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Laura Catena: “There is no doubt about the permanence of Malbec”

Laura Catena, Catena Zapata’s Managing Director stresses the fact that Malbec is already famous in the world, however she speaks about the need for more in depth research.

Py Federico Lancia - Gustavo Flores Bazán.

When we think about Catena Zapata, we refer to the winery that opened the door for Argentine wines to appear on an international stage. Currently, Laura Catena, who received her medical degree at Stanford University and a Harvard biology degree, is one of the most famous Argentine wine ambassadors.

She splits her time between the US and Argentina, but she is one of the few people who knows most about the development of the Argentine wine industry. She started working with his father in the 1990s. In addition, in 2010 she published the book “Vino Argentino, An Insider’s Guide to the Wines and Wine Country of Argentina.” In this interview with Vinos y Buen Vivir (Wine and Good Living), she discusses the leap in prestige that needs to be made by Argentine wine, the Malbec grape, Argentine culture and Argentine consumers.

Can you tell us how this idea of studying Argentine terroir was born? And when did you decide to make wines that could stand with the best in the world?

The truth is that 20 years ago, when I returned to Argentina from the US, I realized that our land was completely different, with high altitude, much more intense sunlight, and poorer soils than the rest of the world. So I knew that even if we hired the best foreign wine consultants, their advice would not be valid for our region. And so I realized that we needed to carry out our own research.

The second thing I realized is that people knew very little about our signature grape: Malbec, not even Argentinians. In this case, I also realized that foreign advice couldn’t help much.

Therefore our conclusion was: if we wanted to make wine that could rival the best in the world, which has always been my father’s vision, we needed to be able to understand each of our region’s (terroir), just as the most prestigious world wine regions have done in the past, like Bordeaux or



Burgundy in France. And today our goal at the Catena Institute is that the Adrianna Vineyard (in Gualtallary) becomes the most studied vineyard in the world. Even though this goal may sound unattainable to some, it is what motivates us.

How do you achieve global prestige in winemaking, like regions such as Bordeaux or Burgundy have done?

The truth is that this is just the beginning. When I arrived in Argentina in the 1980s, I noticed that people were not interested in drinking Argentine wine, they weren’t interested or they didn’t think Argentina could make great wines, but today we can say that there are many wine collectors who believe in Argentina and see its potential in terms of quality and aging.

The biggest step toward having a wine that can compete with the best in the world, like the quality we perhaps have today, is that we have to make it. I have doubts about that (laughs). Sometimes I think we have world-class quality wines and sometimes I have my doubts. I think it’s the same with tasting: some days you like your wines when you taste them and other times you just don’t like them.

However, I think that to truly understand our land, and the corresponding grape variety, in this industry you can’t do anything fast. For instance, you plant a vineyard, then you wait 5 to 6 years in order to evaluate if the wine is good or not. It takes you another 10 years to produce a fairly good wine, then you have to wait 2 or 3 years more during oak aging and then there’s cellaring. And the truth is we don’t have a recipe to produce a perfect wine. There is a lot of study that needs to be done and we need to be patient.

And then we must communicate.

Then we need to tell the world about the work we are doing, make sure that people try our wines, and taste our aged wines. In the last 5 years, we have held collector tastings in several cities: we travel to Paris, Hong Kong, New York, San Francisco and invite a lot of people who collect French, Californian and Italian wines (some of them even have Argentine wines, you would be surprised) and we invite them to do blind tastings of these famous wines against ours.

The truth is that we have done very well so far. But the thing is that for instance you organize 10 different tastings for 10 people each, but then you realize that you need to organize 100 more tastings and in the end you need to do thousands of tastings. This is a job that we need to do at Catena, but it also needs to be done by other Argentine wine producers as well. And they are indeed doing it. We just need to be patient.

So after reading “Catena Zapata since 1902” on a wine label, you think about 100 years more? How do you generate such motivation ?

That’s what wakes us up every morning. The idea of a family business makes you realize that you are building something not only for your generation, but also for the next generations in your family and for the next generations of people who live and work here. Our Mendocinian winery is not just about the Catena family. If the people who work in our winery share the same long-term vision, we will be able to achieve it.

You live part of the year in San Francisco. What do Americans really think about our wines?

Today it is booming, American consumers think that Argentine wine is good, they are willing to pay for a bottle of Argentinian wine and Malbec is present in most restaurant wine lists. However, they still don’t know the difference between a Malbec from Agrelo and a Malbec from Gualtallary. Also, they don’t know much about Argentine culture, which I think is very important. Because in Argentina, we are born with that culture. And that does not happen in other wine producing countries.

I am passionate about telling the long and rich stories of the immigrants who used to plant vines so that they could drink wine every day. That is why Italian wine is so famous all over the world. While you are drinking a bottle of wine, it is like you are kind of going away on vacation for a couple of hours. Americans still don’t know much about our tango, culture, barbecue, art and music.

A lot needs to be done to combat the security issue in Argentina. I fear tourism might decrease because of this. And this is very serious. Tourism,

which did so well in our country in the last couple of years, encourages people to want to drink our wines because they have been here. I worry a lot about this issue.

Adding surnames to Malbec, promoting other grape varieties, emphasizing Malbec—these are all questions that concern the wine industry every single day. What is the way of the future for Malbec, your signature grape?

In fact this is a question we must all ask ourselves. Our concern is basically a comparison with Australia and their signature grape, Syrah, which became a kind of commodity. I don’t think the same will happen with Malbec, since Malbec is a marvelous grape, with very intense aromas, length and soft, silky tannins. It would be as if one day we asked if people would ever stop eating dark chocolate. And of course nobody will ever stop eating dark chocolate, just because it is delicious. The same concept applies to Malbec. Do you think that Chateau Lafitte ever wonders if the Bordeaux blend will not be fashionable or prestigious any more? They would never ever ask themselves that. They have no doubts about the everlasting life of Bordeaux blends.

What is your main challenge as a successor to your father at Catena Zapata?

The problem is that we are few, even though we have a wonderful team, the world is so big. Today you cannot say, I will only focus on the US because they love Argentine wine and because we are doing great with our wines in the U.S. You just can’t do it because those people who used to live in the US may be now moving to the Caribbean, or those who used to live in Europe may be now moving into Hong Kong or Singapore and so on. The world is really big and so we need to keep traveling and visiting all of the time.

When you introduce a wine to people, and it’s a family business, they want to meet someone from the family or the winemaker. I find it difficult to be able to spread my message to as many people as I would like. Besides I have three kids, a husband and I work as a doctor...(laughs).

