

Wine Spectator

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by James Laube

First Impressions of Buenos Aires

The rich wine and food heritage of Argentina is reflected by its people, and its visitors

Buenos Aires—For journalists, typing in a dateline signifies the beginning, the starting point for a story, as in this is where I am or this is where the story originates. From my earliest uses, I've always enjoyed datelines. Magazines don't typically use them. But I'm going to, at least for the time being. Today I'm happy to punch the keys to spell Buenos Aires.

First impressions. It is a long flight from San Francisco to B.A. with a stop over in Lima. But mine is pleasantly uneventful, with everything on time. There is the usual excitement that comes not only with travel and vacation, but being in a foreign country and all that entails, from customs to culture.. Happily, I don't feel like a foreigner in Buenos Aires. I know many people in wine in this country but have only met them in the U.S. Now I'm in their country, very comfortable and looking forward to my on-the-ground wine education.

First impressions are often telling. One thing I notice immediately: Wine is a huge source of national pride among Argentines. From the airline staff to taxi drivers to waiters and sommeliers in bistros and restaurants, wine is a big part of the psyche here. They are both proud of what wine means to their country's identity and comfortable with it. No one so far has a clue that I'm a writer, so all the talk and enthusiasm for wine is unsolicited. I'm happy to be anonymous. Argentines know that many Yankees are here for at least one of the following: wine, wine country, inexpensive travel

accommodations—including taxis and restaurants—beef (a given), pappas fritas, or summer weather. I have chosen Argentina for all of the above and am pleased so far by each. It is nice wearing shorts and a t-shirt and today I need to buy sun block. I'd forgotten I would need that. What's endearing is the confidence Argentines have with wine. I've only been here 24 hours, but already dined at a few places, from casual street fare to last night's dinner at La Brigada, an old-fashioned steak house with an extensive offering of Argentine wines (*tintos/ galore*) and a menu with more steaks prepared more different ways than I've ever seen. The ease with which wine is presented and served is reassuring. Last night at La Brigada we sampled several items on the menu and two reds, a sleek, elegant, rich and lively 2003 D.V. Catena Adrianna, a Malbec, which was sleek, polished and layered, with a subtle tobacco edge, and a 2007 Sotтона Judas, both from Mendoza, a richer, younger, more extracted style that developed into a racy earthiness, giving the Adrianna the edge. Both cost about 300 pesos, or \$75. Wine was the biggest dinner expense, but our own doing.

One thing I've noticed in all of my travels is that wine lovers tend to congregate at similar venues no matter where they are: They know how to hunt down the best places to eat and drink wine. In that sense, even in a city as large and diverse as Buenos Aires, it's a small world.