendoza Province in Argentina opened the national vine nursery, importing saplings mainly from France. Malbec survived the dry conditions of Mendoza's high altitudes. When Domingo passed away in 1989, Nicolás, belatedly recognizing the value of Malbec, shifted his focus. He carefully examined the barren land at the foot of the Andes. The desert area, largely ignored, wasn't producing much – yet Malbec wines from this terroir displayed strong aroma and high concentration. Nicolás felt the site's potential. Though experts argued that the highlands were vulnerable to frost and grapes wouldn't ripen sufficiently, Nicolás nevertheless pushed forward, and in 1992 he broke ground on Adrianna, a vineyard 1,480 meters above sea level. Despite whispers that he was crazy to build a vineyard at such an altitude, the vineyard produced high-quality Malbec grapes.

In 1996, Nicolás created the Catena Alta Malbec wine. Robert Parker, the renowned wine critic, gave it 94 points and said it was the best Malbec in Argentina. Wine enthusiasts from around the world took notice. In 1997, Nicolás successfully produced a top cuvée, blending the finest Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec from the vineyard. He named it after himself. Finally Nicolás had a world-class wine on his hands. In 2009, the wine magazine *Decanter* named him "Man of the Year" for his dedication to developing an entirely new Malbec wine. He is also the first wine producer from South America to enter the Wine Hall of Fame.

Nicolás has a very reliable assistant in Laura Catena, his oldest daughter and president of the winery. After earning her biology degree at Harvard, Laura studied medicine at Stanford. Since the late 1990s, she has been director of the winery in-house research department, studying the growth of grapes in highland vineyards. She discovered that grapes produced from areas at different altitudes differed in quality. In 2002, the family blended similar vintages grown in different vineyards to produce another top-rated wine. The new process was dubbed microclimate blending. Laura is perhaps the next wine leader of Argentina and the 21st century.