

Stephen Tanzer's

Winophilia



Catena rules Argentine chardonnay

Stephen Tanzer

When I think of wine from Argentina, it's generally rich, full-flavored reds—especially malbec—that come to mind. On those rare occasions that I seek out white wine from Argentina, I normally enjoy torrontés, a distinctive variety that yields delightfully floral, fruity, mostly light-bodied wines that make perfect aperitifs or first-course wines. Torrontés is *de rigueur* at the beginning of a meal at most serious restaurants in Buenos Aires.

But I rarely consider Argentina as a source for chardonnay, for the simple reason that in my exhaustive annual tastings of new releases from Argentina, very few of these wines offer real personality, flavor intensity and verve. Except for those from the Catena family.

Since the mid-'90s, Catena has been Argentina's leader in exporting high-quality wines to international markets. Although best known for their malbecs, the Catena family produces a range of chardonnays that is impressive from top to bottom. In my tastings this past fall and winter (more than 300 of the best current releases from Argentina are reviewed in Issue 148 of the [International Wine Cellar](#)), the sexy, truffley, large-scaled **Bodega Catena Zapata 2007 Catena Alta Chardonnay Mendoza** bottling (\$35; imported by [Winebow, Inc.](#), New York, NY), with its wild character and complex smoky, meaty and mineral suggestions, was as impressive a chardonnay as I tasted. This wine is made from special lots from the Catena family's Adrianna Vineyard, located at an altitude of more than 4,800 feet. It comes entirely from Burgundy clones, which tend to give a more mineral style of wine in these shallow, well-drained soils.

Just a step behind Catena's flagship offering was the **Luca 2008 Chardonnay Uco Valley Mendoza** (\$33; [Vine Connections](#), Sausalito, CA), a wine bottled under the label of paterfamilias Nicolas Catena's daughter Laura. For a layered, deep, compellingly ripe chardonnay, it displays captivating restraint to its sweet pear, peach and mineral components, not to mention a very long and smooth finish. Its brisk acidity no doubt is partly due to the fact that the average altitude of these vines is over 4,700 feet.

But it's Catena's inexpensive chardonnays that will garner the attention of most wine lovers today, especially those who are thirsty for great value. Perhaps the best bet in terms of price/quality rapport and availability in the marketplace is the **2008 Catena Chardonnay Mendoza** (\$18, [Winebow, Inc.](#)), made from a blend of high-altitude vineyards. I especially enjoyed its fresh aromas of stone and citrus fruits and spices; its subtle sweetness of fruit; and its suave texture. Best of all: I've seen this wine on retail shelves for as low as \$13.99. At anything near that price, it's a SCREAMING CHARDONNAY VALUE, especially considering that recent vintages of this wine have been consistently excellent. This may well be the most predictably excellent chardonnay in its price range available in the U.S. market.

One step down but no less noteworthy for its value is the **Alamos 2008 Chardonnay Mendoza** (\$13; [E&J Gallo](#), Frisco, TX), a wine bottled under Catena's second label that's also widely available and widely discounted. As is true of so many chardonnays in this price range, the Alamos wine is a blend of many components from many vineyards (80% of the fruit comes from the cooler western end of Mendoza's Uco Valley), but this one offers a particularly satisfying combination of fruits and spices, with flavor intensity, freshness and balance I rarely find in chardonnay in this price range. You can find acceptable chardonnays in this price range from such sources as Australia and Chile, but most of them will come off as overoaked, flat or dilute next to the Alamos example.

By the way, I'll offer some of my top torrontés picks in a future post.

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