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Argentine Vintners Go Global

Paul Lukacs - Nov. 2, 2005

Argentina is one of the brave new worlds for wine. While it has a long history of winemaking, few vintners in this South American country ever bothered to export their wines in significant volume. The Argentines themselves drank just about everything made there, so for a long time no one much cared about international tastes or preferences.

How times have changed. As has happened in many wine-consuming countries, a new generation started to drink less but better wine. When it did, producers had to cultivate new markets, beginning noticeably about a decade ago.

Then the Argentine sense of what constitutes quality began to shift, reflecting global style rather than local tradition. Out went brown, oxidized wines. In came fresh, fruity ones. Led by consumers in cosmopolitan Buenos Aires, international fashion quickly carried the day.

That's why today's top Argentine wines so clearly exemplify a New World wine style — meaning a vivid, fresh character, with a complexity that reflects layered fruit flavors rather than earthy ones. This style has captivated consumers all across the globe. While America and Australia often are cited as its standard-bearers, no country seems more committed to it than Argentina.

To be sure, Argentina's brave new wines exemplify contemporary fashion. Yet, because they also reflect their origin, they're not likely to be in vogue today and out of style tomorrow.

The country's vineyards all lie in hot valleys or plains that would be literal deserts were it not for irrigation. They also tend to be at high altitude, so they receive intense sunlight as well as plenty of daytime heat and nighttime cool. As a result, grapes there have little difficulty ripening. Naturally high levels of sugar are their trademark, and the wines inevitably seem rich and ripe. When they reflect their "terroir," they taste not of earth but of succulent fruit.

Because grapes in Argentina get so ripe so easily, the winemaking challenge becomes preventing the wines from seeming sweet or unbalanced. It's met in the vineyard by keeping crop yields low, and in the winery by carefully controlling fermentation. Still, when Argentine wines slip, they tend to taste unfocused, the whites lacking acidity and the reds seeming sappy.

The most distinctive Argentine white wines are made with a grape called torrontes. Apparently a 19th-century Spanish import, torrontes today no longer is grown in the Old World, and, in fact, it has become something of an Argentine specialty — particularly in the northern region of Cafayete in Salta

Province. The wines have a spicy, floral muscatlike aroma without seeming heavy, and, when well-made, are bright and beautifully refreshing.

Good choices for aperitif sipping, wines made from torrontes should almost always be consumed within a year or two of harvest (which occurs in the Southern Hemisphere six months before harvest up north). Freshness constitutes their charm, so age only proves a detraction.

Quara 2005 (\$9) offers a delicious introduction, being dry but lavish. Similarly styled, Crios de Susanna Balbo 2005 (\$13) exhibits just enough crisp acidity in the finish to stay balanced, and Alta Vista “Premium” 2005 (\$9) delights with a bouquet reminiscent of roses and honeysuckle.

Argentina produces some tasty sauvignon blancs, but my experience both here and when touring the wine regions there suggests that far too many suffer from excessive residual sugar, tasting too sweet. There are some fine exceptions, though, including the clean, crisp Urban Uco 2005 (\$9) and the lush but still varietally true Famiglia Bianchi 2005 (\$18). For sheer value, you can’t beat Trapiche Falling Star 2005 (\$6), a must-buy if you’re throwing a party and need a case of simple but tasty white wine.

As seems true just about everywhere in the winemaking world these days, Argentine vintners make plenty of chardonnay. As with sauvignon blanc, some of their wines seem too sweet. Terrazas de los Andes 2004 (\$10) avoids that pitfall, offering plenty of crisp apple and pear-scented fruit. Taking a step up in complexity as well as price is Trapiche “Broquel” 2004 (\$15), a chardonnay that integrates fruit and oak seamlessly. And proving that the country is capable of making truly world-class wine from this most popular white grape variety, Catena “Alta” 2002 (\$30) tastes rich and creamy, with a superb structure and a long, evolving finish.

MALBEC THRIVES

Argentina does even better with reds. You can find an occasionally exciting merlot or syrah (sometimes labeled as shiraz), but cabernet sauvignon, malbec, and various blends are really the wines to search out and buy.

Malbec, a French grape used as a blending component in Bordeaux and as the primary variety in the wines from Cahors, achieves a sweet perfume reminiscent of violets and licorice, as well as a sexy, supple texture when vinified carefully in Argentina. It’s one of the few varieties that clearly outperforms the Old World original in New World vineyards.

Smooth but bright, El Portillo 2004 (\$9) offers an attractive, value-priced introduction to Argentine malbec. More nuanced and also more expensive (yet still offering excellent value), Fabre-Montmayou “Gran Reserva” 2003 (\$15) has excellent depth and length. Made in a similar style, Alta Vista “Grande Reserve” 2003 (\$17) is deep, rich and seductively spicy. It’s hard to imagine finer red wines for less than \$20 than these two.

Catena “Alta” 2002 (\$45) costs significantly more, but then it’s a remarkably complete wine, displaying an elegance and finesse to which few malbecs even aspire. This special-occasion wine, while delicious now, should get even better with five years or so in bottle.

Malbec is often said to be Argentina's signature varietal, but my tastings suggest that the wines made there from cabernet are often just as good if not better. The fact that cabernet makes many good wines in many other places is no reason to ignore the many excellent ones coming into our market these days from Argentina. Start with Bodega Norton 2003 (\$10), a soft, supple wine with just enough grip in the finish to stay in balance. Bianchi "Elsa" 2004 (\$8), with a slightly herbal note in the bouquet, offers further fine value.

As with the malbecs, many of the most exciting cabernets come in the \$15 to \$20 range. Bodega Salentein 2003 (\$18) displays plenty of ripe, sweet fruit, along with excellent depth. Trapiche "Broquel" 2003 (\$15) is similarly styled, while Fabre-Montmayou "Gran Reserva" 2003 (\$15) tastes even more nuanced and sophisticated. All three outperform many cabernets made elsewhere and costing two or three times as much.

RED BLENDS

Some of the finest Argentine reds are blends. That's because, no matter the hemisphere, the whole wine often can prove superior to the sum of its parts. Urban Eco "Vino Tinto" 2002 (\$9), a blend of 45 percent tempranillo, 30 percent malbec, 15 percent syrah and 10 percent merlot offers astounding value. Rich, ripe and spicy, but at the same time remarkably elegant, this wine may require a special search to find, but it's well worth the trouble.

Although most of the other excellent Argentine blends are considerably more expensive, they are still well worth buying. Here are three that can hold their own with the very best reds made anywhere in the world:

- Alta Vista "Alto" 2002 (\$45), a blend of 80 percent malbec and 20 percent cabernet, tastes remarkably rich and spicy, with a leathery undertone and a very long finish.
 - Much the same is true of Cheval des Andes 2002 (\$65), a Bordeaux-styled blend with layers of rich fruit supported by notes of cocoa and mocha.
 - ***Perhaps even more elegant and complete, Nicolas Catena Zapata 2001*** (\$85) offers a wonderfully complex bouquet, followed by ripe fruit held in beautiful balance by firm but not astringent tannins.
- These are three wines of genuine finesse and sophistication — some of the very finest from a country that is sending more and more fine wines to our shores every year.