

MATT KRAMER

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## Why Just Drinking Isn't Enough

-“Sure Argentina has quite a lot of it, in fact. by just about anyone’s fine wine emerging. in the remarkable producers as Antucura blends), Colomé (powerfully

**MENDEL (austerely beautiful Malbec)** or Viña Alicia (exceptional finesse). All of these wines, and many more, reflect a finewine civilization that’s new and, yes, better.”-



long grown wine, But only now, account, is truly You can taste it wines of such (elegant, refined

minerals wines),

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# Why Just Drinking Isn't Enough

**B**UENOS AIRES, Argentina-As many of you know from reading my twice-monthly column, "Drinking Out Loud," on WineSpectator.com, my wife and I moved to Buenos Aires in February for a three-month stay.

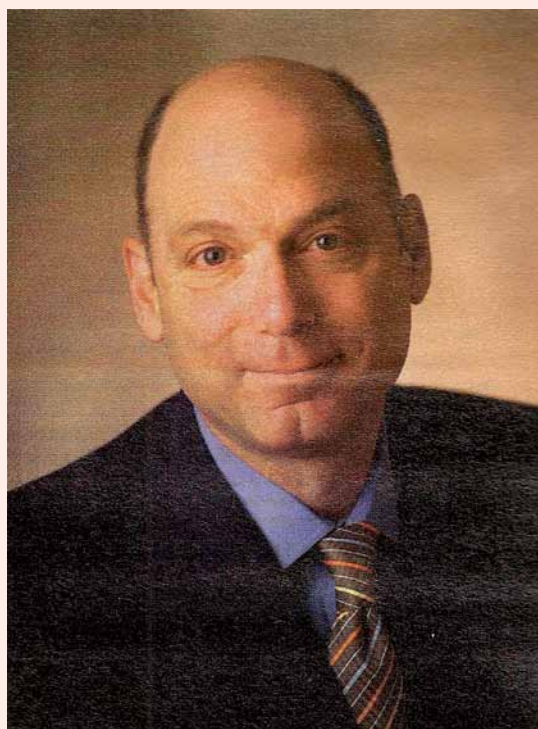
Why Buenos Aires? You know the old joke about how if you have to ask the price of the yacht you can't afford it? The same applies to Buenos Aires: If you have to ask why, well then, obviously you've never been here. Suffice it to say that Buenos Aires is an exotic, improbable hybrid of Paris and Mexico, with the architectural grandeur and city planning of the former and the warmth, kindness and humanity (and broken sidewalks) of the latter.

Of course, I also came for the wine. I've been foraging to pretty far-flung wine regions: Mendoza (600 air miles west of Buenos Aires); Patagonia (610 miles southwest); Salta (800 miles northwest). Each of these zones is strikingly different. Mendoza, for example, is vast, boasting a vineyard area equal to two-thirds of the grapevines planted in all of California. Salta province, for its part, is much more rugged, with vineyards that start at 5,500 feet in elevation (around the town of Cafayate) and rise to a nosebleed 9,000 feet or higher as you drive north from Cafayate into neighboring Calchaquies Valley.

Why do all this traveling? The lesson is one you can't learn too many times: You never really know a wine until you've been where it's grown. This may come as a surprise to some drinkers, for whom wine seems a finished product, a bottle on the shelf.

To a degree that's true. I would never claim that you can't appreciate, say, a Vosne-Romanée unless you've been to that small patch of land in Burgundy's Côte d'Or. But I will say this much: I don't think that you can really know a wine-any wine that's a powerful expression of place-unless you've laid eyes on the spot.

This may seem nonsensical, even elitist. After all, isn't everything the wine has to say already contained inside the bottle? Yes and no. Yes, everything the wine has to say is indeed inside the bottle. But a great Malbec from Mendoza ain't Heinz ketchup. Unlike the latter (tasty as it is), fine wine requires interpretation-which goes way beyond mere "tasting."



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In order to understand what a fine wine has to say, you have to bring to it almost as much as it brings to you. This is where knowledge comes in, where context is essential, and ultimately, where travel not only to a wine's geographic source but also to its originating culture is vital.

This is the root, by the way, of the objection of some to "international" wines. Technically, they're almost always beautifully made. But one senses an absence of a culture, of a particular, individual civilization that informs why this wine was made to begin with.

What's the difference? It's not talent or technique. Everybody, everywhere, has got that. Rather, the result is a reflection of a civilization, of a set of values that, Ouija-like, shapes a palate and guides the hand as the vintner chooses when to pick, how to ferment, how much or little oak to use, and how he or she wants the wine to "behave."

This is why, as we've seen in California, Australia, Chile, Oregon and elsewhere, French winemakers often create different wines than the locals. They bring another set of v