



Don't Cry for These Argentine Wines

Even by the flamboyant standards of modern winemaking, few know how to grab the public's attention better than Argentina's Nicolás Catena. His flashy new winery in the shadow of the highest peak in the Americas, 22,851-foot Aconcagua, is a futuristic version of a Mayan temple. Never mind that the Mayans were hooked on cacao, or that their empire never stretched beyond Central America. Convention doesn't matter much to Catena, the high-profile guru of a growing pack of innovative vintners transforming Argentina's Mendoza wine region into the Southern Hemisphere's equivalent of Napa Valley. "Building a French château or Italian palazzo-styled winery never entered my mind," says the 63-year-old Catena. "We're part of the New World, so it's only fitting we honor our own heritage."

But for all the glitz, Catena knows the proof is in the bottle. And his competitors know it,

too. Spurred in part by Mendoza's blessed climate and land costing a fortieth of comparable Napa Valley lots, winemaking giants such as California's Kendall-Jackson, France's Rothschild and Moët & Chandon, and Spain's Freixenet have set up operations here in the past decade. So have "flying winemaker" consultants such as California's Paul Hobbs and France's Michel Rolland. Indeed, with most of Argentina's economy still in a shambles from four years of recession and January's default and devaluation, the country's 150-year-old wine industry stands out as a rare bright spot: Exports last year expanded 20%, to \$149 million - A record

Argentina's ruby-colored jewel is the pungent malbec grape—a variety originally grown in Bordeaux, but one that wine critics agree takes best to Mendoza's dry, high-desert terrain. Although high-quality, stand-alone examples of this onetime blending grape now abound in the U.S. and Europe, that it's known at all outside Argentina is largely the work of Catena. During his tenure as a visiting economics professor at the University of California at Berkeley in the early 1980s, Catena and his family toured Napa and Sonoma wineries, which were then first challenging French dominance of the quality wine trade.

Returning to Argentina in 1983, Catena set out to repeat the Napa revolution at the vineyard planted by his Italian-immigrant grandfather in 1902. Leaving academics behind, he oversaw the transformation of the family business from Argentina's once-largest producer of jug wine to a world-class vintner relying on computer controls, international consultants, and stainless-steel tanks. In a recent blind taste test in London, critics



Nicolas Catena and daughter, Laura

judged his \$80 1997 Nicolás Catena Zapata line on a par with top-quality wines retailing for three times their value. After tasting Catena’s \$50 Alta line, Robert Parker, the hallowed voice of authority in the wine world, wrote: “These wines from Nicolás Catena and his daughter represent the finest in winemaking art from South America.”

Although Argentine wines are increasingly available in U.S. stores, they’re harder to find than wine from Chile, which exports a full two-thirds of its output. But as the world’s fifth-largest wine producer, Argentina has the potential for its denser, fruity wines to match the global reputation of its beef and soccer players. Today, 24 Argentine wines rank 90 and above on the influential 100-point *Wine Spectator* scale.

The push toward quality is also trickling down to midpriced wines. At around \$15 a bottle, the Reserva line of cabernet, malbec, and chardonnay made by Chandon-owned Terrazas de los Andes offers some of the best values on the market. It also carries the cachet of coming from some of the highest-elevation vineyards in the world, 3,500 feet above sea level. “The worst part about premium Argentine wines is they always sell out too fast,” says Alfredo Bartholomaeus, owner of Springfield (Va.) wine importer Billington Imports (www.billingtonwines.com). If that’s a problem, Argentine winemakers don’t mind being associated with it.

By Joshua Goodman

