

"We have to focus on the HIGH-END"

Laura Catena, president of Bodega Catena Zapata, the winery which is leading the export of high-end wines from Argentina, is a key promoter of our white and red wines in the US, where she has been living for many years. Presently, she's putting her focus on our local history and culture in order to keep expanding the sales of our wines abroad.

At 43, Laura Catena, president of Catena Zapata, runs a winery that is not only the pioneer of high-end Argentine exports, but is also the trend setter for what Argentine wineries should do. At present, the different Catena brands are leading brands at many price levels and the whole world recognizes Catena Zapata as the winery that has done the most to build a positive image for Argentine wines around the world.

In 2009, Nicolas Catena, her father, was named "Man of the Year" by the prestigious UK magazine "Decanter", an award which had never been given to a South American vintner before.

Laura moved to the US when she was 14 years old, when her father was a visiting professor at UC Berkeley. Later on, while travelling frequently as a promoter of the family wines, she was able to increase sales of the company's exports in the dynamic markets of North America.

Today, with her family settled in San Francisco, she spends four months a year in Mendoza, to keep a close watch over the family business.

Moreover, aside from the increasing sales of Catena Zapata wines and their increasing worldwide prestige, Laura was born in the vineyards. Her grand-father, her father, eldest brother and younger sister were born on the family estate too.

"It may sound like a cliché saying that passion sells, but the truth is, I really believe in that", explains Laura. "Many times when I tell the story of my family and I imagine my great-grandfather, Nicola Catena, arriving in Argentina at the young age of 18 in a ship crowded with immigrants from Italy, my eyes swell up with tears. In fact, this passion and obsession for making wines that can compete with the best of the world, continues to be a family tradition; it is something that not only we, the family feel, but it is also felt by the people who work for our company"



LAURA CATENA

Your winery, and you yourself, as President of Bodega Catena Zapata have done an outstanding job of promoting Argentine wines abroad...how did you accomplish this? What were the key factors?

The key factor was to focus on quality from the very beginning, when Argentine wines were not even known by most people in the world. We focused on quality and tried to make world class wines that could be better than those of our competitors in other regions of the world. We frequently conducted blind tastings comparing our wines to other well known wines from around the world. We did extensive research on soil and climate for twenty years and we conducted our own Malbec plant selection from our oldest vineyard, the "Angelica" vineyard, which is now 70 years old. These plants were planted in carefully selected locations in the high altitude valleys of Mendoza, with very poor soils and an optimal thermal amplitude. Also, we planted Malbec in cool climate areas as high as 5,000 feet elevation where red varieties had never been planted before. We were very successful even though no one would have ever imagined that red grapes could have grown there. In addition, we brought the best barrels from France, the best pneumatic presses from Italy and the best bottling machines from Germany. Finally, we invested in our people; we sent our people to study in France, the US and Australia.

The second factor was sticking to our conviction that the family winery, started by my great-grandfather, has to last for many decades to come. Argentina is unique in the New World in the sense that it has a domestic wine culture very similar to that of Italy, France and Spain due to the large amount of European immigrants that came here. In other words, people like me who sell wines have winemaking in their blood.

In your opinion, what has changed the perception of Argentine wines in the consumer market over the last ten years?

Wine consumers are smart: when they buy a \$20 bottle that is much better and more concentrated than a \$40 wine, they buy the \$20 wine again. I believe that the high altitude vineyards of Mendoza are ideal for the production of highly aromatic and concentrated, yet soft and elegant wines. But in order to be able to sense or feel the *gout de terroir*, as the French call it (the typical flavor profile of a certain region), the wine cannot be oxidized and we must keep the yields low. I think that the Argentine wineries have learned a lot about viticulture and winemaking over the last 10 years. However,

I don't think success would have been possible without our special and unique *terroir*, and without the old vines brought by the immigrants during the 19th century.

What's the perception of our wines in the US?

Right now, Argentine wines are very popular in the US. In fact, I talk to many young people who say that their favorite wine is Malbec. However, when it comes to wine connoisseurs and collectors, we have to work harder. During the last two years we have conducted wine auctions of our top wines in several cities of the world. We wanted to find out how "collectible" are top wines were, which are sold at \$ 100 to \$200 per bottle. We were really surprised by the prices we got for our wines: we sold several 3 liter bottles of Nicolas Catena Zapata for prices between \$1500 and 5000 and a 6 liter bottle of the same wine for \$10,000 at auctions held in the US and Asia. The bottle which fetched the highest

price was a 1997 Catena Zapata Estiba Reservada, which was sold in Beijing for \$27,000.

Argentina is the country which has the highest growth in wine sales to the US. Why do you believe this is happening now?

In my opinion, it is mainly a matter of an excellent price-to-value ratio. But also there is the mystique of the Argentine, our culture and the outstanding job that Argentine winemakers are doing when they travel to other countries to promote their wines. High scores given by leading wine critics like Robert Parker or Wine Spectator magazine have played an important role too. In the US, people do pay attention to high scores.

In Argentina, your winery is the leader in exports of premium and super premium wines. Apart from focusing on quality, what other things have you done to attain this position?

Our family has a long history and we have great conviction in our heritage and traditions. This is why most of our vineyards are named after a family member. As for me, I'm very proud of my father, who pioneered modern viticulture and introduced Argentine Malbec to the world. This is why when I travel around the world, I feel tremendously patriotic, which goes beyond selling a particular bottle of wine.

How important is it to the success of your wines in the US, that you, as owner of the company, live there?

I have access to many wines here in the US, so I'm aware of the newest trends and important business developments. That of course helps a lot. However, I spend 4 to 5 months a year in Mendoza, since that is what I love the most: being at the winery and in the vineyards. My husband complains a little and he's right to do so. The kids (I have two boys and a girl) love following me from one place to the other.

Do Argentine wines have something in particular that has led them to be perceived so highly?

Quality, above all. And also the wonderful combination of concentration and softness provided by our high altitude mountain vineyards. Secondly, there are many good varietal wines in Argentina, like Malbec, Torrontés and Cabernet Franc. It's interesting to have a signature white and red grape and so many options for the future.

What are Argentine wines lacking in order for them to attain an important share in the world wine market?

This year Argentine wines exported to the US surpassed Chilean exports. But, in other markets like Asia, Argentina still has a long way to go in comparison with Chile. I think we have to diversify our efforts, focusing on high-end wines, since these are the only wines that can survive recessions and changes in the market.

Do you think that the scores given by the major international wine critics are important?

High scores help a lot. They are particularly relevant when it comes to wines from Bordeaux, but they are also important for Argentine wines.