

The following report is from the Argentinean part of the scholarship trip, and based on issues discussed during our fascinating vineyard visit and tasting with Edgardo del Popolo from Doña Paula.

The Many Faces of Mendoza

As our plane buffeted its way over the Andes, the majestic sweep of Mendoza appeared from the clouds. Vines stretched as far as the eye could see, separated with neat avenues of trees. These vines are the lifeblood of Mendoza; a fact which is inescapable from the moment you touch down in this fascinating region.

At passport control in Mendoza airport, the swarthy, moustachioed man behind the counter studied my visa.

“Wine merchant eh?”

“Er, si” I stumbled, wishing I had got around to those Spanish lessons.

“So” He peered over his glasses at me, “What’s your favourite grape?”

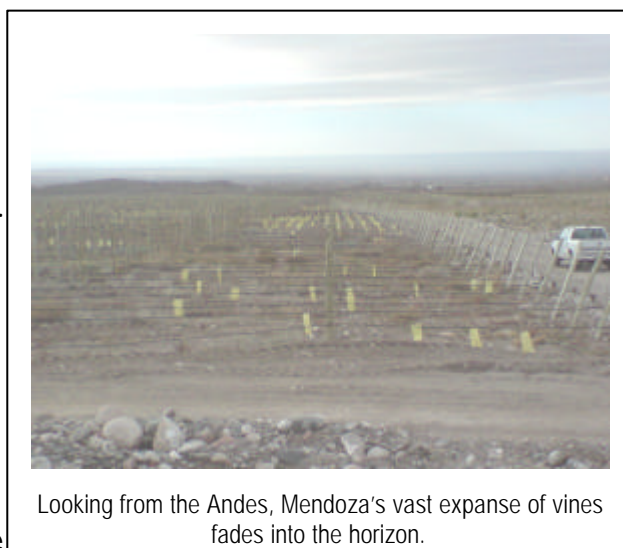
Given my situation, the only answer I could give was “definitely Malbec”. This particular grape has become synonymous with Argentina; it has raised the country’s wine producing profile around the world and is an integral part of its wine heritage, landing with the first Europeans in the country.

Argentina’s passion for wine really began with the arrival of the Spanish settlers, who discovered that the Andes foothills were the perfect place for vines. The construction of the railway linking Mendoza City to Buenos Aires in 1885 established the town as the ‘Wine Capital’ of Argentina by allowing its wines to be easily transported across the country. New grape varieties were brought across from Chile and Peru and soon Argentina became the most important wine producer in South America, with Mendoza the biggest area of production.

Domestic consumption has however dropped dramatically from its dizzy heights in the 1960's when an average Argentinean quaffed 90 litres of wine a year. Following a severe economic downturn in the 1970's, the wine industry had to look to other markets to survive. The 1980's brought increased wealth and prospects, which led to a surge of investment in the wine industry from domestic and foreign sources, thus allowing Argentina to launch itself into exporting. The promotion of Malbec as 'the grape of Argentina' gave the country a unique selling point.

Malbec has never before really caught consumers' imagination. As Auxerrois in Cahors in France its black, rustic style can be tannic and heavy. In Bordeaux, Burgundy and the Loire where it is known as Pressac or Côt, it can be green and thin, or destroyed by frosts and rot. In Argentina, however, it has taken on a new life-force.

Even Mendoza airport has its own vineyard (where they grow only Malbec) which we passed *enroute* to the highway. Once outside the confines of the city, the landscape opened up before us. The sheer scale of the vineyards is hard to comprehend; with 146,000 hectares Mendoza has the same area under vine as Bordeaux, Burgundy, Champagne and Alsace combined.



As we travelled through Mendoza the mighty peak of Aconcagua was a constant feature of the Western skyline. At 6962m the mountain is the highest not only in the Andes, but in the Southern hemisphere. It is the Andes that make the climate in Argentina so different to that of Chile across the peaks. The mountains shield the country from much of the rain and cool air from the Pacific which defines the Chilean climate. What little rain

makes it over the mountains (250mm in an average year) generally falls in the summer. However, the risk of it failing as hail in spring means many vines disappear under swathes of netting.



During the winter nets are tied away from the vine for pruning. In spring they cover the new growth to protect it from hail.

With water from the skies scarce, irrigation is hugely important. Melt-water from glaciers in the Andes runs in four large rivers throughout the region, creating a lifeline for vines in the dry, sandy soils. With the ever increasing levels of cultivation deep boreholes provide further supplies, although their use is carefully

regulated. It is this combination of low rain, plentiful sun and sandy soils that makes Mendoza so immune to the fungal problems which plague other regions. This means minimal expensive spraying and is encouraging many producers to make the transition to organic viticulture.

Looking back at the expanse of vineyards we had crossed I was struck by the diversity of environment this region offers; the different soils we had ploughed across, the undulating land with vines on every surface and the endless possibilities this creates. It made me think that perhaps our average image of Mendoza is slightly 'one dimensional'. Think of Bordeaux and you may picture the gentle slopes of St Emilion, the manicured vines of the Haut Medoc or the misty, riverside vineyards of Sauternes. Think of Mendoza and the picture may just be a sea of vines on a dusty, sun-baked plateau. Despite the fact that Bordeaux fits twice into the region, any geographical description beyond 'Mendoza' itself may elicit little more than a scratching of the head amongst wine lovers.

It can be argued that an easily identifiable 'Mendoza' brand is beneficial. There is little of the strict regulation that the Appellation Controlée system inflicts on Bordeaux, leaving growers relatively free to experiment. However, at the root of the AC system is the idea that a wine can be unique to a small area or terroir, where grapes take on distinct characteristics. With the increasing volume of wine made in Mendoza, would it not be advantageous for some producers to create an individual product that consumers could relate to? There are several growers who clearly believe that it would.

One such individual is Edgardo Del Popolo, Director of Viticulture for Doña Paula. He showed us a map he has created of the different regions of Mendoza that goes into in much greater detail than has been attempted before, identifying the soils, altitude and exposure of each region. To highlight the importance of this regional variation he is also working on a second map showing the unique characteristics each area can impart to Malbec.

At a basic level, Mendoza can be split into four areas as defined by Edgardo's map. Northern Mendoza, above the city, sits at 650m, with vines planted on slopes of fine, sandy soil. This region has proved excellent for aromatic whites such as Tocai and Torrontes or fruity reds such as Bonarda and Sangiovese. Some Malbec is produced, but it can be green and harsh. Southern Mendoza is based around the city of San Rafael, on a plain irrigated by the Diamante and Atuel rivers. Its various altitudes allow a range of grapes to flourish, from Riesling on the highest slopes at 750m, to Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah in the lower, warmer areas. Malbec from here is soft and rich and can display good fruit. The area to the east of Mendoza City is a vast plain which sits at 700m, irrigated by the Tunuyan River. It has a high area under vine and a massive concentration of wineries. Eastern Mendoza's defining feature is the 2200 hours of sun it receives in a 210 day growing period. All varieties are grown here, although quality varies. Here Malbec tends to have distinctive strawberry yoghurt and soft plum notes.

The most exciting region of Mendoza has to be the Central region, based around the Uco Valley. Here the vineyards sit inside the Andes foothills and altitudes can reach 1400m. The region enjoys a large thermal amplitude (difference between day and night temperatures) which allows the fruit to retain its primary



One of many new vineyards high in the Andes foothills in the Uco Valley. The Andes are shrouded in falling snow.

aromas. It also helps create a slow, balanced ripening period. This is especially beneficial in red grapes, where slow ripening fixes tannin and colour in the skins so that the wines potentially have greater intensity and structure. Coupled with the good levels of acidity achieved here and the excellent quality of the fruit, wines from this region are often incredibly age-worthy. Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are prevalent here and are often used to create base wines for sparkling styles. Tempranillo and Merlot are also impressive and, of course, Malbec.

We were lucky enough to try a comparison of three Malbec tank samples from the Doña Paula estate with Edgardo. All were from 2008 and from the Uco Valley. The first was from the district of Gualtallary to the east of the valley which showed extremely concentrated deep, dark black-cherry fruit, with some lifted violet notes and plentiful, firm tannins. The next, from the winery's new Altamira (High View) vineyard deep in the Andes foothills to the west, showed huge complexity, with notes of liquorice, agarve (the plant used in Tequila) and fresh herbs overlaid by rich, round damson fruit and softer tannins. Finally, the Malbec from Ugarteche to the south had massive structure with heaps of pure blackcurrant and blackberry fruit.

These very different wines showed not only the fantastic quality which can be attained here, but also that the regional classification of Mendoza barely scratches the surface. There are so many new areas to create and define, and so much more for wine buyers around the world to explore than a simple 'Mendoza' wine. Thanks to the work of Edgardo and others like him, perhaps one day wines from Mendoza may become as distinctive and terroir-focused as those of Bordeaux.