

Best New Releases from Argentina

By Stephen Tanzer

Making vintage generalizations for this huge wine-soaked country is a tricky proposition--after all, we're talking about well over a thousand miles from Salta in the north to the main wine-producing areas of Patagonia in Argentina's extreme south. But I thought you'd be interested to see a rough categorization of recent vintages in the most important Mendoza region by Roberto de la Mota, who is responsible for the superb Mendel wines. While noting that there hasn't been a really bad vintage in Mendoza for quite a while, he said there have been climatic differences worth noting in recent years. His view:

Warmer years: 2004, 2006, 2009.

Cooler years: 2005, 2007 (fresh and rainy), 2008 (frost at the end of the ripening period affected some cabs) 2010, and probably 2013

In between: 2012 and probably 2011.

De la Mota noted that some American tasters are quite fond of the 2009s for their concentration, size, fleshiness and sweet tannins. Europeans, he added, are more likely to prefer 2010, 2008 and 2007, which generally show fresh fruit with better natural acidity. I'm with the Europeans here, as I tend to prefer the cooler years in Argentina, as the fruit can ripen more slowly and gain in aromatic perfume without excessive dehydration or loss of acidity. Of course, even in Argentina's moderately warm years, when growers can be tempted to let their crop hang in search of fuller ripeness, wines can lack acidity or show distinct dried-fruit or porty character.

Mendel, by the way, rates 2012 well ahead of 2010. He considers the earlier set of wines to be fresh, bright and medium-bodied but feels that many of them lack a bit of mid-palate material and complexity.

Increasing specificity of terroir. Among the most exciting developments in Argentine wine in recent years has been the ongoing discovery--and exploitation--of outstanding terroirs, and, more important, the matching of the right varieties--and clones--to these favored spots. According to consulting enologist Alberto Antonini, who has numerous clients in Argentina (not to mention Italy, the U.S. and elsewhere), in just the past half dozen years there has been great progress in the knowledge base of both macro and micro terroirs. The best wines being made today, he says, show pure and intriguing flavors from specific areas that were essentially unknown--or at least not defined--just a few short years ago.

Antonini, who prefers working with malbec over cabernet sauvignon (he believes that Mendoza's high dry desert can produce highly aromatic, concentrated cabernet sauvignon but that these wines are rarely velvety and refined like the top cabernets from elsewhere and often betray a rustic dry edge), considers 2012 to be an outstanding year for malbec, with the top wines showing purity, elegance, complexity and vibrancy, not to mention considerable aging potential. A textbook growing season, he noted, allowed for a slow ripening of the fruit, with a good balance between tannins, acidity and concentration.

By the way, my early look at 2013 suggests that it's a potentially excellent vintage, with cool early autumn weather slowing down the ripening at the end of the season and resulting in wines with strong natural acidity and relatively low alcohol. By most early reports, 2013 produced very fresh whites (I tasted a number of these wines for this review) and highly successful malbecs with smooth, ripe tannins. This vintage marks a return to form for the Cafayate Valley in Salta, much of which was plagued by heavy summer rainfall in 2012. The new vintage has produced numerous dense, sharply delineated torrontes bottlings in Salta with much more intensity than the 2012s. I should also note that in Mendoza, I generally prefer the 2012 reds to the 2011s.

Antonini may yet prove to be correct that the very best sites are capable of making complete malbec wines that combine concentration, complexity, structure and class. But this winter I found myself gravitating toward malbecs blended not just with cabernet sauvignon but with cabernet franc, merlot, petit verdot and even syrah. When used cleverly, these other varieties added elements the malbec needed: aromatic lift, earth tones, red fruits, inner-mouth tension, glossier texture, and so on. I was reminded of the high desert of Washington State, where blends, often from single sites, are currently making some of the state's finest wines. Happily, the most innovative winemakers in Argentina appear to be moving in that direction.

And beyond these blends, some of the most interesting new releases I tried from Argentina this year were relative oddballs for that country, such as semillon, cabernet franc and petit verdot. I also ran across some excellent sparkling wines.

Label confusion. Argentine wine labels often raise more questions than they answer, and they can be very difficult for consumers in export markets to make sense of. Some producers, for example, use more specific appellations like Lujan de Cuyo in Mendoza or Cafayate Valley in Salta on front labels, while others note these place names only in small print on the back. The names of the wines themselves frequently change slightly from vintage to vintage. And of course words like Reserve and Reserva are interchangeable, and the labels on many samples I received from Argentina are not quite exactly the way they will appear on bottles shipped to U.S. importers. Many importers also insist on using names to describe their wines that do not actually appear on the labels, which is also potentially confusing to consumers (not to mention wine writers).

The trend toward focusing on specific, favored microclimates and tightly defined terroirs--and announcing this on labels--continues. Obviously the Lujan de Cuyo region, called a Primera Zona (top area) in Argentina, is shown on many labels, but more and more wineries are beginning to promote the names of more specific sectors or departments within regions, such as Vistalba, Agrelo or Perdriel within Lujan de Cuyo. But there is little consistency to their use and the names do not have legal standing. And there's no requirement to use these place names. These famous names mean something to wine connoisseurs in the home market but do not yet have much meaning for American wine consumers. Incidentally, Lujan de Cuyo is the only DOC designation in Mendoza that is approved by national law.

On the other hand, wineries based in less-favored, lower-altitude sections of Mendoza prefer simply to put Mendoza on the label. The Uco Valley is one of the 17 departments grouped under the 3 desertic regions (in this case, the Central Oasis) that comprise Mendoza. (Lujan de Cuyo is part of the Northern Oasis region.) And those 17 departments are again subdivided. But of course wineries can simply say Uco Valley on their labels and not refer to the sector.

So while Alberto Antonini singles out such calcaire-rich vineyards within Mendoza as Gualtallary in Tupungato (in the Uco Valley), where Catena makes his Nicasia and Adrianna vineyard bottlings, it's going to be a while before these place names begin to have real meaning to American wine connoisseurs, much less mass-market consumers.

Still great values to be found. My annual tastings of new releases from Argentina turned up stunning values, as always, although I must report that tasting hundreds of malbec bottlings each year is becoming harder work. Argentina continues to flood the U.S. markets with lookalike Mendoza malbecs, much as New Zealand is doing with cookie-cutter sauvignon blancs from Marlborough. These two categories have become hugely successful brand names but there can be a great sameness to the wines. There's also something of a race to the bottom going on, as producers and their importers are under constant pressure to meet certain price points. The result: a staggering number of choices for consumers, a lot of them not very interesting. But if you choose well, you can drink terrific wine at very affordable prices, and at the level of the top producers there are world-class wines to be found. Happily, conditions in recent vintages have been conducive to making wines with more energy, and producers today are widely attempting to protect the purity of their wines by avoiding working with overripe grapes and overusing new oak.