

Vertical Tasting of the Nicolás Catena Zapata 1997-2012

BY STEPHEN TANZER | OCTOBER 12, 2016

The wines from Bodega Catena Zapata, including the Chardonnays, have established an impressive track record for longevity—not to mention positive development in bottle. The Nicolás Catena Zapata wine is Exhibit A. My vertical tasting in New York in September went back to the first release, the 1997, and only one of my bottles—the 2000—was clearly past its peak. Even the earliest vintages showed claret-like complexity and finesse of texture. Most impressive, the high quality of this special bottling has been remarkably consistent from year one.



Adrianna Vineyard

The Launch of the Nicolás Catena Zapata Blend

Inspired by the high quality of the 1997 vintage, especially for Cabernet Sauvignon, Catena introduced a new high-end blend that year, naming it Nicolás Catena Zapata (Zapata was his mother's maiden name). A blend of 95% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Malbec made in a Bordeaux style and intended for long aging, the 1997 was released in 2001 and made an immediate splash in the international marketplace as it bested numerous top Bordeaux and California Cabernet-based wines in a series of blind tastings in Europe and the U.S.

Since its initial vintage, the core of the wine has been the 78-acre La Pirámide vineyard next to the Catena Zapata winery in Agrelo (a pyramid-shaped building inspired by Mayan architecture). The soil here is deep alluvial loam and clay over a layer of round rocks ten feet down. Planted at an altitude

of about 3,100 feet above sea level, the site enjoys wide diurnal variation and has proven to be ideal not just for Cabernet Sauvignon but for Malbec, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. Over the years, as the Catena family has discovered and exploited cooler sites for Malbec, the Nicolás Catena Zapata blend has included up to 25% of this variety, which Laura Catena says adds freshness, as it has highish acidity and typically a lower pH than the Cabernet. At the outset, the Malbec component came from the very old Angélica vineyard, but as Catena's newer plantings came on line, Malbec grapes from the Adrianna vineyard in Gualtallary (in Tupungato) and the Nicasia vineyard in the southern Uco Valley were added to the blend in 1999 and 2000, respectively.

The maiden 1997 was aged in 80% new French oak barriques but the percentage of new oak

for aging was quickly brought down to 50%. Vinification takes place in all new barrels for the structural component the new oak gives, but the wine is then moved to 50% second-use barrels for aging so that the wood element doesn't take over the wine. Beginning with the 2006 vintage, the oak influence was further diminished through the use of 500-liter barrels.

The wine is bottled between 18 and 24 months after the vintage. In the early years, it was racked four or five times, but today Vigil racks only after the malolactic fermentation and before bottling as he finds that less racking is more protective and gives the wines better biological stability.



Catena Zapata winemaker Alejandro Vigil and Managing Director Laura Catena

Vigil, who crafts the top Catena wines from literally dozens of components, not just from a range of altitudes and varieties but harvest dates as well, told me that in recent years he has co-fermented small quantities of Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot in the Nicolás Catena Zapata blend because these varieties “add freshness, structure and balsamic aromas.”

Scores and Tasting notes from Oldest to Youngest

Vintage	Tasting Notes	Score
1997	(14.4% alcohol; 5.77 g/l acidity; 3.45 pH): Full ruby-red. Deep aromas of cassis, black cherry, menthol and chocolate, lifted by a minty nuance. Very smooth and fresh, with its juicy dark fruit flavors enlivened by elements of crushed stone, eucalyptus and spicy oak. Relies as much on its acidity as on its tannins for structure and balance. Not a powerful style but this sexy Cabernet is full of life. This wine began its life a bit compact, noted winemaker Alejandro Vigil, and still comes across as slightly clenched compared to most of the subsequent vintages. But it's a distinctly claret-like drink.	91
	Stephen Tanzer	
1999	(13.8% alcohol; 6.0 g/l acidity; 3.45 pH): Healthy dark red. Highly aromatic scents of dark plum, chocolate and smoke. Rounder and sweeter than the 1997 bottling but showing a bit less lift and detail than the earlier vintage. The plum and chocolate notes carry through onto the palate. Finishes with good density and length, an intriguing saline note and chewy, ripe tannins. (There was no 1998 bottling as this was a disastrous El Niño vintage in Argentina during which steady rainfall led to rot before the fruit ripened properly. In fact, Catena bottled only their inexpensive, entry-level Alamos wines in '98.)	90
	Stephen Tanzer	
2000	(13.6% alcohol; 6.0 g/l acidity; 3.56 pH): Medium red with an amber edge; less saturated than the 1999 and 1997 vines. More advanced on the nose, showing a distinct empyreumatic aspect to its aromas of smoked plum, roasted meat, underbrush and burning tobacco. Nicely fine-grained but quite dry, with a touch of greenness suggesting incomplete ripeness. A wine of modest sweetness and concentration, with a dusty, drying, edgy finish making it clear that it's in decline. Drink up.	87
	Stephen Tanzer	

2001	(13.8% alcohol; 5.55 g/l acidity; 3.65 pH): Fresh dark red. Captivating, nuanced nose combines redcurrant, game, truffle, spices and tobacco, plus a subtle suggestion of chocolate. Plush, tactile and round but with no impression of weightiness, this broad wine spreads out impressively to saturate the mouth, with harmonious acidity contributing to its elegance. Finishes spicy and very long, with excellent penetration for its age. This wine reminded me of a 2001 claret or a 2001 Napa Valley Cabernet; it would be great fun to compare these wines in a blind tasting. A beauty. Features an unusually high percentage of Malbec as harvest conditions were generally favorable for this variety; rains in late March made picking Cabernet Sauvignon an adventure.	93
Stephen Tanzer		
2002	(13.9% alcohol; 5.85 g/l acidity; 3.7 pH): Good dark red with an orange edge. Complex, slightly brooding aromas of currant, dark plum, leather and tobacco, plus an element of medicinal menthol. Very concentrated and youthful; at once sweet and serious, showing terrific density and medicinal reserve to its flavors of sweet plum, currant and saline minerality. The very long finish features nicely integrated acidity and broad, fine-grained tannins. This still-young beauty should be even more harmonious with another couple years in the cellar. Long hang time for the Malbec in 2002 produced very expressive wines with fully ripe tannins.	93+
Stephen Tanzer		
2003	(13.9% alcohol; 5.7 g/l acidity; 3.72 pH): Deep red with ruby highlights. Malbec-dominated aromas of black fruits, violet, licorice and spices. Thick and rich but not especially sweet, in a slightly medicinal style; very Malbec and less complex and refined than the 2001. Finishes with big, chewy tannins and a touch of dryness. This youthfully tight wine needs patience. According to the winery, 2003 featured a cool, long growing season that was especially strong for Cabernet Sauvignon, but today it's the Malbec that's most apparent.	91+
Stephen Tanzer		
2004	(14% alcohol; 5.8 g/l acidity; 3.72 pH): Full medium red. Vibrant, expressive scents of cassis, black cherry, licorice and violet. Densely packed and quite firmly built, conveying terrific juicy intensity and a restrained sweetness to its youthful dark fruit flavors. Some peppery acidity gives this very penetrating wine a slight leanness. With its firm vertebral column, this wine still needs time to gain in pliancy. Incidentally, this was the first vintage of the Nicolás Catena Zapata to include some Malbec vinified with whole clusters, and that no doubt explains its peppery element.	92+
Stephen Tanzer		
2005	(14.6% alcohol; 5.81 g/l acidity; 3.63 pH): Healthy medium ruby. Pungent scents of blackberry, cassis, violet and licorice. Very concentrated, plush and broad but at the same time classically dry and quite young, conveying a strong impression of medicinal reserve. The rising black fruit and spice finish displays excellent length, but the wine's firm spine of acidity and slightly dusty tannins call for patience. I find this more backward than the 2004.	92+
Stephen Tanzer		
2006	(14.5% alcohol; 5.79 g/l acidity; 3.62 pH): Bright ruby-red. A bit narrower and less ripe on the nose than the 2005 version, offering scents of medicinal black fruits and mint. Then sweet, plush and chocolatey in the mouth; in a rather powerful style but showing considerable Malbec sex appeal and inner-mouth lift to its flavors of dark fruits, flowers and spices. Finishes with substantial ripe, suave tannins, an element of saline complexity and noteworthy Cabernet grip. According to winemaker Vigil, this wine was very tannic at the beginning. It's approachable today but still has plenty of positive evolution ahead.	92
Stephen Tanzer		
2007	(14% alcohol; 5.8 g/l acidity; 3.72 pH): Full red-ruby. Very tight aromas of blackcurrant, blackberry, licorice, pepper and herbs. Rather tight and uncompromising, even a touch reduced, offering good intensity and structure but less fruit sweetness and flavor than most vintages of this wine. The firm, dusty tannins show a dry edge.	91

Will this clenched wine blossom in bottle? Time in the glass brought more texture and sweetness and a captivating violet quality. This early harvest was reportedly favorable for cool vineyards like Adrianna and Nicasia, fruit from both of which are in this blend.

Stephen Tanzer

2008 (14% alcohol; 6.2 g/l acidity; 3.7 pH): Bright ruby-red. Very expressive, complex aromas of plum, currant, cherry and black olive, complemented by a slightly candied quality. Fat, pliant and deep on the palate, with the dense black fruit flavors given lovely definition by well-integrated acidity and lightly salty minerality. This beautifully balanced wine has the mid-palate stuffing to support its fine-grained tannins on the rising finish. A very suave vintage.

Stephen Tanzer

2009 (14% alcohol; 6.5 g/l acidity; 3.5 pH): Bright ruby-red. Brooding, reticent aromas of medicinal black fruits, licorice, mint and crushed rock; I was reminded of Château Latour! Very rich and thick but classically dry, offering excellent chewy depth but showing a youthfully unyielding quality to its flavors of dark berries, bitter chocolate and minerals. The wine's strong acid streak is currently keeping its intense fruit under wraps. Finishes broad and long, with a faint herbal edge but a captivating light touch. This extremely promising wine from an early harvest is still a baby and may yet merit an even higher score as it comes into greater harmony.

Stephen Tanzer

2010 (14% alcohol; 6.5 g/l acidity; 3.45 pH): Bright ruby-red. Very pure, multifaceted nose offers black fruits, dusty spices, game, leather and minerals. Plush on entry, then classically dry and uncompromising, showing a lovely light touch and terrific violet lift to its sharply delineated flavors of cassis, menthol, licorice, bitter chocolate and saline minerality. Very claret-like in a St. Julien way. This wonderfully suave, still-primary wine, from a small, cool harvest, finishes with sneaky breadth, fine-grained tannins and captivating spicy lift.

Stephen Tanzer

2011 (14% alcohol, 6.4 g/l acidity; 3.57 pH): Bright ruby. Aromas of cassis, black cherry, minerals, violet and bitter chocolate show very good lift but also a youthfully serious medicinal aspect. Densely packed, fresh and broad but unforthcoming today, showing little in the way of easy sweetness. The medicinal black cherry flavors come across as distinctly cool owing to complicating notes of mint, licorice and herbs. Finishes with substantial dusty tannins that will require patience.

Stephen Tanzer

2012 Bright dark ruby. Urgent aromas of crushed blackberry and violet. Boasts outstanding concentration and density without any impression of heaviness, with its creaminess perfectly buffered by harmonious acidity. This is richer, deeper and more pliant than the Malbec Argentino--and easier to taste today--but dry, minerally and classic. Finishes with firm but pliant tannins and outstanding persistence. One could almost drink this wine with food today.

Stephen Tanzer



Vertical Tasting