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A drought of wine loosens the tongue, cements the bonds of friendship and inspires brave acts, but can it really pull a country out of crisis?

Argentina has become a byword for economic misery - it has been in recession for four years.

"Everyone asks me 'How's your family?' - almost as if they are offering thier condolences," says Laura Catena, the daughter of one of Argentina's tope wine producers.

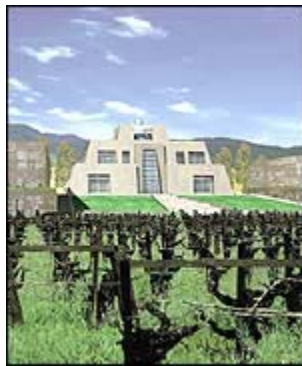
But in fact we have never been more enthusiastic. The company must do well, we must drag the country out of this crisis."

Unlike so many businesses crippled by Argentina's economic crisis, Ms.

Catena's family firm is prospering.

The vineyard's exports to the US are growing by about 30% a year, and its new world wines are garnering international prizes.

"It's invigorating, it's almost a patriotic feeling. We have such great expectations," she says.



Centenary

The Catena Zapata winery was founded in Argentina's Mendoza region 100 years ago by an Italian immigrant - Ms. Catena's great grandfather.

The poor desert soil, the high altitude and low rainfall provided an unlikely haven for the young vines.

"The plant has to suffer to give a good wine," says Ms Catena. "Smaller berries give a more intense flavor."



Ms. Catena's father, Nicolas, now runs the \$40million business, with three vineyards and a long list of brands, including Argento.

Based in San Francisco with her husband and two young children, Ms. Catena is vice president of the company.

Her pivotal role in the business, however, has only developed over the past five years.

Before that, she worked full-time as an emergency medical physician.

Wine and Medicine

The 35-year-old new works two days a week as a doctor and spends the rest of the time on the business.

"Both professions have helped me, one with the other," she says.

"I'm a big customer service person, and that has come from medicine."

Admitting she had to overcome her own student-bred prejudice toward working in business she still has the zeal of a new convert.

In college, you always thought that people who did business wanted to make money. I was drawn to medicine because I wanted to help people, but I am feeding a lot more mouths selling wine.”



-Age: 35
-Educated at Harvard and Stanford Universities
-Married with two children
-Trained as an ER doctor
-Became Vice President of Catena Zapata in 1997.

Don't Cry for me Argentina

Argentina's economy collapsed late last year, forcing the government in January to remove a peg tying the local currency to the U.S. dollar.

The peso spiraled down, pushing up the cost of imported food and goods by about 70%.

But for exporters, like Catena Zapata, it was a boon. Suddenly Argentine products were priced much more competitively on the international markets - and the dollars came rolling in.

“We have more money to spend on the

vineyards and salaries cost less,” says Ms. Catena. The buoyancy of Catena Zapata's exports have also compensated for a drop-off in the domestic business.

Sleeping Giant?

Argentina is the fifth largest producer of wine worldwide.

But most of the wine is drunk domestically and exports - \$128 million last year - do not match those of other regional producers, such as Chile.

In the past decade, however, Argentina has started to



switch from producing large amounts of table wine to smaller quantities of higher-quality brands for export.

Ms. Catena's father was at the forefront of this movement and spent 10 years developing his vineyards to make the step-up in quality.

“Many people told him he was crazy,” she says.

“But he knew the survival of the company depended on exports.”

More recently Mendoza has caught the attention of foreign wine producers with companies such as Spain's Freixenet buying up local wineries.

Father-love

Ms. Catena is insistent, however, that the family-run Catena Zapata will not sell out.

The family feeling runs strong - her regard for her father rivals even her passion for making wine.

“He has a bias for women, which is very unusual in Argentina. He believes women work harder and are more creative - I think he even trusts women more.”

Notably, Argentina's first master of wine, Marina Gayan, who now



works for Hardy Europe, used to be in charge of exports at Catena Zapata.

But women and wine don't always mix so well.

“One problem with the wine industry is being pregnant - you can't drink. I had to do a lot of spitting,” Ms. Catena says wryly.

Following the birth of her second child, she was able to drink wine again “guilt-free.”

But how long will it be before her fellow Argentines can raise their glasses to new beginnings?

Ms. Catena says she has faith in the government's ability to put the economy back on track. “I'm an optimistic person. They really have to do the right thing.”