

Laura Catena: “I would like that working at Catena Zapata becomes the equivalent of studying at Harvard”

At present, Nicolás Catena Zapata's daughter is President of her family's company, a leading winery in Argentina. Educated in the United States, Laura's involvement in the company is growing day by day, to the extent that she currently spends several months a year in our province. Here, she tells us how she started working in the world of wine and what her goals are for the future of the company.

An Interview of Laura Catena by Mauricio Llover.

How did you get involved in the wine industry?

I always loved my family's story, of my great-grandfather who had come from Italy and of my grandparents, Domingo Vicente Catena and María Angélica Zapata, who meant everything to us. My grandfather had planted several vineyards and my grandmother, as a teacher and headmaster of the local school, loved helping students who wanted to learn and make progress. I developed an early interest in my family's history.

And it was your family who transmitted a passion for wine to you?

Absolutely. A passion for wine and for everything else. We're all good readers in my family, we're very intellectual and we love to do research. When I was a small girl and lived in Argentina, on the weekends, we used to visit museums, libraries or the Buenos Aires International Book Fair. My mother also encouraged me to do volunteer work at different institutions; she tried to instill me with the value of helping people so when I was in college I volunteered in a hospital in Senegal. And wine was part of these values, too.

But you didn't study anything related to wine or business administration...

Not specifically. When my father travelled to the US to teach at Berkeley as a visiting professor, I ended up staying to study in the US. Later on, I studied biology at Harvard, where I was taught by Noble Prize winning professors, and it was then when my love for science was born. I graduated from Harvard Magna Cum Laude and my thesis was on Alzheimer's disease. I also studied several languages, like Latin, English, French and Italian. After all that, I graduated from Stanford as a physician, without having ever thought of joining the family's business.

So when did you decide to begin working for your family's company?

While I was studying medicine at Stanford in the 80's, my father used to come and visit me very often since he had begun exporting wines to the US. He made me taste all of the great wines that he was able to find in the US. So by the age of 18, I was already familiar with the best wines of the world, which were impossible to find in Argentina. I remember my father gave me an American Express card as a gift on one condition: that I could only use it to buy only the best wines, which I would then save to taste with him.

Did you do the tastings at restaurants or wineries?

Mostly we did the tastings in my dorm room at Stanford. We would order pizza and I would arrange the bottles on a small table. It was really fun and I remember that the only thing my father asked of me was that I should serve the wines in Riedel glasses. So now as I look back



I realize that I was a wine lover since my early youth. And it was about that time when I decided to travel to Mendoza more frequently, to learn about what my father was doing and to help him get to know whatever quality wines I could find or discover in the US. Little by little, I got more involved and it was when my first son Luca was born, that everything changed: the concept of family and tradition struck me as something very important, so I asked my father if I could be in charge of the US market.

And what happened to your career in medicine?

I didn't quit. I used to work full time as an emergency room doctor, and instead I began to work part time only, since I couldn't manage it all. So now I work both as a physician as well as for the family business. In a word, I have been able to combine the rational approach of business with the aspect of caring for others, inherited from my mother and grandmother.

How did you end up being the president of the company?

To me knowledge was crucial. I wanted to be respected by people because of what I knew, not just because I was Nicolás Catena's daughter. So I first began to work in the Research Department and it was not until five years later that I decided to get involved in other areas. Currently, I run the production area and manage all non-domestic sales of the company.

Which is the main challenge for a winery like Catena Zapata?

The core challenge has to do with human resources. This is the point that can really differentiate us from our closest competitors. We have everything else: vineyards that are unique in the world and the latest technology. So today the most important thing for us is to train our staff so that they can develop a career in our company. For example, right now we are providing scholarships so that our people can study at UC Davis, since our goal is to compete with the best wines of the world. I would like that working at Catena Zapata becomes the equivalent of studying at Harvard.

Vino Argentino

Laura Catena, author of the book “Vino Argentino”, has already sold 10.000 copies in the US. The book has been reviewed by prestigious publications like the New York Times, The Washington Post and Oprah magazine. You can buy it in bookstores or on the internet. The book, soon to be translated into Spanish and Portuguese, “recreates the tradition of 400 years of argentinian viticulture”, defining Argentina as the Old World within the New World.