

FOCUS ON ARGENTINA

High altitudes and winemakers with attitude mean there's much more to Argentina's wine offering than just Malbec and Mendoza

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the beautiful SOUTH

Windswept and low-lying, with chilly nights, Patagonia is very different from Mendoza. And as **Tom Cannavan** discovers, its cool climate is, not just good for penguins, but for Pinot Noir too



the valley of stars

Used initially to add lightness to jammier blends, now the more classical, structured wines of the Valle de Uco are attracting European investors and wine buyers alike. **Sarah Jane Evans MW** reports

Be sure to pack a guide to the sky at night when you go up to the Uco Valley. You may not think you are interested in the stars, yet inevitably, after a steak and several glasses of Malbec, you will find your eye is drawn upwards to the skies. You'll probably think that the rush of lights you see is a result of leaning back too rapidly (and that 14.5% wine). Don't worry: it's not spots before the eyes, it really is like that.

No wonder O. Fournier names its wines (A Crux and B Crux) after the brightest stars of the Southern Cross constellation. In these clear skies, astronomy suddenly becomes interesting. It's not just the stars, either. Your eyes are constantly drawn up to the Andes, and in particular to the distinctively shaped volcanic Mount Tupungato, one of the highest in South America, that dominates the region. It's hardly known, yet it's only 400m lower than its neighbour Aconcagua, which is popular with climbers, including keen members of the wine trade.

To return to the packing, don't forget the sunglasses. You'll be travelling higher

up the mountain than anywhere else in Mendoza, so you'll need the sun cream, too. Since the vineyards are at 900-1,500 metres, you'll also need a fleece (or a sweater knitted from Andean alpaca wool, sold at wallet-fleeing prices in downtown Mendoza). It gets cool earlier,

colours, and more flavour and structure to the wine. The day-night temperature difference brings freshness, and the altitude and latitude are also crucial. These grapes ripen later, and have a shorter growing period than their cousins further north and east.

By the time you get to the Uco Valley, you have left the Argentinian clichés behind

The result? A region tailor-made to cope with global warming. There's little risk of the over-ripe, stewed, almost raisined fruits that Mendoza can produce. There's a fine ripeness and 0.5-1.5 degrees less alcohol. At a time when both consumers and trade

because of the altitude, and also because this former fruit-growing zone is one of the most southerly of Mendoza's wine regions. There's a difference of as much as 16°C between daytime and night-time temperatures – a really important factor in keeping freshness in the wine.

In fact, all of these factors are ideal for vines. The sunshine means the grapes will ripen, and all the UV light means thicker skins, deeper, more purple/blue

are getting weary of overly alcoholic New World wines, this is a real point of difference. In Argentina only Salta and Catamarca can offer this same high altitude style.

Until recently this meant Uco fruit was used for blending, to 'lift' riper, fatter wines. It's only now that Uco wines are appearing on the market. It's still early to talk about the terroir and to segment the valley into sub-regions. Most vines have yet to reach

their full potential, yet it is already clear that they can produce exceptional quality, with a distinct minerality.

'The really old vine fruit in Uco is located primarily in the San Carlos area that includes the legendary La Consulta,' says James Forbes, UK director of Wines of Argentina. 'Vineyards like this are next to impossible to buy, but the five- to 20-year-old vineyards in other areas are easier to get hold of and are producing some amazing fruit.'

MORE THAN MENDOZA...

Given all these factors, grouping the Uco Valley (or Valle de Uco, as it is properly called), within the Mendoza region can be misleading. Mendoza produces around 80% of Argentina's wine, and as you land at the airport, the land spreads out flat around you for miles. Like large parts of Australia, you can see that it's ideal for commercial farming because of the flat soils. However, by the time you have driven an hour south to get to the Uco Valley, things are very different. You have left the clichés of Argentina far behind.

All of this makes wines from the Uco Valley ideal as a smart sell for a smart restaurant. Yes, I know, it's a hopeless name ('I'll go for the Uco'), but then no one said Coonawarra was ever going to be easy. The problem about Mendoza is that it is a collective name, one too

Although relatively new, Uco has had the good fortune to be discovered by top producers

often known for its easy, plummy £6.49 Malbecs. Most of these come from those productive plains. These mountain-watered vineyards in the Uco Valley are a different matter.

What helps the sell – and the enjoyment for the customer – is that although the Uco Valley is relatively new, with comparatively young vines, it has had the good fortune to be discovered early on by top producers. This has undoubtedly built its reputation rapidly. Michel Rolland beat a path here, for his own winery Val de Flores, as well as

for the collective brand Clos de los Siete (originally founded by seven owners).

And it's not just the French (Jacques and Francois Lurton also started up here); the Spanish too have joined in, with José Manuel Fournier, and there's a Dutch investment group at Salentein. No wonder people gossip about a 'calle de los europeos', a 'Europeans' street. Nor is it just Europeans. Nicolas Catena long ago identified the outstanding potential of Uco fruit, and has been active in raising the profile of the region.

So what does this mean for your wine list? To generalise wildly, Uco Valley can bring – because of its terroir and occasionally because of its winemaking – a certain European elegance to the sumptuous charms of Malbec. If Malbec were a designer suit, then it would definitely be more Giorgio Armani than Gianni Versace.

ONE STOP GRAPE SHOP

For the sommelier, this is a real point of difference. At last it's possible to take the same grape variety (Malbec) and offer very different styles – from Colomé Estate (85% Malbec, grown at 2,500 metres way north), to Bodegas Norton's deep, punchy Malbecs from Luján de Cuyo, and then up to the cooler charms of Bodegas Lurton in the Uco Valley.

The excitement about the Valley is not just to do with Malbec either. Where Argentina can be just too darned hot, this zone in the shadow of the Andes has become a favoured try-out for international varietals. In addition to Malbec, you will find extensive plantings of Tempranillo, Pinot

Noir, Merlot, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, with some Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah on the lower, warmer slopes.

What's happening on the slopes of the Andes deserves attention. It's true that talking about regionality in Argentina is tough when Australia still hasn't got the message across properly. Nevertheless, taste some of these new wines, and then ask yourself – isn't it time you retired some overpriced Californians and tired Australians? There's more to Argentina than tango, and the Uco Valley is a good place to start. 🍷

Uco Boss: key names from the Valley

O. FOURNIER

Fournier was impressed by the potential for Tempranillo in the Uco Valley, and it figures in the top Alfa Crux blend with Malbec and Merlot, as well as in the stylish, lower-priced Urban Uco range (very Buenos Aires!). Fournier is also growing Sauvignon Blanc in the region. But Fournier doesn't just stop with Argentina; Bodegas O in Ribera del Duero is also an impressive project, as befits the Spanish ownership.

Seckford Agencies, 01206 231188

FRANCOIS LURTON

Brothers Jacques and Francois Lurton started out in Argentina in the early 1990s, working with top producer Catena Zapata among others. By 1996 they had worked out that Vista Flores was the place to be. It's now Francois Lurton running the show with over 200ha. His top wines include Gran Lurton (Cabernet Sauvignon), Piedra Negra (Malbec) and Chacayes (Malbec blend). He also has the entry-level Tierra de Luna and the premium Terra de Luna Alta Colección.

Hispa Merchants, 020 8740 4556



With the air of a First World War soldier ducking shells in the trenches, James Forbes clings on to his imaginary hard hat and flinches imperceptibly. If there's one thing that Mr Wines of Argentina UK hates, it's the 'I' word. Icon wines are really not his cup of Malbec. He's very happy with the word 'super-premium' though. So confident and happy, in fact, that he's prepared to clear his desk and lay out some of these Argentinian treasures across it, risking permanent wine stains from the deeply coloured wines.

These were all red wines. Torrontés, for all its strengths as an entry-level wine will struggle to muster the necessary depth to attract big bucks. There are, though, top Chardonnays from the cooler areas, with potential for Viognier in the longer term.

The prices ranged from £13 to 'guide price \$150', the varietals from mono-varietal Malbec to blends of all kinds. No super-premium Pinot Noir that I could see, nor yet a mono-varietal Tempranillo, but both of these must surely come.

Reader, I liked them. Well, let's be more accurate: I was dead keen on a third of them. Some of them revealed the iron fist in the velvet glove of Michel Rolland; others had the influence of US consultant Paul Hobbs. They had a forward, shiny confidence that showed that they were conscious of the

Super-premium wines are creeping in from Valle de Uco and Salta in the north

importance of appealing to US consumers. (Given that some of the wines were cheerfully £40 upwards, they need to please the USA as the British are more price-sensitive.)

In the main these were wines from Mendoza, which is, after all, the powerhouse of production. But super-premium wines are creeping in from the Uco Valley, and from Salta in the north. The clue to the pretension was the hefty bottle. Not very 'green', but then, so few of them are made and subsequently exported, the carbon footprint is not too much of an issue.

It seems that in the UK we still lag behind the reality of Argentinian winemaking. Junior Vianna MW of Coe Vintners is a passionate crusader for Argentina's wines. He stresses that 'it has great Viognier, great Cabernet Franc'. Yet still the super-premium wines are only creeping on to lists in ones and twos.

The Gaucho Group has the widest selection of Argentinian wine in Europe, so the affiliated shop on Swallow Street is a great place to research, and you can treat yourself to a steak, too. After that, the (lack of) presence of these wines on UK lists is depressing.

It's curious, because Malbec is a grape that's made for short- to medium-term consumption and is ready to please as soon as the cork is pulled. These may be icon wines but they don't have to be stored for a minimum of five years to become ready to drink.

In this respect they are a sommelier's dream, and the tannins are ripe and soft. The downside is there's far more to Argentina than Malbec. The best form of attack is surprise, so list a Tempranillo blend from Argentina and try it out on your Spanish fans! ♣



Greetings, pop-pickers!

The red hot top 10 of Argentina's icons

1. **Achaval Ferrer**
Corney & Barrow
2. **Bodega Chacra**
Not available in the UK
3. **Cheval des Andes**
Moët Hennessy UK
4. **Bodega Catena Zapata**
Bibendum
5. **Viña Cobos**
Alliance Wines
6. **Dominio del Plata**
Las Bodegas
7. **Mendel**
Prestige Agencies
8. **Bodega Noemia**
Wine Treasury
9. **Pulenta Estate**
Fields, Morris & Verdin
10. **Bodegas Trapiche**
HBI Wines & Spirits

... and seven top-tastic choices by Sarah-Jane 'Parker' Evans MW

Achaval Ferrer Finca Mirador 2006, Medrano, Mendoza
Distinctive briskness with expressive savoury tobacco aromas. Palate of blackberries, dark plums. Mouth-filling, succulent and intense.
£40.83, *Corney & Barrow*, 020 7265 2400

Pulenta Estate Gran Malbec 2005 Alto Agraño, Mendoza
A brilliant, really vibrant aromatic style. Jumps out of the bottle. Full of flavour, this is a vibrant style that will charm the punters.
£9.30, *Fields, Morris & Verdin*, 020 7819 0360

Viña Cobos Malbec 2005, Peridriel
A Wine Spectator favourite; one for any restaurant with a serious American clientele. Minty, creamy, red fruit aroma; intense. Great fruit, great oak, and loads of it, but it is restrained. Long, persistent finish.
£72.67, *Alliance Wines*, 01505 506060

Pascual Toso Finca Pedregal 2005, Barrancas
Aromas of rhubarb and dark plums; intense palate with mineral finish. Supple, creamy, spicy. US winemaker Paul Hobbs consults.
£15.59, *Stratford's Wine Agencies*, 01628 810606

Bodega Lurton Chacayes Valle de Uco 2003
Reveals a French influence with red fruit, modern spice; lively; lots of complexity. Impressive, elegant and controlled.
Not available in the UK.

O Fournier Alfa Cruz Blend 2005, Valle de Uco
A blend of Tempranillo, Malbec and Merlot produces a textured, rich, complex wine with refreshing savoury notes and a restrained elegance. Very good.
£50.39, *Coe Vintners*, 020 8551 4966

Bodegas Callia 2005, Valle de Tulum
A blend of Syrah, Tannat, Malbec and Merlot. Minty, leafy and earthy aromas on the nose, followed by a palate of stewed blackcurrants with a rich texture.
Not available in the UK.