

Boom Time Argentina

Sales are up, visitors are coming in droves, and Argentina's wines are no longer fighting for recognition. It's glory days in the shadows of the Andes.

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On a warm comfortable November evening in Mendoza, Argentina, Erika Goulart, a flamboyant, fast-talking Brazilian who lives in Buenos Aires, is recounting the brief history of her family's Argentine wine label.

"We began Bodega Goulart in 2005 with 2,500 cases. This year we will bottle 38,000 cases and export to eight countries. That's pretty good growth, no?" Yes, Erika; using any accepted measuring stick, that's amazing growth for a start-up producer, especially one that continues to rent winemaking space while drawing up plans for something proprietary.

Yet Goulart's story, while impressive, is not unique in a country where wine exports and overall production have been growing by as much as 40% annually in recent years. All across Argentina but particularly in Mendoza, the source for more than 70% of Argentina's wine, there are a fountain's worth of boom time stories.

Other cases in point among many: Kaiken, founded by Aurelio Montes of Chile and his partners in 2002, is now a 140,000-case producer that's exporting 35,000 cases of wine per year to the United States; Bodega Vistalba, launched a handful of

years ago by industry veteran and former Trapiche head Carlos Pulenta, already has a million cases of capacity; Bodega Renacer, which has foreign ownership and is run by Patricio Reich of Chile, has gone from zero to 85,000 cases in just six years, with roughly half of Renacer's production being sold in the United States.

In the fast lane

Throughout much of the rest of the wine world, struggling economies have forced many wineries to batten down their hatches and cut sales projections. But Argentina continues to fly in the face of prevailing winds, registering its most significant period of success since its immigrant-led wine industry first went commercial in the latter part of the 19th century.



"Things are good now, but this is when the hard work gets harder," Alberto Arizu Jr., president of the Wines of Argentina trade association but also a member of the families that produce Luigi Bosca and Viña Alicia, tells me over lunch in Buenos Aires. "Achieving growth is sometimes easier than maintaining the status one has obtained. We have to be aware that the consumer is always looking for the next new thing. We want to avoid being today's success story and then tomorrow's old news."

Argentina's capital, within sight of the Avenida 9 de Julio's dozen lanes of buzzing traffic, and it seemed like the perfect metaphor for what's been going on with Argentinean wine. The jacaranda-lined Champs Elysées of Buenos Aires is a sight to behold, a source of national pride even, but only assuming that nobody slams on the brakes or that nothing unforeseen gets in the way of the roadway's free flow. Should that happen, might

everything screech to a halt? Could Argentina revert back to where it was a decade ago: misunderstood and largely ignored?

As wineries from Luján de Cuyo to Tupungato assessed damage from a nasty November 16 frost that should shrink the size of the 2011 harvest by about one-third, these are the questions many are asking: For how long can Argentina's wine industry continue to expand?

The consensus answer in Mendoza, if there is a such a thing for a region with literally hundreds of wineries of every dimension, size, focus and quality level, is that the region's Andes-influenced, high desert terroir, vastly improved winery infrastructure and top-notch human talent are good enough as a whole that things should hold steady even if growth inevitably slows.

During my visits and over myriad tastings, winery owners and winemakers expressed nothing but confidence about the quality of what they are putting in the bottle, especially their Malbecs and red blends, pointing out that pricing is favorable compared to other wine-producing countries and that all product ranges are covered with wines of quality, from the under-\$15 segment of the market to the middle tier and up to the prestige level.

Yet there is still an underlying fear, albeit a quiet one, that Argentina could be branded a one-trick pony due to the fact that Malbec has become Argentina's lifeblood, accounting for more than 80% of all Argentinean wines being exported to the United States.

But that's an issue for another day; in the meantime Argentine Malbec is selling like mad and it's all systems go in Mendoza as well as in other wine regions including Patagonia, Salta and San Juan.

Malbec mania and other highlights

I review more than 500 Argentine wines annually for Wine Enthusiast and my trip to Mendoza last November was my sixth to the region since 2001. Here are a series of snapshot impressions from that trip that when put together tell the story of a vital industry that has more than come into its own over the past decade.

Recent Vintages

Everyone wants to know what to drink now, and interestingly, two of the most recent vintages on the market—2007 and 2008—are not great by Argentine standards and refute any beliefs that Mendoza's harvests are similar year to year. Of the two, 2007 was a better year with cool weather and rains at harvest; 2008 was warmer during the growing season but also humid; then cold weather set in during April, including a vintage-ending frost on April 14. Wines from both vintages can be excellent, as indicated in my recommended wines box, but overall these were stunted vintages that produced hard, tough, ungenerous wines. The good news is that 2009 and 2010 were much better than '07 and '08; 2011, meanwhile, is in the works, but it will be a difficult, small harvest because frost struck the morning of November 16, just two days after temperatures had topped 100°F. "A frost like that happens once every 20 years. It's definitely not a good thing, especially for larger wineries that have volume quotas to meet," explains Eduardo Alemparte, winemaker for Kaiken in the Vistalba subzone.



Uco Valley vs. Primera Zona

The Uco Valley starts about 40 miles south of Mendoza city and extends for another 50 miles down to San Carlos. In recent years wineries left and right have been buying property, sourcing grapes and planting vineyards from Tupungato through Vista Flores and down to El Cepillo to capture the valley's fresh, crisp, red-fruited style of Malbec. "Uco is where it's at as far as a new area to discover," asserts Edgardo Del Popolo, head winemaker at Doña Paula, as we hike through his newly planted bush vines in Tupungato, nearly 4,000 feet above sea level.

While getting to know the virtues of the Uco Valley I had become a little bored with the wines from the so-called Primera Zona—the warm regions of central Mendoza surrounding Luján de Cuyo. But on this trip I spent valuable time seeing 95-year-old vineyards in Lunlunta, stony alluvial soils in Vistalba and Perdriel, and learning about the Andean winds that cool vineyards on both the north and south banks of the Mendoza River. And after tasting the full-bodied depth, lushness and power of wines from Viña Cobos, Mendel, Benegas, Terrazas de los Andes and Bodega Vistalba, I am convinced that both the Uco Valley and the Primera Zona have plenty to offer.

Other Wines to Look For

In addition to the mixed case highlighting a dozen personal favorites, here's a short list of other recommended current or soon-to-be-released wines: Kaiken 2007 Mai, a new icon Malbec; **Mendel 2010 Sémillon, a partially barrel-fermented white that's true and waxy**; Bodegas Caro 2009 Amancaya, a Malbec-heavy blend that's a good deal at \$20; Lurton 2009 Gran Lurton Corte Friulano, a barrel-aged white marrying Viognier and Friulano grapes; Benegas 2008 Luna Benegas Cabernet Sauvignon, a chewy, tasty Cab that's ripe and a good value at \$12; Navarro Correas 2008 Alegoria Malbec, a wine with depth and balsam-wood character; Renacer 2008 Enamore, a quasi Amarone-style red wine made from five types of dried grapes; Ruca Malen 2009 Yauquén Chardonnay, a no-oak, clean and crisp Best Buy Chardonnay; Terrazas de Los Andes 2008 Altamira Single Vineyard Malbec, a new, upscale powerhouse Malbec made by Hervé Birnie-Scott.

Wine Recommendations

95. Vistalba 2007 Corte A (Mendoza); \$50. Power and purity come on like gangbusters, and the flavors are a classic mix of blackberry, cassis and fine Swiss chocolate. Heady, smooth and impressive. 87% Malbec with Bonarda and Cabernet Sauvignon; drink now through 2014. Editors' Choice. Imported by San Francisco Wine Exchange.

93. Viña Cobos 2007 Marchiori Vineyard Malbec (Mendoza); \$190. Young and rugged on the nose, but with exotic herb and spice aromas. Like all Cobos Malbecs, this is brawny and a touch medicinal, with dark fruit flavors, licorice, chocolate and richness; drink now through 2013. Imported by Paul Hobbs Winery.

92. Mendel 2007 Unus (Mendoza); \$40. **Big, lush and structured, with cola and mocha aromas. A pure and delicious Malbec-Cabernet blend with the full allotment of berry character, cola accents, dark spice and clarity; drink now through 2014. Imported by Vine Connections.**

92. Cheval des Andes 2006 Red Wine (Mendoza); \$70. Dense and dark, with aromas of rubber and leather. Complex and stylish but with raw power, and the flavors of blackberry, fig paste and herbs register as modern Mendoza. Malbec-Cabernet Sauvignon-Petit Verdot; best from 2011–2015. Cellar Selection. Imported by Moët Hennessy USA.

92. Bodega Goulart 2007 Gran Vin de Goulart Malbec (Luján de Cuyo); \$60. A purple monster with aromatics of campfire, mint, blackberry and spice. Robust and pure, with an emphasis on black fruit, cassis and chocolate. The finish brings nuances of cardamom, nutmeg and peppercorn; drink through 2013. Imported by Southern Starz, Inc.

91. Achaval-Ferrer 2008 Finca Bella Vista Malbec (Mendoza); \$120. The richest of A-F's single-vineyard '08 Malbecs. Opens with leather, smoke, blueberry and floral aromas. Next comes a dark palate of wild berry flavors and minerality. Finishes with less acidity than its brothers, Altamira and Mirador; drink now through 2015. Imported by T.G.I.C. Importers.

91. Doña Paula 2007 Selección de Bodega Malbec (Mendoza); \$50. Pure on the nose, with pop. Aromas of black cherry are tight and smoky, with minerality. Flavors of cola and berry fruits are on the money, and the feel is firm, deep and layered; drink through 2014. Imported by Vineyard Brands.

90. O. Fournier 2006 B Crux (Uco Valley); \$21. A rare blend of Tempranillo and Malbec, with creamy berry and mild leather aromas in front of easy-going raspberry and blackberry flavors. Oak is prominent but doesn't overwhelm; drink now. Imported by Fine Estates From Spain.

90. Trapiche 2008 Broquel Bonarda 2008 (Mendoza); \$17. Thick and pulsing, but not angular or tannic. The nose brings richness, smoke and black fruits, while the palate is focused and forward, with black fruit flavors and a slight creamy character. Imported by Frederick Wildman & Sons, Ltd.

89. Renacer 2007 Punto Final Reserva Malbec (Mendoza); \$20. Dark, sweet and rooty on the nose, with berry, plum and chocolate flavors. Per usual, Punto Final is ripe and big, with a peppery finish and toasty, jammy warmth. Imported by Winebow.

89. Alta Vista 2008 Atemporal (Mendoza); \$25. Woody at first, this four-grape blend eases toward roasted berry, cassis, herbal plum and molten chocolate. Massive and structured, with a big-boned skeleton and heat on the finish; 15.5% alcohol. Imported by Buena Cepa Wines.

87. Trivento 2009 Reserve Malbec (Mendoza); \$11. Bright, sweet and fruity, with cherry candy and blackberry aromas, then a fresh palate with chocolate, raspberry and a nice texture. Best Buy. Imported by Banfi Vintners.