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Wine Star: Nicolás Catena

The right leader at the right time, this vintner effected profound change in Argentina's wines

Ben O'Donnell

It can take years, even centuries, for a wine region to come of age but, as Wine Spectator executive editor Thomas Matthews noted, "sometimes, on occasion, an inspirational leader can bring rapid and profound change." He invoked Baron Philippe de Rothschild and Robert Mondavi, and in the next breath, introduced another pioneer: Argentina's wine visionary, Nicolás Catena.

Catena described the evolution of Catena Zapata. The family company, like most Argentine bodegas, produced large quantities of inexpensive, rustic wine. Then, a visit to Napa Valley in the early 1980s inspired him: Relative upstarts were talking about achieving world-class quality in wine. "I had been educated that nobody, nobody, could make a wine to compete with the French," he recalled. "Why could I not do the same in my country?"

The path forward was far from clear. After insufficient success trying to emulate others with varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, "finally I accepted the French obsession with terroir."

Catena returned to the Malbec grape that had proved itself a partner to the land and headed for the hills—to Tupungato, 5,000 feet above sea level. Skeptics warned that late frosts would wipe out his crop, and it would never ripen at such altitude, but Catena was undeterred. With a talented team, and a great site identified in the Adrianna Vineyard, Catena sought to steer his wine toward greatness with research and technology, joined by his daughter Laura in 2001.

Even today, Catena said, the work continues: The higher sunlight intensity at altitude affects the grapes "in a way we are only just starting to understand." But his dream of greatness on the world stage has been met, with other Argentineans following in his footsteps. For Wine Experience guests sipping the immense but deftly balanced Bodega Catena Zapata Malbec Mendoza Adrianna Vineyard 2007 (95 points, \$120 on release), there could be no disputing that.



Jon Moe

Nicolás Catena poured the Bodega Catena Zapata Malbec Mendoza Adrianna Vineyard 2007.