

Wining on

Sowing Semillón

By Sorrel Moseley-Williams

For The Herald

MENDOZA — It's time Argentina took a premium white wine seriously and Semillón is the grape for the job. That was the gospel according to the sixth Premium Tasting in Mendoza on Thursday at a seminar dedicated to the Bordeaux grape

Led by Chilean wine critic Patricio Tapia, Semillón's New Lease of Life, focused on regenerating this previously popular white. "What goes around comes around," said Tapia, and with good reason. Semillón, known for its medium-high acidity and ability to use botrytis "noble rot" to its advantage to create the sought-after Sauternes sweet wine from south-west France, is no newcomer to Argentine terroir.

One of the five panellists, Facundo Suárez from Finca Suárez the third of four vineyard-owning generations in Uco Valley proudly showed off Estudios Ampelográficos (Wine Botany Studies), a book written by his grandfather Leopoldo which highlighted Semillón's potential more than a century ago.

"In Mendoza and San Juan, Semillón has become widespread and, as in its country of origin, produces the best white wine elaborated in the region," Leopoldo wrote in 1910. One of his sons, Facundo's father, later planted five hectares of the white grape, while the other managed with 20 hectares.

But, over the years, the noble white grape has taken a bit of a kicking thanks to the rise in Malbec's popularity, with vines pulled out to make way for Argentina's most popular red and other tintos such as Bonarda, the second-most planted red, and Cabernet Sauvignon. While 1,255 hectares were under plantation in 1990, by 2015 that figure had almost halved to 781 hectares, according to the INV viticultural institute.

Some Argentine winemakers have been in a special relationship with the Bordeaux transplant for some time, including Roberto de la Mota from Mendel Wines, Marcelo Miras from Bodega Miras (ex Humberto Canale and currently a consultant for Bodega Del Fin Del Mundo in Río Negro and Neuquén respectively) and Juan Roby from Familia Lagarde, also speakers at the Premium Tasting seminar.

De la Mota said: "(Argentina) used to have a lot of (Semillón) vines but numbers went down in the 2015 census. It's mainly used as a sparkling wine base these days by many as it can be harvested early."

While Lagarde's 1942 is now an historical legend, Mendel's Semillón is a modern-day contemporary, testament proved during the tasting. There's certainly a thread between the 2015 and 2009 sampled: honey, bee's wax, floral notes, apricot and that characteristic medium-high acidity that hits the side of your tongue with a vengeance (and one of the reasons Sauternes wine ages so well, besides the positive influence of noble rot). But the 2009 absolutely has it, and with bells on, thanks to riper apricot and more floral, blossom notes seven years after the grape was harvested (360 pesos).

One of the younger generation of oenologists to embark on a love affair with Semillón is Matías Riccitelli from the eponymous winery. Familiar with the grape's relatively small production in Patagonia, he decided to take on a new winemaking challenge in a new region, certainly to him. He said: "After finding out that some very old Semillón vines had been badly treated and not used, it seemed crazy that we might lose our heritage, I remembered Río Negro and I thought 'why don't we do something there because it has a good climate for Semillón? Let's go there.'"

Now on his second vintage, Matías aims to produce a complex Semillón with the ability to age. "2015 and 2016 were two different years and I am still learning, still trying to make a complex Semillón. I remember the noble ones I've tried abroad and I don't want to make a wine that dies in two years."

Matías' 2016 is still youthful with a citrus and peach nose, sporting orange blossom and minerality. Its marked acidity is austere, and needs time to calm down but its citrus notes are certainly refreshing.

By contrast, his first vintage in 2015 is more voluptuous thanks to some time spent in used oak barrels, with an intense peach, apricot, floral and banana nose. That notable acidity is still present but this is a richer, more rounded and complex wine yet easier to drink; so much so, you might easily sink 750 mls without realizing (800 pesos) — and loving it.

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