

ARGENTINA'S ONE TWO PUNCH

One grape and one man are leading the country's march toward wines of quality and character BY JAMES MOLESWORTH

Can Argentina fulfill its potential and produce world-class wines? The answer is an emphatic yes, thanks to the Malbec grape in general and the wines of Nicolás Catena in particular. • The 68 Argentinean Malbecs that I tasted over the past year confirm the findings of my last report ("True Colors," April 30, 2002) on the region: Malbec is clearly Argentina's strong suit and, dollar for dollar, the country's bottlings of this variety comprise one of the world's most distinctive groups of wines. • Meanwhile, Catena's portfolio, from the value-priced Álamos line up through the Catena, Catena Alta and Catena Zapata wines, provides the country's broadest and best-scoring range of quality, with many of the wines made in ample quantity. The question facing Argentina now is, can Catena's colleagues follow suit, or will the wine industry there be a one-man show?

Opposite: Nicolás Catena, Argentina's foremost vintner, has set a new standard of quality for his nation's wines.



Above: The design of Nicolás Catena's state-of-the-art Catena Zapata winery was inspired by Mayan architecture. Below: Pedro Marchevsky has been key to Catena's unrivaled success in Argentina. Now, he produces his own BenMarco label as well.

For this report, I have reviewed 183 wines, 18 of which rate 90 points or better on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale—the best showing yet for this still-developing region. Nine of those 18 top wines are Malbecs or Malbec blends. (For a complete list of the top-scoring wines from my tastings this past year, see the chart on page 111; for an alphabetical guide to all wines tasted, see the Buying Guide, page 161.)

Malbec was originally used as a blending grape in Bordeaux, for its deep color and firm tannins. Rarely seen in today's Bordeaux blends, the grape's French home is now the southwest appellation of Cahors, where Malbec makes firm, structure-driven wines.

In Argentina, the high elevation of the vineyards produces an altogether different version of the grape, with vivid plum, boysenberry and blackberry fruit, meat and spice notes and sweet, lush tannins. Think of it as Argentina's version of Zinfandel, but with more depth and polish. Thankfully, most wineries have elected not to produce a heavily extracted, high-alcohol style of wine and instead are allowing Malbec's focused fruit and unique range of flavors to shine.

Recent vintages (1999 through 2001) have all been good to outstanding. And early indicators point to '02 as Argentina's best vintage in a generation, particularly for Mendoza, the country's premier wine-producing region.

The best wine from my tastings is the stunningly dense yet pure and defined Bodega Catena Zapata Nicolás Catena Zapata Mendoza 1999 (93 points, \$90). This blend of predominantly Cabernet Sauvignon with Malbec is the best wine yet from Catena and his winemaker José Galante, and it sets a new bench-



mark for quality (and price) in Argentina.

In fact, almost all the country's top wines are made by Catena's Bodega Catena Zapata winery (formerly called Bodegas Esmeralda) or by other wineries to which Catena is connected. The consistently very good to outstanding Tikal and Luca wineries are owned by Ernesto and Laura Catena, respectively Nicolás' son and daughter. They also employ the same winemaker, Alejandro Sejanovich. In addition, Pedro Marchevsky, Catena's longtime vineyard manager, runs his own winery, BenMarco, while Marchevsky's wife, Susana Balbo, former export manager for Catena, is a winemaker with an eponymous label.

Catena himself has ownership interest in several other wineries, such as Bodegas Escorihuela and Familia Rutini. Catena has also debuted his first joint-venture, called Caro. A 50-50 partnership with the France-based Domaines Barons de Rothschild (Lafite), Bodegas Caro introduced its first wine, from the 2000 vintage, at the end of 2002. A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec, it rates 90 points. Interestingly, the wine is very much in the Lafite style, with elegant cedar and vanilla notes, as opposed to the full, rich style of Catena's own wines.

Once you step outside the immediate Catena "family," however, the number of top wineries is limited. They include Achával-Ferrer, Viña Doña Paula (owned by Chile's Santa Rita), Paul Hobb's Viña Cobos, Michel Rolland's Bodega San Pedro de Yacochuya and the Domaine Chandon-owned Bodegas Terrazas de los Andes.

Though few in number, the top wineries continue to elevate their quality. Focusing primarily on Malbec and employing modern

TOP-SCORING WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
BODEGA CATENA ZAPATA Nicolás Catena Zapata Mendoza 1999 Roasted cocoa bean, bittersweet chocolate, black currant and blackberry. Powerful finish, tongue-pounding tannins.	93	\$90
BODEGA CATENA ZAPATA Malbec Mendoza Catena Alta Angelica Vineyard 2000 Aromas of chocolate, raspberry confiture and sweet smoke. Juicy and dense. Raspberry and blackberry on the long finish.	92	\$55
BODEGAS ESMERALDA Malbec Mendoza Catena Alta Angelica Vineyard 1999 Aromas of blackberry and espresso. Sweet, dense tannins. Long finish drips with fruit and toast, yet remains elegant.	92	\$50
ACHÁVAL-FERRER Malbec Mendoza Finca Altamira 2000 Dark, with blackberry and chocolate notes. Racy finish unfolds with juicy acidity; crammed with fruit, spice and smoke.	91	\$85
BODEGA CATENA ZAPATA Chardonnay Mendoza Catena Alta Adrianna Vineyard 2000 Unctuous apricot, mango, fig and dried pineapple flavors, with grilled nut and spice notes. Long, creamy finish.	91	\$32
BODEGA CATENA ZAPATA Malbec Mendoza Catena Lunlunta Vineyards 2000 Concentrated blackberry and raspberry fruit and mineral and sanguine notes. Fleshy finish builds in intensity. Great cut.	91	\$25
TIKAL Malbec Altos de Mendoza Amorío 2000 Drips with fruit—blackberry, raspberry, boysenberry. Lush, ripe tannins imbedded from start to finish.	91	\$30
ACHÁVAL-FERRER Quimera Mendoza 2001 Focused, with raspberry, cassis, violet and mineral. Long finish. Remarkably racy, considering the dense, ripe fruit.	90	\$55
BENMARCO V.M.S. Mendoza 2000 Mineral, bittersweet dark chocolate, bramble and sanguine notes. Opaque red that has a brooding, slightly rustic feel.	90	\$32
BODEGA CATENA ZAPATA Chardonnay Mendoza Catena Agrelo Vineyards 2001 Lovely purity and balance, with ripe flavors of fig and pear backed up by floral and toast notes.	90	\$20
BODEGA SAN PEDRO DE YACUCHUYA Cafayate 1999 Flashy style, with seductive toast and spice notes over the remarkably supple blackberry and boysenberry flavors.	90	\$60
BODEGAS CARO Mendoza 2000 Nice mix of ripe, crushed berries, vanilla, spice and cedar notes, with an elegant texture and pretty finish.	90	\$40
BODEGAS ESMERALDA Cabernet Sauvignon Mendoza Catena Agrelo Vineyards 1999 Ripe, with raspberry and cassis fruit that grips the palate. Chocolate and toast notes on the finish.	90	\$22
BODEGAS ESMERALDA Chardonnay Mendoza Catena Agrelo Vineyards 2000 Delicious. Juicy, with fig, pineapple and pear flavors, fat texture and a long finish that lets the flavors hang on.	90	\$17

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
BODEGAS TERRAZAS DE LOS ANDES Cabernet Sauvignon Mendoza Gran 1999 Dense, dripping with currant, cassis, bittersweet chocolate and brooding loam notes. Full-bodied, yet sleek and pure.	90	\$38
BODEGAS TERRAZAS DE LOS ANDES Malbec Mendoza Gran 1999 Sports a boatload of fruit—blackberry, currant, boysenberry—with coffee, mineral and toast notes backing it up.	90	\$38
BODEGAS TERRAZAS DE LOS ANDES Malbec Mendoza Reserva 2000 Packed with fruit. Shows some mature notes, with dark boysenberry and bramble flavors. Meat- and iron-accented finish.	90	\$15
TIKAL Júbilo Altos de Mendoza 2000 Thick kirsch flavor, with alluring plum, spice and toast notes. Nice tight package, with juicy, vibrant acidity.	90	\$50

BEST VALUES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
BODEGA CATENA ZAPATA Chardonnay Mendoza Álamos 2001 Pretty pear and piecrust flavors, with hints of lime and flowers. Nice round texture and good length on the finish.	88	\$10
BODEGAS ESMERALDA Chardonnay Mendoza Álamos 2000 Big and juicy, with ripe pear, hazelnut and fig notes. Long creamy finish. Quite tasty.	88	\$10
VALENTÍN BIANCHI Malbec San Rafael 1999 Lots of sweet toast and vanilla, with juicy black and red berry fruit and spice flavors. Delicious.	87	\$13
BODEGAS ESCORIHUELA Malbec Mendoza Don Miguel Gascón 2001 Textbook Malbec, with brier, chocolate and dark plum flavors. Fleshy texture, smoky finish. A touch rustic in the end.	87	\$10
BODEGA CATENA ZAPATA Bonarda Mendoza Álamos 2001 Nice tasty dark plum and berry fruit, with sweet vanilla and toast on the gutsy finish.	86	\$10
BODEGA CATENA ZAPATA Cabernet Sauvignon Mendoza Álamos 2001 Good juicy bramble, black cherry and vanilla flavors, with a gutsy finish.	86	\$10
BODEGAS ESMERALDA Malbec Mendoza Álamos 2000 Cinnamon and spice aromas. Blackberry and chocolate flavors. Sweet berry finish picks up a meaty note.	86	\$10
BODEGAS Y VIÑEDOS SANTIAGO GRAFFIGNA Barbera Tulum Valley Selección Especial 2000 Delicious plum and brier flavors. Ripe and exuberant, with a rich, jammy finish.	86	\$8
BODEGAS Y VIÑEDOS SANTIAGO GRAFFIGNA Malbec Tulum Valley Selección Especial 2000 Lively, with medium-weight brier and blackberry flavors augmented by tasty, sweet toast. Some muscle on the finish.	86	\$10
BODEGAS LA RURAL Chardonnay Tupungato Trumpeter 2000 Creamy feel, with pretty fig and quince notes underneath. Stony, mineral notes on the finish. Nicely done.	86	\$9

vinification techniques to unearth the potential in their vineyards, these wineries released some compelling wines during the past year. They include the Achával-Ferrer Malbec Mendoza Finca Altamira 2000 (91, \$85), Tikal Malbec Altos de Mendoza Amorío 2000 (91, \$30), Bodegas Terrazas de los Andes Malbec Mendoza Gran 1999 (90, \$38) and BenMarco V.M.S. Mendoza 2000 (90, \$32).

Value Malbecs abound as well, with numerous very good or even outstanding bottlings priced at \$15 or less. Look for the Bodegas Terrazas de los Andes Malbec Mendoza Reserva 2000 (90, \$15), Bodegas Escorihuela Malbec Mendoza Don Miguel Gascón 2001 (87, \$10) and Viña Doña Paula Malbec Luján de Cuyo Los Cardos 2001 (87, \$9). Bodega Norton shone this year with some improved Malbecs, including its Malbec Mendoza Reserve 2000 (89, \$15).

There is more to Argentina than just Malbec. Cabernet Sauvignon makes outstanding wines there, while grapes such as Bonarda (a round, plummy, fleshy grape similar to Italy's Barbera) and Syrah also add to the country's range. The Susana Balbo Syrah-Bonarda Mendoza Crios 2001 (89, \$15) and Valentín Bianchi Cabernet Sauvignon San Rafael 1999 (89, \$14) offer character and value.

Argentina's white wines are generally less dynamic than its reds, though some fine Chardonnays can be found. Examples include the Bodega Catena Zapata Chardonnay Mendoza Catena Alta Adrianna Vineyard 2000 (91, \$32) and Chardonnay Mendoza Catena Agrelo Vineyards 2001 (90, \$20), along with the Bodegas Terrazas de los Andes Chardonnay Tupungato Reserva 2001 (89, \$15). Torrontés, a spicy Muscat-like grape unique to Argentina, has garnered some enthusiasm, but most of the bottlings that I have tasted show a waxy, slightly blowsy side.

Throwing a monkey wrench into Argentina's burgeoning wine industry is the country's recent economic crisis and the dramatic

devaluation of its peso. In recent years, many of the wineries that had been producing for the domestic market re-equipped themselves, while others started from scratch—all aiming at the expanding export market. Whether these retooled and nascent wineries can survive the sudden economic downturn and match the quality that Catena and the other handful of elite wineries are currently producing is an open question.

Luckily, many wineries have the advantage of earning foreign currency, and with the devaluation of the Argentinean peso making the country's exports more attractively priced in foreign markets, its wine industry could be a factor in Argentina's economic recovery.

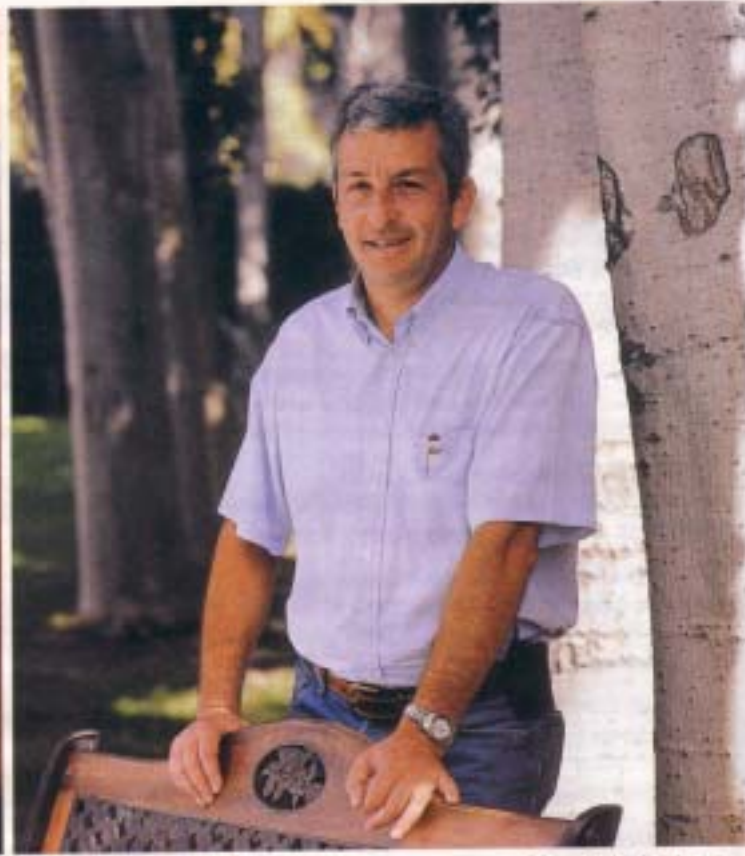
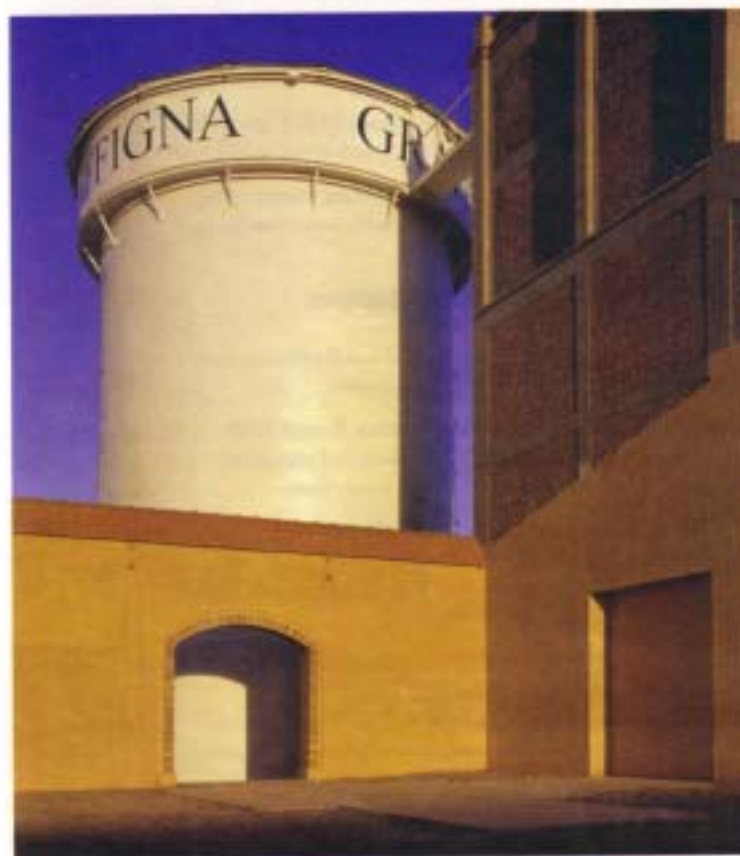
"If you invest now, it's with a very weak peso, which you can then get dollars for," explains Donald Hess, whose new Colomé project will be releasing its first wines later this year.

But not all wineries are taking advantage of the opportunities. Some of the region's large, widely distributed companies, such as Trapiche, Bodegas Balbi, Santa Julia, Marcus James and Fincha Flichman, continue to produce lackluster wines. This, like the economic upheaval, is slowing Argentina's progress.

Still, there is plenty to be optimistic about. Hess' Colomé has the potential to bolster the group of top wines; so does Carlo Pulenta, whose family owned Trapiche before its sale in 1997. Pulenta's Bodegas Salentein debuted its first set of wines recently, highlighted by a solid Malbec Mendoza 2001 (88, \$18).

Argentina's wine producers have a lot to work on, but they also have a lot to work with. If the wineries can forge ahead and use quality as their ultimate barometer of success, consumers will soon have a steady stream of appealing wines coming their way—a stream that can offer an impressive combination of character and value.

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Left: The modern wineries of Bodegas y Viñedos Santiago Graffigna have been built on a strong winemaking tradition that dates to the late 1800s. Right: Enologist