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The Chill Above, The Chalk Below Gualtallary

by Patricio Tapia

Closing in on 5,000 feet above sea level, the terrain southwest of Mendoza becomes extreme. Above it all, the colossal Andes seem about to fall into the landscape, their white pinnacles set against a light blue sky. The harsh desert landscape takes on a special clarity here in Gualtallary, the new frontier for Argentine malbec.

In Gualtallary the story is quite different. No one bothered to plant vines here until drip irrigation made it feasible. That's when growers began to explore new regions and ***Nicolás Catena placed a bet on this barren hillside*** in the early 1990s.

An the time, Catena was busy restructuring his family's winery, focusing on higher-quality wines and abandoning the bulk wine business. One of Catena's goals was to produce a great cabernet sauvignon, emulating the wines of California, where he lived during the 80s. Areas such as Luján de Cuyo, near Mendoza, were too warm to grow an elegant style of cabernet, so he sought out lower tempereatures at higher altitudes.

Catena's team began a project at 4,900 feet in a place they would eventually name Adrianna Vineyard, now 286 acres of vines. In addition to cabernet sauvignon, they planted chardonnay and selections of malbec from his flagship vineyard, Angélica, with its old vines planted 2,300 feet below, in Maipú.

Down in Luján de Cuyo, I met with Alejandro Vigil, who joined Catena in 2002. Prior to coming to Catena, Vigil - who has "Malbec" tatooed on his arm right next to the name of his son, Juan Cruz- had worked as the chief of soil studies for the National Agricultural Technology Institute (INTA). "Adrianna's temperature is some four degrees (Celcius) lower than in Maipú," Vigil says, "but what impressed me the most was the different soils and their impact on malbec grapes".

That interest led to a fixation with Adrianna: Vigil went so far as to make 600 malbec micro-vinifications from different soils an altitudes. "Today we have a better knowledge of the vineyard, so we only make around 220," he says, with a certains ironic tone, as if to justify the 20 malbec samples, all from the 2011 harvest, he's lined up for me to taste.

After studying the Adrianna vineyard for more than ten years, Vigil and his team have identified three broad soil types. Vigil defines the first as "sandy soils with stones, typical of riverbeds, which produce wines with a good deal of alcohol and maturity for such hot soils." The second type is composed of sand and stones on a calcareous base; these are cooler and retain water better, producing grapes with better acidity and herbal aromas. "45 centimeters below, where lime begins, the temperature is two degrees (Celcius) lower than on the surface," Vigil says.

It's wines from the third type of soil -a mix of chalk and sand- that stand out to me in the tasting. They seem to convey a certain electricity, accentuating the wine's acidity, increasing its freshness. The texture of the malbec grown on calcareous sand has a kind of tensions that brings chalk to mind. While the other samples - particulary those of soils without calcareous rock- seem sweet and enticing, these malbecs are pure energy. "Soils with a larger amount of chalk are what we are looking for. They always give us a more mineral and refreshing quality. And alcohol contents never exceed 13,5. These are sharp malbecs," adds Vigil.

The sharp edge is what convinced Nicolás Catena of Adrianna's potential. In 2002, the grapes harvested at this vineyard went into the Catena Alta Malbec, which was then the top malbec of the house. By 2004, the pungent, mineral complexity of the grapes inspired Catena to showcase it in their Single Vineyard line, currently one of the clearest studies on the many faces of malbec in Mendoza.